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## Kathryn Harrison

**The Binding Chair**

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**Q: What led you to write a novel about this particular facet of China's cultural history — foot-binding?**

**A:** My mother's mother, who raised me, grew up in China at the turn of the last century, so the time and place has always occupied a large part of my imagination.

**Q: How did you research this topic? Were you able to get first-hand accounts from women who participated in the ritual of foot binding?**

**A:** Much of what I know of China comes from my grandmother — a vast untidy anecdotal history. To supplement this I did a lot of research in libraries, including oral histories taken from Chinese women whose feet were bound, and I traveled to Shanghai.

**Q: How did you envision the narrator? As a woman or a man? Would you have been able to write this novel in the 1st person?**

**A:** It's an omniscient narrator, but I would describe the consciousness of the book as female. Had it been first person then it would have been May's narration, and I didn't want to write it from inside her perspective because it would have made her less mysterious. Ultimately I wanted her, and her suffering, to be unknowable.

**Q: Do you think that Western society is too moralistic and simplistic in its assessment of other culture's customs? In your mind, were Chinese women victims of this custom, or was their relationship to it more complicated than that?**

**A:** Yes, westerners are very reductive and chauvinistic in their approach to other cultures. As evidenced by the fact that Chinese women bound the feet of their daughters and were reluctant to let go of the power the bound foot conveyed, the relationship was not one of simple victimization. I wanted to write about the use of disfigurement, both on a physical and spiritual level, by the disfigured: May.

**Q: Are you working on a new project?**

**A:** I'm just finishing up the first draft of a novel set in Alaska, around 1915.

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