



The Binding Chair

By Kathryn Harrison
ISBN: 9780060934422

Plot Summary As the 19th century waned, China began to buck Western Imperialism, Russia was experiencing a revolution, and the nations of the world inched toward the first global war. With these epic events as the boisterous backdrop, Kathryn Harrison has crafted an ironic, lyrical, shocking novel about the secret lives of women, the universal search for home, and ultimately, the power we have to direct the course of our own lives -- and the lives of those we love. The center of *The Binding Chair* is May Li -- an upper class Chinese woman who, as a child, was subjected to the ancient ritual of foot binding. Exotic and beautiful, complex and compelling, May Li's childhood was consumed with preparations for marriage. May accepted its inevitability, even indulging in romantic fantasies about her potential mate. But when the rich silk merchant to whom she was delivered turned out to be a sadist, May breaks free from her husband's house, goes to Shanghai, changes her name, supports herself as a prostitute, and masters the English language. May has a plan: to land a wealthy English husband, procuring for herself security, love, and an escape from her Chinese heritage. Opportunity arrives in the unlikely form of Arthur Cohen, the Jewish philanthropic brother-in-law of a wealthy businessman. Arthur goes to the brothel with a specific purpose -- to emancipate a victim of foot binding. Instead,

he is utterly captivated by May's tiny, fleshy appendages and marries her. May's affect on the Cohen family is hypnotic and total. Arthur's niece, Alice, fixates on her mysterious opium-smoking aunt. Dolly, her high-strung mother, attempts to squelch their relationship by sending Alice to boarding school in England. The separation only intensifies Alice and May's connection. Alice crusades to fix May's crippled feet. May crusades to prevent Alice from becoming trapped by the passion that so often ensnares the young. May, Alice finds, revels in hobbling around on her deformed feet. In turn, Alice is enthralled by the rush of her own life, of new love, of the exotic. Alice's and May's stories are brilliant counterpoints to one another, illustrating that while two individuals may be born in a different time and place, the profound questions that compel them to spend their lives searching for answers are universal. **Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss May's relationship to the foot binding ritual. Did you perceive her as being a victim? Do you think that May thought of herself as a victim? Why or why not?
2. If you could identify one event as being the one that influenced the path that May's life took, what would it be?
3. How did the third person narrative affect the tone of the novel? How would it have been different if the reader had seen the world specifically through May's eyes, or even Alice's?
4. Was Dolly's impulse to separate May and Alice well founded, or was she being hyper-vigilant? Would you characterize May and Alice's connection as a healthy one?
5. If May's feet had not been bound, would Arthur have loved May? If not, does that diminish his love for her? Do you think that May was in love with Arthur, or do you think she needed him?
6. Why didn't May want to wear the orthopedic shoes?
7. *The Binding Chair* teems with characters, and all of them are somehow connected to each other. How did this support the themes in the novel?
8. Was the conclusion of the novel satisfying? Why or why not?

About the Author: Kathryn Harrison is the author of the novels *Thicker Than Water*, *Exposure*, and *Poison*. She has also written the best selling memoir, *The Kiss*. Her personal essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and other publications. She lives in New York with her husband, the novelist Colin Harrison, and their children.