



Half a Lifelong Romance

Eileen Chang , Karen S. Kingsbury (Translator)

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From one of twentieth-century China's greatest writers and the author of *Lust, Caution*, this is an unforgettable story of a love affair set in 1930s Shanghai.

Manzhen is a young worker in a Shanghai factory, where she meets Shujun, the son of wealthy merchants. Despite family complications, they fall in love and begin to dream of a shared life together - until circumstances force them apart. When they are reunited after a separation of many years, can they start their relationship again? Or is it destined to be the romance of only half a lifetime? This affectionate and captivating novel tells the moving story of an enduring love affair, and offers a fascinating window onto Chinese life in the first half of the twentieth century.

Half a Lifelong Romance Details

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Author : Eileen Chang , Karen S. Kingsbury (Translator)

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From Reader Review Half a Lifelong Romance for online ebook

Lilian Kong says

It's been a long time since a book has made my heart ache. I can hardly find words to describe how much *Half a Lifelong Romance* has moved me.

Will love flourish if you "learn" to "properly" love someone? Will that make love persevere through anything? Or will that only kill love, slowly and so ironically that it almost wants to make you laugh? Eileen Chang is not afraid to grapple with this difficult question. She uses painfully restrained prose to illustrate restrained love in the midst of unfavorable social circumstances, reminding us that lasting love really is a thing of chance: it must persist through social codes, historical traumas (namely the Sino-Japanese war), personal misunderstandings, geographical distance, and the simplest accidents that may occur. A deeply painful melodrama about a perfect love that is unnecessarily destroyed and later recognized for its true value - but a bit too late, coated in a sticky, permanent coat of nostalgia.

"Her manner towards him grew slightly distant. She didn't know that matters of the heart are not that easy to arrange: you can't put feelings in a freezer and expect them to keep, without any change."

Virginia Wing says

[illegible]

Kit Gs says

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Leila Soltani says

I wanted to read something from "Eileen Chang" since I am auditing an online course about masterpiece in world literature (in Edx) and Eileen Chang was one of the authors the course instructors introduced at the Chinese literature chapter. I chose this book since it had the highest rate on Goodreads.

About the book itself:

For me it was so much fun to find out lots of information about Chinese culture (during 1930's and 1940's) The similarity between Iranian and Chinese culture was more than I thought. The traditional families and sexism in the families was annoying and upsetting.

The story itself was not the kind of story I normally like. Lots of misunderstanding among people while you know stories from the both sides and watch how they waste their lives because of those misunderstandings was annoying and stressful! Apparently there are a movie and series adaptation from the book but I don't have the nerve to watch!

Aubrey says

4.9/5

It was a memory she could not outlive.

You should take the average rating as a more accurate representation of my views than what the current star system will afford. When I read *Love in a Fallen City*, I didn't have half the proper awareness that I have now, so what went into that book's positive rating was a feeling half proud of, half in love with the sense of venturing where few readers my age, at that time and to my perspective, had gone before. Misguided as that was, it led me to Chang-translated *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* and the movie of *Lust, Caution* and this, so there's something to be said for years of maturation. I'm never going to know what I missed by reading/watching all of this and more in English translation, but the little I'm able to get has made me happy that Eileen Chang is a star in the country of her birth.

But that's the sort of thing one hears about in detective stories—in real life, it doesn't happen often.

I haven't read an author since Jane Austen who takes love this seriously in such an extraordinary way. No matter what point of history of a particular locale you pick, the times will be in some variation of flux, and the microcosm of a plain old-fashioned romance, put to paper skillfully enough, can encompass all the destabilizing surges as well, if not in some ways better, than a battlefield. *Lust, Caution* also deals with a fraught relationship, but all of it was far more black and white and sexually charged than this near 400 page narrative of a happy ending just beyond the edge of tomorrow.

On the scale of show to tell, this veers far on the side of tell, but honestly, I'm tired of pretending that showing, this presumptuous proclamation of an implied need for universal cultural mores, works often enough to merit following it 100%, especially when it comes to fiction written in foreign mentalities and narratives depicting scenes of abuse. How else would you know the perilous rationale of (view spoiler) without:

Greed was the motivation behind his confession, but Manzhen did not see this. His self-accusation made her think that he had some kind of conscience after all. Her experience of the world was still not deep enough to help her see that cruelty and cowardice go hand in hand; and that those who, when they're riding high, transgress flagrantly are later crushed by the slightest touch of hardship, at which they pull long, sad faces. A small streak of sympathy leavened her loathing: she had no intention of heeding his wishes, but neither did she want to add to his suffering.

You could do your best to *show* this, but the world is too filled with the mainstream 'literary' style of writers twiddling off into gynephobia land and expecting credit for critical thinking or satire or deconstruction or whatever gives the monumentally popular and demographically gifted a pass for doing worse than nothing.

Austen also comes up as a point of reference because all she does is tell, but does so to give credit to the complicated interaction of character and social forces in the worlds that she shapes. Chang is less biting and more relative in observing why people in her pre-WWII urban China do the things they do and spawn the misunderstandings they spawn, but the buck stops at excusing patriarchal figures and their sex-worker shaping and other entitled and misogynistic ways. It's not so simple as oh, foot-binding! The horror! That's a hugely complicated topic in and of itself (see Cinderella's Sisters for why), but Chang is considered with what can be glibly put as 'modern', least as modern as pre-Cultural Revolution China can be. She lays out her cast, sparks a few sustaining emotions, and watches as fate, time, and the misfortunes of the world she once lived in suffocate those sparks just enough to prevent the flame, but never sufficiently to put them out.

"I can't do this to her—she's already sacrificed so much for our family's sake."

"I have nothing but sympathy for your sister and what she's been through," Shijun said, "but other people don't see it in the way we do. To get along in society, sometimes you have to—"

Manzhen did not wait for him to finish. "Sometimes you have to show a little courage," she put in.

I'd only watch one of the film adaptations of this if I was really set on bawling my eyes out. There are a few truly evil (male) people in this, but otherwise, you have this must be implied for the sake of the family, this must be left unfinished for financial constrictions, this must be committed to because our emotional bonds do not exist for our convenience but for our soul, etc, etc, etc. I'm a total sucker for long and involved and super subtle courtship, especially if the author knows her human beings and other cultural milieu. I rated this less than The Song of Everlasting Sorrow, but only for matters of prose and an increased portion of the sort of grand spread historical/inanimate analysis I like so much. To those who don't read romance: good. Much, much, much more for me.

Love is not passion, perhaps. Not yearning either, but the experience of time, the part of life that accumulates over the months and years.

Basma says

Every time I read a book that I thought I would enjoy or is the kind of book I would typically enjoy and then I don't, I think there's something that I'm missing. I stopped this book at around 30% and I just couldn't push through.

Melody says

Eileen Chang (???) is one of the most prominent authors in Chinese literature; and Half a Lifelong Romance (???) is one of her most beloved novels. She's also the author for Lust, Caution (?), and its film adaptation is released in 2007 (it is with this film that Director Ang Lee won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival for the second time.)

Set in 1930s Shanghai, *Half a Lifelong Romance* is a dramatic story of love, betrayal and family oppression revolving Shen Shijun and Gu Manzhen; two young people who fell in love with each other but unfortunately their love is tested and torn by circumstances and family pressures. Shijun is now the only son in the family (after his elder brother passed a few years ago); his parents separated although they are still legally married. It is common for a man to take a concubine during that time period and Shijun's mother could only tolerate despite her being the first wife. Shijun moves out of his Nanking home to work in Shanghai, where he befriended Manzhen through his college friend and now colleague, Hsu Shuhui, who's also working in the same factory.

Manzhen, on the other hand, comes from a poor family and faces the burden of supporting her family after her elder sister, Manlu, got married. Although Manlu still contributes to the family since her husband is quite well-to-do, Manzhen feels she should bear that responsibility now after what Manlu had sacrificed her youth, dignity and a good marriage for the sake of them, by being a taxi-dancer and an escort. Although Manlu's role has risen to the top by marrying off to a wealthy man, her marriage isn't blissful.

Manzhen and Shijun, though struggling in their own ways in work for financial and career prospects respectively, both of them are happy and satisfied with their simple life, until an unfortunate incident happens that shatters their dreams and drive them apart.

I've to say I enjoyed reading this novel very much. The story is absorbing, and the characterisations are great. Ms. Chang has created a cast of interesting characters; each of them so intriguing in his/her own ways. Manzhen is a strong, independent woman who has her own mind and is not afraid of hardships, while Shijun is a reserved and a responsible young man. Despite their differences, they complement each other through their love and respect.

At its core, this is a forlorn love story that makes you think that under certain circumstances, what people and misunderstandings could set off a chain of events that would wreck a relationship of a couple who's so much in love with each other. But, what most saddened me is the betrayal not among outsiders but by your own family members, which is in this case of the novel. Traditions, society and most of all, the traumas Manzhen had gone through are also a few factors that made it impossible to rekindle their relationship.

'Shijun, we can't go back.' (Pg 372)

While this is a sad story, what makes this novel stands out is Ms. Chang's skilful writing, the characterisations and the intricate plot which capture not only the readers' attention but to evoke their emotions as well. A beautiful, unforgettable classic in my opinion; I know this story will stay in my mind for a long time to come.

(4.5 stars)

Bookworm says

I don't get it. This ended up being another case of not understanding how this could get such good reviews. I heard about this book and was excited to read that this was available in English. I'm not into romances but thought this would be an interesting change of pace.

It's a story of two people who spark a potential romance, except to be sidelined by family drama, societal

expectations, etc. Shijun and Manzhen begin taking baby steps towards a relationship but it is their fate not to be.

Since I've read mostly Western (really, US/British authors) romances, I was perfectly fine with reading one where the two do not end up together. However...I thought the book was terrible. It started out okay with an introduction to the characters with getting a feel of their day to day lives, their society, etc. But it is sloooooooooooooow. I'm okay with books that take awhile to get going but after awhile it just wasn't worth it. I can't tell if it's because of the translation, a cultural barrier or if it's just a bad text. Other people/reviewers seemed to really like it but I simply could not get into it.

Maybe it wasn't the right time or maybe the romance genre as a whole is just not one for me, regardless of the author's background. Oh well.

Luckily I borrowed this one from the library.

Bob Martin says

Set in 1930's Shanghai and Nanking against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion, which seems to have surprisingly little to do with this story. It is very elegantly written, conveying the innermost unspoken conflicts of each of the characters. But it was a painful book to read.

Two young people, coworkers, fall in love, innocently, and almost unexpectedly, but circumstances beyond their control conspire against their happiness. Misunderstandings, terrible coincidences, unwritten rules of conduct, and evil acts against them all work to insure their misery. There is no triumph, no justice, no retaliation, not even any resistance. It had the potential for a great revenge story, but it wasn't that kind of book. It was a dissatisfying book. I'm glad I read it, but it pissed me off.

Bettie? says

Description: Manjing is a young worker in a Shanghai factory, where she meets Shujun, the son of wealthy merchants. Despite family complications, they fall in love and begin to dream of a shared life together - until circumstances force them apart. When they are reunited after a separation of many years, can they start their relationship again? Or is it destined to be the romance of only half a lifetime? This affectionate and captivating novel tells the moving story of an enduring love affair, and offers a fascinating window onto Chinese life in the first half of the twentieth century.

PMP says

I want to throttle every character in this book, except the country doctor. Only a Chinese person could write a tragedy that turns entirely on things overheard, things failed to be said, things assumed to be understood.

Heatherblakely says

(I still have no idea how I got this book--it showed up on my doorstep one day.)

This book was enjoyable for the most part. I need to read more books that don't take place in the US or Western Europe, and Chang's writing flowed enough so I wasn't bored, even though not a whole lot happened. I knocked off a star because there was a sexual assault that was just kind of breezed over, but it bothered me for a good 50 pages. All in all, I'd recommend this.

Matthew Sciarappa says

New favorite book?

This might be my new favorite book.

Review forthcoming.

Inderjit Sanghera says

Tragedy and ennui are typical outcomes in most of Eileen Chang's love stories; the characters are often overcome by a sense of fatalism, of life getting in the way of their relationships, of unrequited and unfulfilled love. These are the dominant themes in 'Half a Life-Long Romance', which follows the stories of four principle characters; the reserved Shijun and the equally reticent yet delicate Manzhen, as well as the more boisterous pairing of Shuhui and Tsuizhi. All four characters are led astray by their emotions, or by family and friends and 'Half a Lifelong Romance' explores the impact of the choices we make and how we live with our decisions, it is a story about human imperfections and how we constantly misunderstand and misconstrue one another's intentions-there are few happy couples in the story and this perhaps reflective of Chang's own unhappy love life.

There is something elegant, something ethereal about Chang's prose style. As with the short stories in 'Love in a Fallen City' moon-light frequently evokes the emotional epiphanies experienced by characters; the half-light of moon-light as it accentuates the misunderstandings which drives people apart, the imperceptible moonbeams which accentuate the delicate beauty of Manzhen, the love-lorn nights within which the characters are doomed to wonder. There is something mellifluous and melancholic about moon-light in the novel, as it both beautifies the world and emphasises the separation which exists between the characters ;

"On the balcony itself, the moonlight was swallowed up in the light of the lamps. But Manzhen's forearm, resting on the railing's outer edge and bathed in the lunar glow, gleamed white."

The most tragic character within all of this is Manzhen. Whilst the fates of Shijun, Shuhui and Tsuizhi are primarily, but not wholly, driven by their own choices Manzhen is constantly at the mercy of wider societal prejudices. Her sister's position as an escort impacts on her ability to form a relationship with Shijun and her rape by her brother-in-law entraps her into servitude in a society in which, as woman, she is blamed for being violated. Tragedy underpins the actions of most the characters; Manzhen's somewhat callous sister Manlu is forced into being an escort to support her family and this leads her to a path of cynicism and self-destruction, even the essentially morally upright characters constantly make the wrong choices and decisions, so that the novel becomes a collection of might have been's and could have been's, a novel in which happiness eludes

the characters who are doomed to labour under the weight of the choices they made.

Jacqueline says

It's about a good woman's life, and how all the coincidences happened to her brought her from the heaven to the hell. What I learned from this book is being good cannot guarantee you to lead a happy life because lots of unexpected things will just happen. What can you do? You cannot do much, since you have no control over them. The only thing you can do is to be strong and face it even when you have to live in regrets.

Zoe says

A fantastic female writer. It is her poignancy that I love so much. This is a woman who had loved and lost, in a turbulent time in history. War, love, a wait of half a lifetime, holding on and letting go. Eileen Chang is one of my favorite writers. A woman who knew about women.

? says

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Beverly says

An overcast of melancholy paired with a cinematic touch makes this story of star-crossed lover in 1930s and 1940's Shanghai so heartrending.

This is one of Ms. Chang's most popular novels and was originally serialized in 1948 in a Shanghai magazine but finally thanks to translator, Karen S. Kingsbury recently published.

While at times this novel moves along at the pace of a soap opera, the reader will be so engrossed in the couple's lives that they will be anxious to read if they finally grabbed their gusto or let themselves be directed by others. As often as I wanted to shake the characters into taking a risk for love or happiness, I remembered the time and place of the storyline and the value of family, honor, and tradition were the mantra of the time and often won out over personal independence.

The minute detail of the scenery, food, appearances, etc. was much appreciated this made the characters become real before my eyes. I also thought what the characters left unsaid were important in feeling empathy for them.

This is definitely a classic to be enjoyed as the tender prose serves to emphasize the beauty of the time and soft-edge the cruelty of the times.

James says

Half A Lifelong Romance is perhaps Eileen Chang's most popular novel, telling the story of Gu Manzhen and

Xu Shijun, between whom love quickly blossoms yet traditional family pressures and events beyond their control soon destroy any possibility of their future together. Fourteen years pass before they find that as Manzhen says to her first love, "Shijun, we can't go back."

Eileen Chang's masterful prose, translated by Karen S. Kingsbury, is perfectly able to capture the everyday struggles of pre-1949 China, the "boudoir realism" for which she was often derided by her contemporaries instead explores the everyday lives of ordinary, middle-class Chinese, for whom daily life was marked not by a cataclysmic battle for the soul of the nation but by finding love and dealing with family and business concerns. This subject matter, more introspective and psychological, is where Eileen Chang shines: her novellas (such as "Lust, Caution" and "Love in a Fallen City") are excellent examples of focused, psychological studies of middle-class life with the war against Japan serving as a backdrop to the more to the quiet, private themes of emotional loyalty, vanity and betrayal.

In the character of Manzhen, the reader finds perhaps the closest resemblance to Chang herself: Manzhen's treatment at the hands of her sister and husband reflect the abuse Chang suffered at the hands of her father. This realism, not as the May Fourth writers (such as Lu Xun or Guo Moruo) envisaged as saving the nation but instead exploring the soul, is seen throughout the novel and gives it a powerful human element.

Half A Lifelong Romance is a bitter-sweet and moving tale of life and love, but also hopelessness, of how despite our best intentions, sometimes life doesn't end as sweetly and as hopefully as we think. This love story does not feel contrived but rather the reader is invested in the struggles of Manzhen and Shijun, supporting them even when they seem to have given up.

Eileen Chang saw this as one of her favourite novels, one she never translated into English perhaps for fear of neutering its powerful prose, but through Kingsbury's translation, readers can finally see Chang's pride displayed.

Matteo Cavelier says

A fascinating book, despite difficulties in translation and its distance from the Western cannon that makes it difficult to appreciate. Still, the story is as gripping as it is tragic. Despite the cultural and linguistic gap, Chang shapes a timeless story. Timeless may be the wrong word, since time is by far the most important component of the novel.
