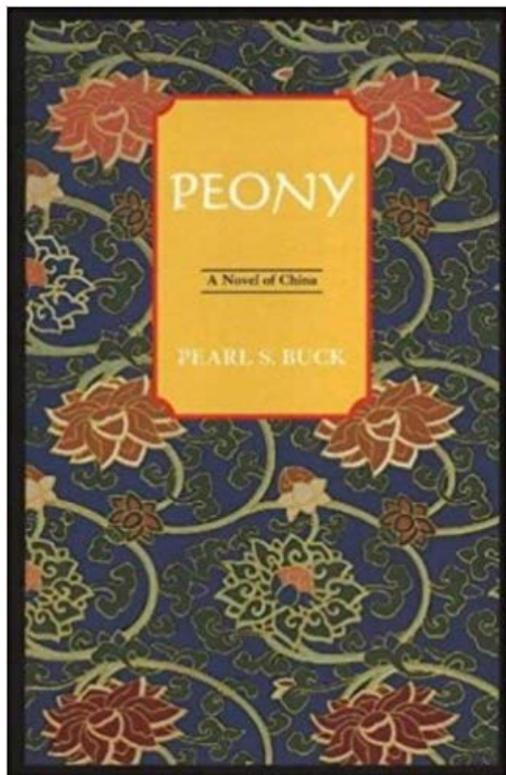


Peony by Pearl S. Buck



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ISBN: 0819705934

ISBN13: 978-0819705938

Author: Pearl S. Buck

Book title: Peony

Pages: 338

Publisher: Bloch Pub Co (May 1, 1997)

Language: English

Category: Genre Fiction

Size PDF version: 1177 kb

Size ePUB version: 1332 kb

Size FB2 version: 1541 kb

Other formats: lit mobi lrf rtf

Young Peony is sold into a rich Chinese household as a bondmaid -- an awkward role in which she is more a servant, but less a daughter. As she grows into a lovely, provocative young woman, Peony falls in love with the family's only son. However, tradition forbids them to wed. How she resolves her love for him and her devotion to her adoptive family unfolds in this profound tale, based on true events in China over a century ago.



Reviews of the **Peony** by Pearl S. Buck

Olma

This book opened my eyes to something I didn't know before, something it had never occurred to me wonder about. China, unlike most western countries, never discriminated against the Jews or tried to convert them to their religion. It focuses on a Jewish family in China and on Peony, a young Chinese bondswoman who is more than a servant, less than a daughter to the family. Peony has been part of the family since early childhood, when she was purchased to be a friend and playmate for their only son. As a young adult, Peony walks a thin line. She is an extremely intelligent and capable person, but one whose choices are limited by the circumstances of her birth. Madame Ezra, the family

matriarch, struggles to keep Jewishness alive in the family, something which is, in subtle ways, made more difficult because the Chinese people are so accepting, it would be easy to just blend in. That these two strong women should be at odds is inevitable. The struggle is not as one-sided as it may seem. Ms. Buck endowed each of them, as well as the other characters who make up the plot, with fully human traits. As the story unfolded, I was able to empathize with all of them - not an easy feat for a writer to pull off.

Malhala

This is a fascinating look at an unknown piece of Chinese history: the Jews of Kaifeng. Jews first settled in China in the Middle Ages. By the 1850s when the book takes place, the Jewish community in Kaifeng was on the wane. We see the decline of the community through the eyes of Peony, a Chinese bond servant in the House of Ezra. Ezra ben Israel is half-Chinese himself, but his wife Naormi, known as Madame Ezra, is of pure blood and great piety. She makes sure the rituals are observed, and she and the Rabbi's wife had arranged for their children to wed. But her only son David is not enthused about marrying Leah, the Rabbi's daughter. She is beautiful, but he has his heart set on a Chinese girl, Kualin, the daughter of Kung Chen his father's business associate.

The first part of the book is a struggle for the heart, mind and soul of David ben Ezra. On one side are his mother, Leah and the rabbi, who would like to train David as his replacement. His own son, Aaron, is a ne'er do well who is already stealing from the temple. On the other side are Kualin, Peony, and to a lesser extent, Ezra, who sees the benefit of aligning his house with that of the wealthy Kung Chen. David is caught in the middle, torn between his sorrowful Jewish heritage and the more joyous Chinese way of life. The second half of the book posits a similar dilemma for Peony. What is her place in this household and can she remain indefinitely?

here are many philosophical moments in the book, as when Peony asks an older servant, "Is life happy or sad?" David and Ezra realize that it is easier for the Jews to remain separate and maintain their traditions in countries where they are not accepted than in a nation like China where foreigners are able to assimilate easily. Pearl Buck does a great job of showing this dilemma and how it affects the community.

I really enjoyed the book a lot, and found a great deal to ponder. I also enjoyed the depiction of the two very different cultures. There is an extensive essay at the back of the e-book by Dr. Wendy Abraham detailing the history of the Jews of Kaifeng. She praises Pearl Buck's depiction of the culture, though notes that Buck took some liberties with the actual history in order to write a more sweeping story that basically encompasses the entire 19th century. I really loved this book and can't recommend it to highly. It had been years since I'd read Pearl S. Buck. She was a favorite author when I was in college, but I'd somehow missed this one. Glad I read it.

Berkohi

Though Pearl S. Buck wrote historical novels about a variety of peoples and places, she is best known for her books set in China, the country in which she was raised. In the case of her 1948 book entitled *Peony*, however, the subtitle "A Novel of China" really doesn't let you know what you're in for, as this is quite an unconventional book by Buck. Here she bases her story on the history of Jews in China, particularly the centuries-old Jewish community of Kaifeng, Henan Province, where the story of *Peony* takes place.

Ezra ben Israel's Jewish ancestors arrived in Kaifeng four generations prior to the start of the novel. His family has managed to maintain their Jewish identity despite the progressively shrinking membership of their synagogue. Ezra, a successful merchant, is the son of a Jewish father and Chinese mother and displays a healthy respect for Chinese customs. His wife, however, is more of a hardliner in her devotion to the Jewish faith and believes in preserving the racial purity of her community. She envisions her son David as the future rabbi of the Kaifeng synagogue and wants to

marry him to Leah, the daughter of the current rabbi. Peony, a young Chinese woman, is a bondmaid in the family household and has been raised almost as a daughter to Ezra and a sister to David. She is secretly in love with David, but realizes that as a bondmaid (a nicer word for slave) she has no chance of being his wife. Instead, hoping to please him, she schemes to encourage his marriage to a wealthy Chinese girl to whom she learns he is attracted.

Because the Jews were welcomed by the Chinese and allowed to live according to their Jewish faith and customs, this is not a tale of religious persecution. The primary threats facing the Jews of Kaifeng are assimilation and attrition. The Chinese were so welcoming that cross-cultural exchange and interracial marriage became common, resulting in cultural dilution. David is faced with the dilemma of to what degree he owes allegiance to his ancestral culture (and his mother) and how free he is to follow his heart and live his own life as he sees fit. As is often the case with Buck's books, the story sometimes ventures into soap-opera melodrama, but she is such a good transcriber of human emotion, and the characters feel so genuine, that the reader usually doesn't care. Even when the plot of Peony becomes romantically overwrought, it is anything but formulaic. The narrative takes unexpected turns and neither succumbs to mawkishness nor settles for an easy ending.

For much of the book, the time period of the story is indeterminate. Buck goes out of her way to make the story timeless by eliminating historical detail. For example, neither horses nor automobiles are mentioned as a means of transportation, and the Jewish family acts as if they could be straight out of Ben-Hur. Towards the end of the book, however, the Empress Dowager Cixi makes an appearance, which places the story roughly in the 1890s. The ebook edition from Open Road Media includes a substantial afterword, written sometime after 1990, by Wendy R. Abraham, an expert on the Jewish diaspora in China. She gives a detailed historical overview on the subject, from the arrival of the first Jews in China as early as the 8th century to a summary of the research on the Kaifeng Jews up through the late 20th century. The nonfiction account of this surprising episode in world history is truly fascinating, and the fictional narrative that Buck crafts from it is moving and thought-provoking. Though not as outstanding as The Good Earth trilogy, Peony is one of Buck's better books.

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