

# Other Women tightly crafted but flawed first novel

BY ANDY POTTER

Vancouver writer Evelyn Lau's past work featured four-letter words like love and hate. Hence, it's no surprise that her first novel, *Other Women*, is a love story.

Of sorts.

I'm not averse to love stories; I've dipped into my share — everything from Gothic romances to exotic erotica. Along the way I've often wondered: What makes

novelists beat the love drum again and again? It could be the royalty cheques — as Harlequin "authors" know, millions of readers have a soft spot for amour. Mavis Gallant cloaks it in philosophy — she states that love is the great mystery of life, and that if ever we solve it there'll be no

more point in writing. Then there's Lau, whose *Other Women* offers a thoroughly modern take on amour — a tale of convoluted, unrequited passion underpinned by a fashionably distant narrative tone.

Fiona, the novel's artsy young protagonist, is trapped. She's in the grip of that old devil — amour. She faces most aspects of life with pragmatic fortitude, yet when it comes to love, her heart turns her brain to jelly. The ob-

ject of her desire is an older man: suave, successful, handsome Raymond. Raymond happens to be an older, married man who has vowed never to leave his wife. He is attracted to Fiona, deeply, and he admires her, greatly, but won't leave his wife. Not surprisingly, given the dynamics of such affairs, Fiona is left holding the short end of the stick. Yet she can't let go, she can't stop thinking about him, his life, and his wife, one of the many other women that Fiona looks to for clues to the mystery of winning eternal love.

Fiona's love for Raymond is undoubtedly pure, yet it is an obsession, virtually a sickness. At best, it is wonderfully, magically invigorating; at worst, horrendously debilitating. Fiona could escape, could start afresh, but chooses to live in a paradoxical heaven/hell of her own making. She rides the love roller-coaster almost daily, plunging from bliss to despair; her crashing descents make Tristan's long ride with Isolde look like a gentle slide down Citadel Hill. Yet, for all the pain Fiona bears, it is difficult to feel sorry for her; Lau has not created a simpatico character.



Evelyn Lau

Fiona suffers, we see that she suffers, and still at the novel's end we are left thinking: What kind of love is this; why doesn't she let go?

Although *Other Women* features tightly-crafted prose, the story often sags. Lau is an accomplished poet and short story writer, but she has not yet mastered the narrative pace and momentum needed to sustain a novel. *Other Women* continually circles itself, which, given that love is its theme, is no cause for deep consternation. Yet, in Lau's hands, the circling too rarely spirals upwards, too rarely leads beyond Fiona's introspective musings. Love stories are personal, of course, but the best — witness the many permutations of *Romeo and Juliet* — are also timeless and universal. Lau's first attempt at a confession d'amour is clever, yet distinctly 90's.

## Double Happiness

BY JAMES WORRALL

If you are sceptical about Canadian cinema, go see *Double Happiness*.

The movie, written and directed by Mina Shum, is the story

of Jade, a Chinese-Canadian woman in her early twenties, living with her conservative family in Toronto. Jade searches for happiness in both halves of her world: the half saturated with her family's traditional culture and values, including parental authority and red bean biscuits; and, the half which contains premarital sex, rebellion, and possessions packed in old boxes formerly containing tequila and lemon gin.

The movie is very well made, and the acting is admirable, notably by Sandra Oh, who plays Jade, and Stephen M.D. Chang, who plays her father. Shum shows us that Jade loves her family and their traditional life, but ultimately does not belong with them. Jade does not resent her minority background; in fact, she uses it to her advantage when pursuing her dreams of an acting career. However, we know that she is more comfortable with her renegade friends, such as her white love interest, the geeky but endearing Mark.

Is it possible for Jade's parents and their peers to pass on their traditional values in modern Canada? All the young Chinese characters rebel in some way or another: Jade's older brother leaves the family, one potential husband that her parents are eyeing turns out to be gay, even her youngest sister, Pearl, has begun to reject the old ways. Whether or not Shum's portrayal of Chinese-Canadian life is accurate, *Double Happiness* is a fantastic film, and one not to be missed.

Value: \$7.50 out of \$8

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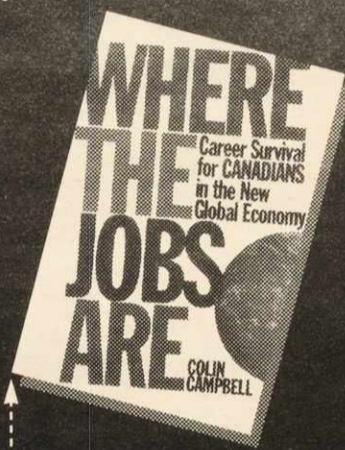
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