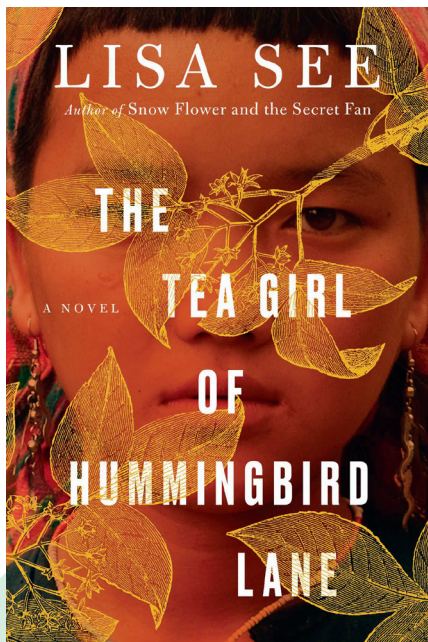


# FRESH READS

Though each is set in a different time period, from the early 1900s to the 1980s to present day, this month's books explore the ways our families, friends and partners shape us. And, of course, they're impossible to put down!



The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane (Scribner) by Lisa See, \$25.

impo- verished village, expects Li-yan to follow in her professional footsteps, but the job requires following traditions that Li-yan finds abhorrent. Instead, with the help of a non-Akha teacher, she rebels and pursues an education—until she finds herself single and pregnant. So begins the latest novel from Lisa See, who weaves together a compelling mother-daughter story and a profound modern-day history of tea against the swiftly changing China of the 1980s. Though set in nearly modern times, this novel is classic See: rich storytelling that illuminates little-known pieces of history and asks hard but respectful questions. Read on for See's take on tea's cultural importance, familial bonds and how writing this book felt like fate.

## CULTURE CLASH

Best known for her 2005 book-turned-movie, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, author Lisa See is back with a compelling new novel about a close, if tumultuous, mother-daughter relationship.

**A** member of the Akha tribe, one of China's 55 ethnic minorities, Li-yan lives a life that revolves around Pu-erh, a rare type of fermented tea that her community believes has healing qualities. Her mother, who uses Pu-erh in her duties as a midwife for their small

### What was your starting point for this story?

It's so weird how stories come to you. One day, when my husband and I were walking, we saw a white couple with their teenage Chinese daughter between them. She had this ponytail that was swinging back and forth, and it looked like she was bringing such life to them that I had this thought, She's a fox spirit in that family. In China's culture, a fox spirit can be pretty mischievous, but it can also bring real goodness and luck into your life. So I knew I wanted to write about adoption, but not so straight on. I write historical novels, so I needed something that would be the historical backdrop. Then, I was giving a talk at a library, where someone had been brought in to do a Chinese tea tasting; the tea was Pu-erh. Then, the next piece was I wanted to go to China to do research, and it just so happened an acquaintance had been at a banquet where he was seated next to a woman who is the largest importer of Pu-erh into the country. She was already planning a trip and invited me to go with her. She introduced me to the Akha people, and I knew I had to write about them after spending time with a young woman whose experience informed my main character, Li-yan.

**As you read the book, there's a sense of predestination. Was that intentional?** Yes. I think it's because so much of how the book happened for me really was about fate. The

# LIT PICKS

Three more great reads

Akha have a saying, “No coincidence, no story,” which I think is true; in our lives, most of us have had things happen where you’re in the right place at the right time—or the wrong place at the wrong time—or you bump into someone who’s just the person you needed to meet right then.

## Why is tea the thread that weaves through the story and connects the characters?

When I was thinking about tea—which is the second most popular drink in the world, after water—it has this very old history. They’ve been drinking it in China for 5,000 years. And it has had its ebb and flow. At times, tea was very highly collected, then at times it was frowned on, and you can see how the attitude affected the people. Pu-erh not only brought the Akha to the outside world but it also brought the outside world to them. Truly, until the mid-2000s, the Akha didn’t have electricity, so through this one product, you can see how China changes and evolves and goes out into the rest of the world.

## Some of the Akha’s practices are quite troubling. How did you balance modern ideas of what’s socially and morally acceptable with respecting the culture?

I tried to put it into the perspective of that culture. I will say with this book, and there is one scene in particular, that it was very hard. I think I tried to balance it with their mystical and also practical view of the world. But it was so interesting and heartbreaking and confusing that some of these practices ended only about 20 years ago.

## The main character, Li-yan, has a stormy relationship with her mother, but they have a very deep emotional connection, despite their differences. How did you tap into that complex relationship?

I didn’t think I was writing about mother-daughter relationships; it was subconscious. But my mom died last summer, as I was writing the novel. I actually finished the final edits about two days after she died. And it was around two months later, as I was looking through a copy-edited version, that I realized it really is about those deep personal connections. Even if it isn’t going well, even if you can’t stand your mother, there is a deep, deep tie that is unlike any other relationship we have in the world, I think. — *Alexandra Donaldson*



### THE OUTSIDER

In 1930s Australia, the economy is slowly recovering from the Great Depression, modern art is on the rise and nine-year-old Lily is starting a new school. She quickly falls in with Beatrice, Heloise and Eva Trentham, the daughters of wealthy bohemian artists. Lily and Eva in particular connect, and their platonic love becomes the linchpin of this engaging read. Through Eva’s friendship, Lily observes a world her middle-class parents can barely imagine: At the Trenthams’ rambling estate-turned-artist colony, children roam freely, adults smoke marijuana and edgy art is standard fare. Told mainly through now-grown Lily’s memories of that exhilarating time, *The Strays* is about the desire to belong and the allure of creativity—and the consequences of flames that burn too bright.

— *Stacy Lee Kong*  
*The Strays* (Hamish Hamilton Canada) by Emily Bitto, \$32.



### GREAT EXPECTATIONS

From the outside, the Blooms look like a happy blended family. Behind the closed doors of their posh English home, though, they’re anything but: Karen, a proud, self-proclaimed tiger mother, spends all her time ferrying 10-year-old Brontë to lessons and extracurricular activities; Karen’s husband, Noel, a handsome (possibly alcoholic) doctor spends most evenings working late to avoid being at home; and Ewan and Verity, the couple’s children from their respective previous relationships, can’t approach Karen’s high standards, so they remain permanently beneath her notice. But when Brontë goes missing, all of the Blooms’ private flaws becoming distressingly public—and the entire family is caught in an impossible-to-stop chain of events that culminates in a shocking murder. — *SLK*

*The Trophy Child* (Doubleday Canada) by Paula Daly, \$24.



### ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

Lonely hearts is an apt description of Rose and Pierrot, the two main characters in Cancon favourite Heather O’Neill’s latest novel. The pair grow up together in an orphanage, where, linked by their shared joie de vivre and knack for performance, they inevitably fall in love. But the star-crossed lovers are torn apart by fate (and an unjust nun) and find themselves moving through Depression-era Montreal, singing, dancing and making strangers fall madly—and we do mean madly—in love with them. As they become entwined with both Montreal’s elite one percent and the city’s seedy criminal underbelly, Rose and Pierrot spend their time searching for each other—and thinking of their lost dream of putting on the best show in the world. — *AD*

*The Lonely Hearts Hotel* (HarperCollins) by Heather O’Neill, \$33.



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