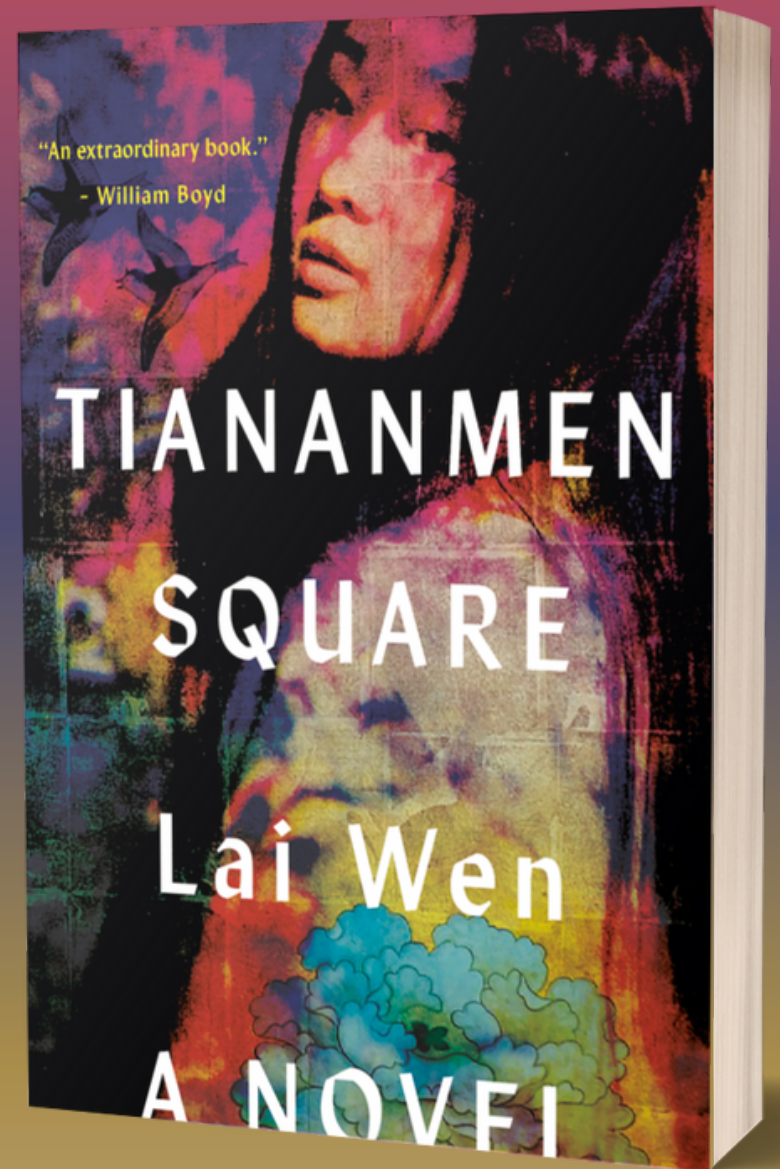


Book Club Kit



“Friendship, family secrets, young love, and loss mingle with political activism in desperate times in Lai Wen’s brilliant *Tiananmen Square*, a novel that reveals truths about the past, a lens through which to view the present, and a warning shot for the future.”

—Meg Waite Clayton, author of *The Postmistress of Paris*

A Q&A WITH LAI WEN

What inspired you to write this novel?

I am dogged and workman-like in my approach to writing, so (unfortunately) I rarely have flashes of inspiration. I felt more as if I was compelled to write this novel—a deep-seated need that had lived in the background of my life ever since the events of Tiananmen Square. The need to address the bravery of people much more courageous than myself. And to make sure I contribute something, at least, to keeping alive the memory of the students and working people who made such great sacrifices during the protests. To try and show those out there who might not know a great deal about this history why the courage of the protestors held such meaning.

***Tiananmen Square* is an autobiographical novel. What is the relationship between truth and fiction in your writing?**

Generally speaking, I think there is some element of fiction even in the genre of pure autobiography. After all, our minds are constantly re-editing the past. But a novel allows for a significantly greater degree of freedom in this regard. You can take aspects of people you have known or things you have experienced, and you can enhance or change them in such a way that the fundamental social and ethical conflicts that are going on underneath the surface of society are made more visible, more palpable. You can use the fictive aspect—that which didn't happen or wasn't true—to render the meaning of what did take place more vivid.

A favorite quote of mine comes from the film *V for Vendetta*, where the main character reflects ruefully: “Artists use lies to tell the truth, while politicians use them to cover the truth up.” I think there is a lot of truth to this. But precisely how much of my story is true and how much of it is fiction, I would rather leave to the reader to decide. After all, trying to figure that out provides one of the more fun aspects of reading the novel, I hope.

A Q&A WITH LAI WEN

Talk about the process of writing this novel. How did it feel to revisit these events from your past?

I don't think I've stopped re-visiting these events, long before I'd ever put pen to page (or finger to keyboard as the case is nowadays). But having started writing, it was often quite hard. Sometimes difficult memories just pop into your head, but you can turn away from them in the light of the everyday and get on with the ordinary things in life. But when you are writing about such memories, you are pressed into contact with them in a more deliberate fashion, and—day after day, week after week—that can feel not only painful, but also exhausting. On the flip-side, there is something cathartic about such a confrontation; there are these feelings you have suppressed for so many years, these truths which need airing. It's like a room full of shadows and dust, only one day a door is flung open, and light comes pouring in. So, to sum up, the process involved both smiles and tears.

Did you do any research to write this book—dig up old letters or photos? Read journalistic accounts? Get in touch with old friends?

I didn't get in touch with anyone I wasn't already in regular contact with. I had come to a point, a few years ago now, where I felt the time was right to try and write this novel and confront these events in a more explicit way. But other people have their own process, their own ways of dealing with things. So, you have to be extraordinarily careful about reawakening certain memories in case you end up forcing someone to go to a place they are not ready to go.

I've read quite a few accounts and investigations of the events of 1989 over the years, mainly because new information about the state and its strategies of oppression (which at the time had been denied) has been revealed. I have tried to integrate this into my own story; to show what exactly the leadership was doing behind closed doors in parallel with the protests as they unfolded.

A Q&A WITH LAI WEN

In *Tiananmen Square*, there is a lot of focus on Lai's personal story and coming of age, before we get into the heart of the political narrative. What do you think personal stories can reveal about the political?

I think there is a parity between the process of adolescence and that of revolution. When you are a child, you exist in a state of innocence in as much as your parents and the elders of your family tend to be the sole conduit through which you experience the world. Despite the tantrums and the acting out, the young child tends to believe what his parents tell him absolutely. But when you get to adolescence, there is a great upheaval as you begin to question the values of your parents and the way they look at the world. Your old certainties break down as you challenge them. That can be painful and traumatic, but it can also be wonderful and uplifting because it is part of the way you shape yourself into an independent adult.

In a similar sense, when we students entered into the year of 1989, most of us had a benevolent, almost childlike attitude toward the Party and state. We believed, unconsciously perhaps—but often quite deeply—that the government had our best interests at heart. It was navigating the thorny terrain of politics and economics in a way which was best for the people, for we ourselves weren't experts and couldn't truly understand those higher concerns. But more and more, we came to question the state's interventions into our lives on campus, and increasingly the sense of paternalism it had cloaked itself in became revealed as stark oppression and ruthless self-interest. The protests marked the means by which a whole generation reached maturity in the most harrowing but also inspiring circumstances. It allowed us to tell the truth about our world ... to ourselves.

So, part of what I wanted to do in *Tiananmen Square* was mirror the spiritual and social awakening of the main character as an individual, personal story with the awakening into political consciousness of a whole generation. I think also that revolution—in fiction but also in reality—can often throw the character of a given individual into its truest light.

A Q&A WITH LAI WEN

Also central to this novel is the story of young love. What were you trying to capture in depicting the relationship between Lai and Gen in the book?

I wanted to capture the sheer intensity of first love, that adolescent sense of all-encompassing passion, but I didn't want to do this in a purely romantic and "fluffy" way. Contemporary culture tends to elevate romantic love above every other form of love; and I think there is a real dark side to this as well. Especially for women.

I think many women—many wives, many girlfriends—invest so much in their partner's wants and needs that they sometimes end up losing the semblance of themselves. Although Lai and Gen's connection is in many ways profound, forged by early childhood experience, nevertheless I think she loses to some degree her own personhood in her struggle for his love and approval, and this is incredibly damaging for her.

What do you hope readers take away from your novel?

Above all, I hope people will enjoy it as a good story. A story about childhood and friendship, and the loss of these things, and the way we think about the past and about the sense of nostalgia and memory that claims us as we get older.

As for the political aspect, I think many of us tend to conceive of social protests and movements against injustice as often being worthy but mirthless things, with worthy but prosaic political ends. But great protests are not just about new ways of doing politics; they are about people gathering together, forming new friendships and relationships, creating new forms of music and culture and poetry, new ways of self-expression and art, and dancing and debate, and anything else you might imagine. They are the blueprints of a new world.

And, from within their midst, one experiences great joy, as well as fear. The events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 were put down in the most brutal and tragic of ways. But I hope that the reader of my book will not simply take away despair but also great joy and hope. For I have tried to capture a small something of what those protests felt like, the light that emanates from them down the years—a light that suggests the possibility, at least, of a brighter and more humane future.

RECOMMENDED READING

***The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy**

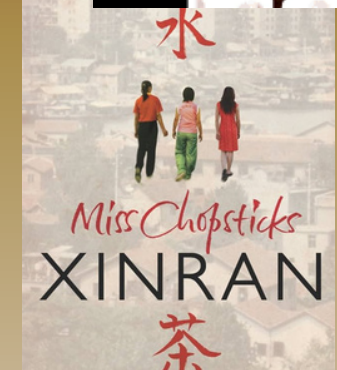
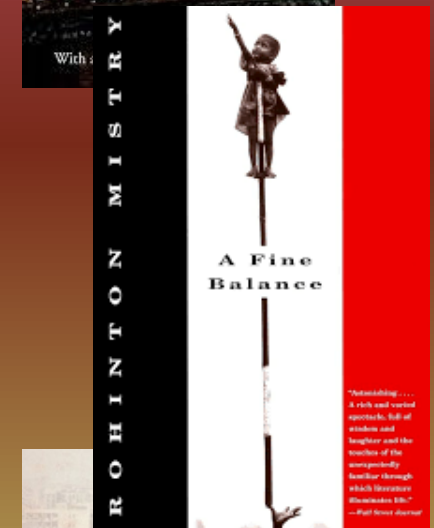
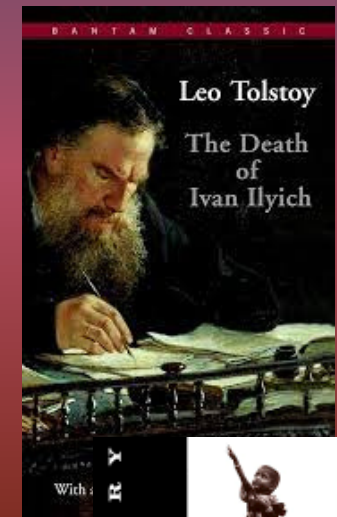
The story of a government official who contracts a degenerative, terminal disease that throws into relief the emptiness of an existence marked by ambition and self-interest. As the layers of his personhood are peeled away by the illness, he encounters a more authentic state of being centered on compassion and vulnerability, and realizes a profound connection with the peasant boy tasked to take care of him. Despite the grimness of the subject matter—the acute psychological and physiological depiction of death and disease—this novella is profoundly redemptive and deeply human.

***A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry**

A throwback to the great European classical literature of the 19th century, this novel provides a totalizing and tragic depiction of a host of characters whose individual lives are shaped by the turmoil of the state of emergency declared in India during the seventies. It is one of those books that weaves great historical events with the minutiae of individual and ordinary life, with consequences that are often tragic and harrowing and humorous and redemptive in equal measure.

***Miss Chopsticks* by Xinran**

A gentle but perceptive story that grows from rejecting the premise of young Chinese women being seen as “chopsticks”—i.e. as pretty but fragile (as opposed to the men who are the “rafters” that hold society up). Xinran explores, with great psychological tenderness, the story of three sisters who emigrate from a village to the city, and their quietly heroic struggle to carve out a life and take their destinies into their own hands against the rigid patriarchal standards they face.



RECOMMENDED READING

***The Comedians* by Graham Greene**

Set in Haiti, the lives of the main characters unfold against the otherworldly darkness of the dictatorship of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his sinister secret police force, the Tonton Macoute (bogeymen).

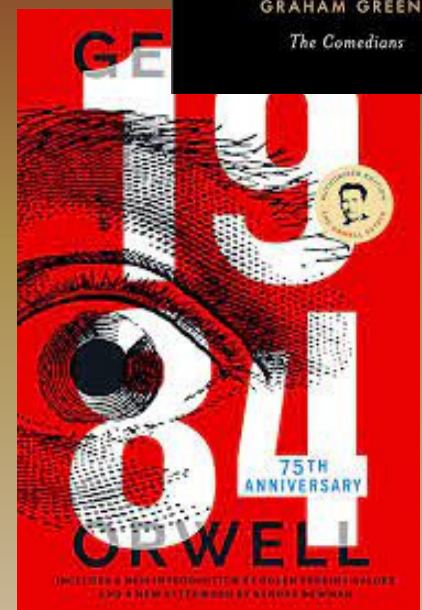
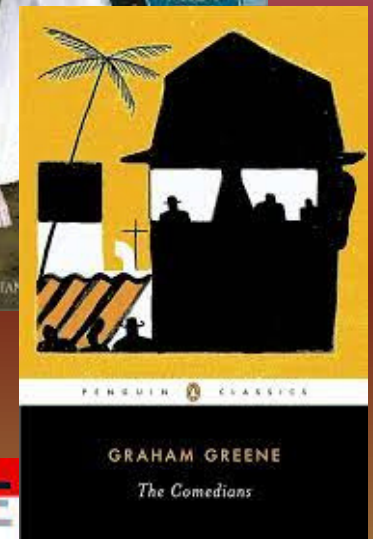
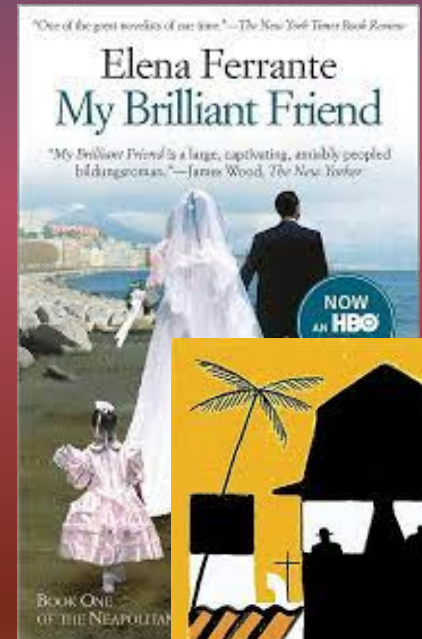
The novel provides an affirmation of freedom and an indictment of dictatorship, demonstrating—with great artistic verve—how decaying and monstrous regimes such as Duvalier’s lend to their functionaries not only obscene power but also transform them into something inhuman, something thing-like, something dead. In Haiti, under Duvalier, the undead really did roam the lands in the black of night, disappearing people, only those zombies wore the dark uniforms and sunglasses of the Tontons.

***My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante**

This novel tells the story of two girls growing up in a poor neighborhood in Naples during the 1950s. It captures the spirit of childhood, its innocence and its intensity, and how the most powerfully felt relationships are often bound by love and sympathy but also by insecurity and competitiveness too. Ultimately it shows how precious childhood friendship is and the tragic aspect that comes from our exile from it, as we enter into adulthood and have to go our own separate ways.

***1984* by George Orwell**

Orwell’s meditation on totalitarianism is unremittingly bleak, but he captures to a tee the perverse and grotesque systems of absolute power that emerged in the midnight of the twentieth century by transplanting them into his fantasy dystopia. Orwell’s vision of Oceania reveals how the state is able to establish its cult of personality in the form of “Big Brother,” the means by which the “thought police” interrogate the hidden lives of their subjects, and the topsy-turvy way totalitarian ideology rebrands slavery as freedom and war as peace.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Many accounts of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre center on the political conflict of the demonstrations and the brutal, hardline response of the Chinese state. Yet Lai Wen's novel, for the most part, follows the coming-of-age story of its protagonist in the years preceding the demonstrations. The protests only occur toward the end of the book and, Lai, the protagonist, is a committed supporter rather than a vocal leader of the movement. In what ways does Lai Wen's distinctive telling of the massacre differ from other stories you have read or heard about it? Discuss how this novel earns its title as a story about Tiananmen Square.
- 2.** Lai's parents have contrasting, almost binary personalities: her father is "a distant presence" throughout her childhood, while her mother is "hands-on, seeking to police every aspect and inflection of her family's life." We learn that they are both marked by the Cultural Revolution. How did this fact shape your understanding of their relationship to each other and to their children? What are some other examples of how different characters in fiction (or people in your own life) respond differently to a shared experience and historic or current events?
- 3.** Within her family, Lai is closest with her grandmother, an outspoken, colorful individualist. Which of the interactions between Lai and her grandmother most moved you? These types of multigenerational households are customary throughout Asia and many non-Western countries, with children, parents, and grandparents all living together under one roof. How does this compare with a conventional nuclear American household? What are some of the cultural customs or family dynamics in the book that resonated with—or differed from—your own upbringing?

4. After a shocking run-in with the police as a young girl, Lai returns home and receives an unexpected display of tenderness from her mother, who gently bathes her wounds. This is a stark counterpoint to her mother's behavior elsewhere in the novel, when she appears temperamental, jealous, or resentful of Lai. What is your understanding of Lai's mother's motivations? What is the source of her resentment? Why do you think Lai and her mother's relationship is, and increasingly becomes, so complex and fractured—and how does that affect Lai and the choices she makes in her own life?

5. In her early adolescence, Lai chances upon a mysterious bookseller, who introduces her to literary classics such as *1984* by George Orwell, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. Lai's reading and discussions with the bookseller widen her understanding of the world. What books have you read that changed the way you perceived the world? Are there people in your childhood who influenced your literary tastes in the same way the old bookseller did for Lai?

6. Lai's school visit to Chairman Mao's mausoleum excites her mother and her neighbors, all of whom deeply revere Chairman Mao's legacy. Soon after, though, her father brings her to the "memory wall," with accounts, stories, and letters from the Cultural Revolution, including a poem he had written. Why do you think Lai's father brought her to the "memory wall" at this point in her life? As a man of few words, what do you think he wanted to express to Lai in this moment? Did this change your understanding of him?

7. Gen and Lai do not initially get along as children and seem like an unlikely pairing as teenagers. Where Lai is sensitive and empathetic, Gen is more reserved, righteous, and sardonic; Gen comes from a well-to-do, aristocratic background, while Lai and her family live in a working-class neighborhood. What did you make of their relationship? What draws them together? What are some other romantic pairings in fiction or film that you might compare them to?

8. In the essay that eventually wins her a scholarship to Peking University, Lai writes, “Being human is about remembering. We are the sum of all our memories. And yet, everyone forgets. And anyone can become confused. But when we lose track of our memories, that is when we are at our most human.” Do you agree? Reflect on this statement in the broader context of this novel—and in your own life.

9. After entering Peking University, Gen’s and Lai’s lives diverge even further. Gen attempts to forge his own path as a student leader, and Lai soon falls in with a group of outsiders, Madam Macaw’s Marvelous Marauders, including the rebellious Anna and Lan and Min, a queer couple. How did your own identity and friendships change from adolescence to adulthood? Were there friends from that period who helped define you and changed the trajectory of your life?

10. The Tank Man refers to an enduring image of the Tiananmen Square massacre: the Chinese protestor who fearlessly stood in front of a row of tanks, who remains unidentified to this day. Lai reveals at the end of the novel that Tank Man is actually a woman—Anna, her close friend with an affinity for cross-dressing. How does Lai’s revelation change your perception of Anna? What does it mean to connect Anna’s story, character, and gender, to Tank Man’s legacy?

11. Today, any mention, reference, or allusion to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests is censored in China by the Chinese Communist Party. At the same time, the practice of banning books with “controversial” subjects is on the rise across America. What are the implications of censoring or banning books such as this one? Discuss the ways censorship and book-banning affects culture and education. Are there instances in which you believe this practice is justified?

12. The author Lai Wen has said that the novel is drawn from autobiographical experience and that she took inspiration from Elena Ferrante in writing under a pseudonymous pen name. In Wen’s case, her anonymity protects her from reprisal over the novel’s subject matter. How much of your reading experience of this story depends on it being true, especially as it is based on a historical event? Think of other novels written under pseudonyms. Does an author’s anonymity—not knowing their real name or identity—affect your response to the work?

13. The novel comes to a sudden close with Anna’s disappearance and Lai’s departure to Canada. The epilogue finds Lai thirty years later in Toronto, a literature teacher and a mother of two. There are small glimpses of how the lives of the other characters—Gen, Lai’s mother and brother—have unfolded. What do you imagine happened for Lai and the other characters in the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen Square? What do you think happened to those we don’t know about, such as Anna or the old bookseller? What else might you want to know about Lai’s life?