

Stage and Studio

Stage & Studio transcript

Program: Lisa See

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DMAE: I'M DMR, STAGE AND STUDIO... WE'RE LISTENING TO MUSIC BY HU-CHIN PLAYER AND COMPOSER WONG ON YUEN...

TODAY I TALK WITH ACCLAIMED AUTHOR LISA SEE. HER LATEST NOVEL, *DREAMS OF JOY* DEBUTED AT NUMBER ONE ON THE NY TIMES BEST SELLER LIST.

WHEN LISA SEE WAS GROWING UP, SHE SPENT A LOT OF TIME WITH HER FATHER'S SIDE OF THE FAMILY IN LOS ANGELES' CHINATOWN . SHE BEGAN HER PROLIFIC CAREER AS A BOOK AUTHOR IN 1995 WITH A HISTORY OF HER GREAT GRANDFATHER, FONG SEE. THE BOOK TRACES HIS JOURNEY FROM CHINA TO BECOME A 100-YEAR-OLD PATRIARCH OF A LARGE FAMILY IN AMERICA.

SINCE THAT FIRST BOOK, LISA SEE HAS SPECIALIZED IN WRITING NOVELS SET IN CHINA. SEE HAS SECURED A SOLID PLACE AS A WELL-RESPECTED LITERARY WRITER OF HISTORICAL FICTION. THOUGH HER BOOKS ARE GROUNDED IN HISTORICAL FACT, SEE SAYS SHE WRITES ABOUT UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCES.

LISA SEE: I always like to say that my books are not autobiographical. I will say that the emotions in these books, especially in how they relate in relationships are very much autobiographical of my experience of being a daughter, my experience being a mother, my experience of my father, and being his daughter, and there's a reason this book is dedicated to my father. I've never done that before. So to me, there's a line in here that says, "Mothers suffer. Children do what they want." And that is a Chinese aphorism. I think that could be said around the world.

HER LATEST BOOK "DREAMS OF JOY" FOLLOWS UP WHERE "SHANGHAI GIRLS" LEFT OFF. THE TITLE CHARACTER, 19-YEAR-OLD JOY, AND HER MOTHER PEARL ARE STRANDED IN COMMUNIST CHINA DURING A HORRIFIC TIME.

SEE CONDUCTED EXTENSIVE RESEARCH ON MAO'S GREAT LEAP FORWARD THAT CAUSED MASS STARVATION IN CHINA BEGINNING IN 1958 TO 1961. I CONGRATULATED LISA SEE FIRST ON THE MOVIE VERSION OF HER PREVIOUS BOOK *SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN*. THAT BOOK IS ABOUT TWO FRIENDS IN 19TH CENTURY CHINA WHO COMMUNICATED VIA A SECRET LANGUAGE.

LISA SEE: It is so exciting, I've had a lot of books optioned, and they've gone pretty far but they've never been made. And so I actually saw the film about 3 months ago. Of course they've made some changes. The part that is true to the original story of Snow flower and the Secret Fan is completely true to the book. It's as though they snipped some pages from the book and put them up on the screen. And then they have created a modern story that sort of bookends and weaves through the original story. And that takes place in Shanghai today, a story of friendship. So there are really two parallel stories of friendship.

DMAE: They added to it then.

LISA SEE: They added, but I have to tell you, that seeing my words and seeing these scenes that I wrote and these characters I wrote up on the screen, it's an extraordinary feeling. And actually in my case, the modern story is English, and the old story, my story, has subtitles. So I literally am seeing my words on the screen. It's just, it's really something.

LISA SEE: And I think people who've read the book will be surprised to see a singing and dancing Hugh Jackman. That will show you how much the modern story is completely different. But one is set in the 19th century, and the other one is in the 21st century. So they should be different.

DMAE: I am totally floored that Hugh Jackman is in this film, because I can't even picture that. But anyway, you got get people to draw...

LISA SEE: He's actually, it's just a cameo. But it's so funny, I've been getting emails from people on my website, and there was an email about a week ago, a woman said, "It's my favorite book and my favorite actor. It's like the icing on the cake." And I like to think of Hugh Jackman as just a little bit of icing.

DMAE: That's awesome. I'm so happy, because I read your books, and I go, "Why haven't they been made into a film?" And probably because of s many reasons that have nothing to do with the book, but they are epic, and it seems like on a grand scale you've got Oscar-winning material there. This is great.

LISA SEE: Thank you for that compliment. I think one of the problems usually is who do you hire to be in those films, and are these people who are recognizable to American audiences. And how accessible is it? My stories, they have to do with Chinese Americans, or they take place in China, but they don't have people doing knife in the, what do you call it, in the treetops, like Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. They're not martial arts movies. So it's a very different kind of story that I'm interested in telling, a much more intimate story, and has much more about character and relationships and emotions like love and envy and all those deep emotions that you wouldn't necessarily get in a martial arts movie.

DMAE: I mean, it's just a basic fact that Asian-American actors don't get those lead roles.

LISA SEE: And in *Snow flower and the Secret Fan*, you have the star of the movie, her name is Li Bing Bing, I don't think anyone here has really heard of her, but she is the Meryl Streep of China. She's won two of their version of the Academy Awards, and she's really extraordinary to see.

DMAE: Well I can't wait to see it. It's coming out soon. So I just want to say also, congrats on *Dreams of Joy*, because all of your novels are so epic in scale. They're incredible historical sagas. But in these two books, *Shanghai Girls* and *Dreams of Joy*, I just am astounded that you could create such a two-part, two-novel journey, and multiple journeys with so many characters.

LISA SEE: I have to say that originally I didn't think I would be writing a sequel, and in fact, I do look at *Dreams of Joy*, I know technically it is a sequel, but that people could read that book without having read *Shanghai girls*. There's a little 3 page synopsis at the beginning of the book that brings everybody up to speed, and even if you had read *Shanghai girls*, but you read it 2 years ago, this will jar your memory and bring back what the book is about.

LISA SEE: This story I believe is a stand alone book, and that people could just pick it up even if they had never read any of my other books. I had not thought even when I started that I would write two books with the same characters. But at the end of *Shanghai girls*, everyone asked, "Will there be a sequel?" That was always either the first or second question whether it was in an interview or at a bookstore event or an email. Every single person, that was always the first or second question. And so it was really wonderful for me to take these characters who at the end of *Shanghai girls* I think, that's just a new beginning, but then to write on what happens to happen. If *Shanghai girls* was about the relationship between sisters, *Dreams of Joy* is really about mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, what parents will sacrifice, and the courage that they have to protect their children, and how children sometimes, it takes them awhile to really appreciate their mother, to really appreciate their father, but that's part of growing up, and you finally get there.

DMAE: How much about your personal thoughts about that, because you explore the sister relationship so much in *Shanghai Girls*, and I know you have sisters. How much of that do you use of your own feelings about these relationships in *dreams of joy*?

LISA SEE: I always like to say that my books are not autobiographical. I will say that the emotions in these books, especially in how they relate in relationships are very much autobiographical of my experience of being a daughter, my experience being a mother, my experience of my father, and being his daughter, and there's a reason this book is dedicated to my father. I've never done that before. So to me, there's a line in here that says, "Mothers suffer. Children do what they want." And that is a Chinese aphorism. I

think that could be said around the world. People really kind of relate to that. So that again, I have wonderful children. But there have been moments when I have thought, “hmm, mothers suffer. Children do what they want.” So I’ve been able to draw on that myself, and I know the things I would do to protect my kids, the sacrifices that I would make, the loyalty that I would have to them. I remember when I was growing up, one of the things my mom used to say to me was, “you know Lisa, even if you become an axe murderer, I’ll still love you.” I never became an axe murderer, I’m happy to say, at least not yet, but I really understand—at the time, when I was little, I would think, “God, what a crazy thing to say.” But now I really understand it, because I know that if one of my kids did something really horrible, no matter what they would do, I would still love them.

DMAE: It’s about unconditional love, but it’s also about conditions of love, and how far you will go for that love. I also wonder about, it says so much about the strength of people enduring such horrific times, and you dealt with that quite a lot with Shanghai girls, with the two sisters escaping and going through this horrific journey to get to America. And what happened there, it seemed like they were following the American dream and finding happiness. But in *Dreams of Joy*, I kept wondering, when is the happiness going to start? And it kept me enthralled because I was going, I have to finish this book to know that they will persevere, they will survive, because I was really worried about these characters.

LISA SEE: I have to say, my books typically are not very happy. I get lot of email from saying, I was crying so hard when I was reading your book. I do get this email at least once a week. I was crying so hard in bed last night that my husband took your book away. I get that at least once a week. So I’m aware of that, with my stories. With *Dreams of Joy*, I really wanted a happy ending. I don’t think I’ve had a true happy ending, but I wanted a happy ending for these people so badly. So I have thought of the book all along as being in two parts. The first part is about finding Joy, the daughter. And the second part is about finding joy, the emotion.

DMAE: AND The details to which you describe the Great Leap Forward, and that was Mao Zedong’s campaign to turn countryside villages into farm collectives that would step up production and move China into this modern society, but then what the government did, the mandates they made on the peasants and the farmers in the rural villages led to mass starvation. There are estimates, they really don’t know or how many people actually died, but it could be 10 to 40 million people.

LISA SEE: Recent documents released by the government of China seem to suggest that it was about 45 million people over three years. And I actually think that when they started they had the best intentions, the country was new, the People’s Republic of China, started in 1949. Great Leap Forwards starts in 1958. It was a new country. I think they did want to bring China up into the 20th century, they wanted to become what they actually have become: a global economic superpower. But this was their way of trying to get there. And they had these campaigns where sometimes it would seem like a good idea at the beginning, but they didn’t really think through the consequences. For example, there was a huge campaign for people to have as many babies as possible. The thinking

was twofold. With every new stomach came a pair of hands that would help build the country. The other was this belief that if we double our population quickly, which in fact they did, that if the United States drops nuclear bombs on China, that there would be enough survivors to rebuild the country. OK. Well neither of those things happened. But here you jump ahead, another thirty years, and they have to start the one child policy. So that was an unintended consequence of this early policy of let's have as many babies as possible. Another one was the elimination of the four pests. And the four pests were insects, flies that for some reason had their own category, rats, and sparrows. And all across the country, in cities, in the countryside, people for 24 hrs a day would be outside, banging together pots and pans and sticks and whatever they could find to make so much noise, that the sparrows would never be allowed to land and would finally fly fly fly, until they dropped dead out of the sky from exhaustion. Well the thinking was that birds will eat seed as you plant it. And if eliminate the sparrows they won't eat the seed, we'll have a better crop. But what they again, the unintended consequence was they forgot about the insects that will come and eat the crop. And so now there was no natural predator to eat the crop.

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DMAE: But I think what you do so well is that you show, it's all gradual. Each new policy, it took a long time, months or even years to really develop. And nobody thought about what the consequences were except for the farmers who for some reason, the peasants were not listened to.

LISA SEE: I think, what is that idea, if you put a frog in hot water and you slowly turn it up, it doesn't have the sense to jump out because it's not really noticing until it's too late. I think that's part of what is happening here.

(BREAK)

DMAE: YOU'RE LISTENING TO STAGE AND STUDIO... I'M DMR.. MY GUEST IS AUTHOR LISA SEE WHO'S TALKING ABOUT HER DREAMS OF JOY, A SEQUEL TO SHANGAI GIRLS...IF YOU JUST JOINED US YOU CAN VISIT HER SITE AT LISA SEE DOT COM AND FOLLOW ALONG. YOU CAN ALSO HEAR THIS INTERVIEW LATER TODAY AT STAGE AND STUDIO DOT ORG.... WE'RE FEATURING MUSIC BY HU CHIN PLAYER WONG ONG YUEN. LISA SEE'S BOOK DREAMS OF JOY FOCUSES ON A MOTHER TRYING TO BRING HER DAUGHTER BACK FROM COMMUNIST CHINA DURING THE LATE 1950S . SEE PUT A GREAT DEAL OF HISTORICAL DETAIL IN THE BOOK BUT IT'S THE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT SHE LOVES MOST.

LISA SEE: what I love, what I personally love as a reader is a book where you're turning the pages because you want to know what's going to happen. You want to know what's going to happen with these characters. Are they going to fall in love? Are they

going to get together? Are they going to find Joy, the daughter, and joy, the emotion? Whatever those things are, but along the way, you can learn a lot. And why not? Why not, that's what life is about. That's why we read, is want to be entertained, but we want to think about the world in a larger way. And when we connect to these characters who in this case are going through some very difficult times, but as a family. They're going through difficult times as a family, that you think about yourself. What would I have done in that situation? How would I have acted? Would I have followed my moral and ethical center? Or would I have been like some of these other people and followed this craziness?

DMAE: I also thought it was crazy, taking all your pots and pans and metal and putting them into these backyard furnaces to make pig iron, essentially that they really couldn't do anything with. So eventually even the farmers didn't have any tools. How much time did you spend picking out the details that you wanted to put in this?

LISA SEE: I usually spend about two years on a book, and a lot of it is research. I will start the research about a year earlier, before I even start really in a serious way. I do a lot of searching on the internet. I live in Los Angeles, near UCLA. I spend a lot of time in the research library. I also read people's published and unpublished dissertations, and I talk to a lot of scholars. But of course the main source is people who lived through that time. And I looked for people, there was one woman who, her family had moved back to China, they were German. And her father had owned a factory in China before the war, and left, and then after the war in 1955, they moved back to China. We have this idea that China was closed. But it wasn't that closed, because there were a lot of people who went there. So I got a lot of details of what daily life was like in Shanghai in particular because this woman, every day I would write here another 20 questions. What was it like? What did they have in the store windows? How did you make toast? Where did you go school? What language did you speak? What did you use for shampoo? All these kinds of things that really had to do with day to day living. And then I also interviewed a lot of people who had escaped out of China, and all the different ways that they did it, so by the end, without giving too much away, those details of how Pearl and Joy and everybody else who might or might not be going along with them, how they get out is all based on real stories of people who got out. And lastly, there's some interesting stuff out there. So one I was doing a search on the internet, and I found something at the library of congress, a documentary about the great leap forward. So I bought a copy, I put it in my computer, and the first thing that came up was CIA. And this was a CIA documentary made in 1958, and they somehow sent someone into China who went all around China filming. So I had an hour of video from 1958, of people working on the farms, people in the cities, what they were wearing. Just what it looked like in the fields, everything that was just so immediate. Obviously the CIA was doing it, I don't why they were taping those things, or how they did it. But it was wonderful to be able to find that and use it.

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DMAE: Now the details that you chose that show the humanity of the characters and the women especially, there's one where the mom who makes the sacrifice to follow the

daughter into China, and works basically as a trash collector, decides to communicate to her daughter by pasting together these shoes made out of paper and rice glue, and I just thought that was so poignant, the message. What was the message? She was lovingly putting together this message for her daughter who she couldn't reach.

LISA SEE: And her never anticipating that her daughter would take those shoes, soak them in water, take them apart layer by layer, and come across the message. But she just wanted, even though she never anticipated that Joy would never see the message, that she would have it. And I think the message is my heart is always with you. And I think that's true for mothers. That no matter where your child is, or what they're doing, your heart is always with them. The section I'm going to read is when Joy marries a young man in the countryside. And Pearl, her mother, is not too happy about it, but she's there nevertheless. So here's the scene.

As a girl, I dreamed of my wedding. The dress, the veil, the banquet, the gifts. And none of it turned out the way I imagined. As a mother, I've dreamed of my daughter's wedding. A ceremony in the Methodist church in Chinatown attended by all of our friends, Joy's dress, my dress, the flowers, the reception at Su Qiao restaurant. But this is nothing like that either. Joy is right that there isn't supposed to be any kind of ceremony or celebration, but as a stranger and someone who has some money to spend, I can bend the rules. Brigade leader Lai is more than happy to take a bribe, some of my special overseas Chinese certificates worth less than 20 dollars, so I can give my daughter a wedding that pays homage to the past and is still true to the new China. The ceremony takes place two days later at dusk on a hillside overlooking green dragon's verdant hills. Sent from tea bushes planted on terraces, wafts on the breeze. The bride is in wedding red, an outfit found Young found in the dowry chest on the villa. She wears the pouch May gave her, and I wear mine, symbols of the ways Joy is linked to my sister and me, and the three of us link to my mother. Joy's hair, which has grown a good six inches this year hangs in two braids just her shoulders. Strips of red wool have been woven through the plaits and are tied in heavy bows. Her cheeks shined with happiness in the heat. Her nails have been stained a reddish color with balsam juice. The groom is as dressed up as I've ever seen him, a blue tunic, loose pants, and sandals. His hair has been combed, and he looks clean. Brigade leader Lai says a few words: "Communism is paradise. The people's communes will take us to it. Tao and Joy, first comrades always, will help the country climb to the highest heights. If Tao sails the seas, then Joy will row in the same boat. If Joy climbs a mountain, then Tao will be at her heels. ZG takes my hand. His touch, his kindness at this moment makes me want to weep. Until now, I thought my daughter had made the greatest mistake possible in coming to China. But that was nothing compared to this marriage. Mothers suffer, children do what they want. I look over at Tao's family. They don't look particularly happy either. The mother must be about my age, although she looks closer to 60 or even older. That happens when you have nine living children, who knows how many dead children, and are poor as can be. The father is just an older version of his son. Thin, wiry, but as dried out and wrinkled as my father-in-law just before the cancer took him. Brigade Leader Lai comes to the end of the ceremony. Tao turns to everyone and announces, "Comrades, I am happy." "I too am happy," Joy echoes. "In hard times, we will share the same piece of pickled turnip," Tao

promises. “We will drink from the same cup,” Joy adds. “I will work by my husband’s side in the commune. I will work with all of you.”

DMAE: Do you fall in love with your characters?

LISA SEE: Absolutely. And then when bad things happen to them, and especially when I know bad things are coming, it just kills me. And often, I know what’s coming, so about two months out, I’ll start to think, “Oh, please. There’s got to be another way. We got to save them. We can’t let this happen.” As though they’re real people. In a way, they are. They have their fate that is coming, and I am just there witnessing it. There are times when I know what’s coming, and I wish more than anything that there was a way to prevent these things from happening. And yet the characters are on their path, that it’s really my privilege and my honor to be there to witness what happens to them.

DMAE: I felt that very strongly in the passage you just read about marrying Tao. Don’t do it! Don’t do it! And you were probably, as you were writing, going, “But he has to.” They have to get married for the story, right?

LISA SEE: Well, it’s not that they have to get married for the story, but that Joy is on a path, and she’s on a stubborn path. She’s very very stubborn. And I think it’s fair to say that at the beginning, she doesn’t think through the consequences. Actually until this moment I hadn’t really realized it. So much of this book is actually about not thinking through the consequences, whether it’s on a personal level, or whether it’s on a governmental level.

DMAE: And that ties with theme of the Great Leap Forward. So that’s brilliant. So you plot everything out.

LISA SEE: I do. I plot everything out, and every once in a while, things change and things happen that I don’t anticipate. There’s some things that happen at the very end of the book that I didn’t anticipate that were going to happen. And they were just as much a surprise to me as I’m sure they’re going to be to readers. I was just like, “No way! Oh my gosh!” I couldn’t believe it, that these things, and I don’t know where that comes from. I really don’t. Because is that really the subconscious at work, or is that some kind of magic that happens when you’re writing.

DMAE: I’m wondering, are you working on anything else?

LISA SEE: I’m already doing research for the next book. I was in New York a couple of weeks ago at the museum of the Chinese in the Americas, doing research. And as soon as I’m done with the book tour, I’m just going to really jump into the new novel. I’m so excited about it. I’ve been reading these oral history projects, and I will just say that when I was at the museum, I don’t think it’s too much of a hint, but they were bringing out these wonderful costumes and things, and headaddresses from the 1930s from nightclubs in

New York that were Chinese nightclubs. It's going to be fun. It's really going to be fun. But sad too, of course, but a lot of fun along the way.

DMAE: Good luck on your tour. It sounds like, is this the biggest one ever?

LISA SEE: It feels like it. 45 events in 15 states.

DMAE: That feels really huge to me.

LISA SEE: It feels pretty big to me too.

DMAE: So keep up your vitamins and your stamina. You look great. You look like you could take on the world right now.

LISA SEE: But it's still only the beginning. This only day 8, I think.

DMAE: Well Lisa See, thank you so much. It's always a please to talk with you.

LISA SEE: Thanks so much for having me again.

DMAE: IF YOU WANT TO CHECK OUT LISA SEE'S BOOKS VISIT HER SITE AT LISA SEE DOT COM. WE'LL ALSO HAVE THAT LINK AT STAGE AND STUDIO DOT ORG...AS WELL AS THE ENTIRE INTERVIEW AND A TRANSCRIPT OF THIS SHOW.

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THANKS FOR PRODUCTION ASSISTANT TALI SINGER.

THAT'S IT FOR STAGE AND STUDIO... THANKS FOR TUNING IN... TILL NEXT TIME... I'M DMR...AND NOW MORE MUSIC BY HU-CHIN PLAYER WONG ON YUEN.