

'Shanghai Girls' captures life of sisters coping in China, U.S.

By Kathryn Reed

Do we ever evolve? Will discrimination ever go away? Will equality for all ever be more than words on paper?



Those are some of the questions I was left with after reading "Shanghai Girls" by Lisa See. Although this 319-page book is a novel, the global concerns are real even if the specific people are not.

It follows two sisters from Shanghai from 1937-57. It's two decades full of tumultuous times in China and the United States.

Coming from a life of privilege, these young girls find themselves sold as brides to cover their father's gambling debt. Much of the story unfolds from there. How they get to Angel Island and the hatred that is thrown upon them is gut wrenching.

Parts of the book are graphic – that's what happens when men behave like barbarians.

Chinese were the lowest of the immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act did not allow them to become citizens of the U.S. until its repeal in 1943.

Issues surrounding immigration 70 years ago seem to have only changed in regards to who the hatred is focused on today. The lack of understanding of cultures is still so prevalent today.

This puts a whole new perspective on illegal immigration. I'm not condoning this practice. The book merely points out on a personal level how immigration affects people – that's its so much more than laws.

Interwoven in their personal stories is the impact of the time period they were living. Their country was attacked by Japan. Their adopted country was attacked by Japan.

"Shanghai Girls" is also so very much about the bond of sisters. Perhaps that strikes a cord in me because I have three sisters.

"For every awful thing that's been said and done, she is my sister. Parents die, daughters grow up and marry out, but sisters are for life," See writes.

It is a story about their struggles of being married to men they did not know, the expectations of their in-laws, children, work, and society.

It's a book that made me think and cry.