

# Small world

Janice YK Lee's second novel is a shrewd study of the constraints of expat life, Anna James writes



## The Expatriates

by Janice YK Lee

Little, Brown £14.99/Viking \$27

336 pages

They are thrilled, they are homesick, they are scared, they are relieved to have arrived in Hong Kong — their new home for six months, a year, a three-year contract max, forever, nobody knows." So Janice YK Lee describes the fresh-off-the-plane expat's state of mind in the follow-up to her 2009 *The Piano Teacher*. In that bestselling debut, Lee took readers to 1940s and 1950s Hong Kong; now *The Expatriates* offers a different perspective on the same setting, as it follows three contemporary American women in the bubble of expat life.

Two of them occupy roughly the same social sphere. Hilary has followed her husband to Hong Kong, where his work has taken him, but their inability to conceive has upset their life plans. When her time is not taken up with charity lunches and cocktail parties, she occasionally "borrows" a mixed-race orphan to test the idea of adopting. The similarly well-off Margaret, by contrast, has two children — but she used to have three. Her youngest went missing a year ago while the family was on holiday in Seoul with a friend-of-a-friend babysitter, Mercy, the third of Lee's expats.

Columbia-educated but from a

be dogged by bad luck. She has come to Hong Kong to escape the frustrations of life after college, only to become entangled in Margaret and Hilary's lives.

Lee switches between the perspectives of the three without a rigid pattern, a strategy that lends the novel a freshness of pace and a pleasing unpredictability. But while it is the women's weaving in and out of each other's stories that creates the overarching narrative, the most powerful moments come from the details of their individual lives — from Mercy's disappointments with what's on offer to a young woman with little money and no connections, or from Margaret's grief at the loss of her son. Of the three, it is Hilary, introduced later than the other two, who seems at first the least likeable, but Lee gently navigates her to the book's core as the women's lives knot together around scandal, affairs and secrets.

Born to Korean parents in Hong Kong, where she now lives, and educated in the US, Lee excels at conveying the claustrophobic atmosphere of expat life. Despite their various degrees of privilege and wealth, Hilary, Margaret and Mercy are all forced to operate within a tight framework of expectations. We are given glimpses of women who refuse to conform, but often that freedom has come about through things beyond their control — usually their husbands running off with younger women.

*The Expatriates* is not satire, but it edges close to it at times; this is a milieu where, at an expat party, Hilary's Chinese friend Olivia is casually treated as a foreigner. One of the novel's strengths is Lee's exploration of the sometimes subtle interplay between different layers and types of privilege; another is her empathy for the loneliness that her characters must endure. The result is a shrewd and moving study of how race, gender and edu-