



Kinder Than Solitude

Yiyun Li

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A profound mystery is at the heart of this magnificent new novel by Yiyun Li, “one of America’s best young novelists” (*Newsweek*) and the celebrated author of *The Vagrants*, winner of the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Moving back and forth in time, between America today and China in the 1990s, *Kinder Than Solitude* is the story of three people whose lives are changed by a murder one of them may have committed. As one of the three observes, “Even the most innocent person, when cornered, is capable of a heartless crime.”

When Moran, Ruyu, and Boyang were young, they were involved in a mysterious “accident” in which a friend of theirs was poisoned. Grown up, the three friends are separated by distance and personal estrangement. Moran and Ruyu live in the United States, Boyang in China; all three are haunted by what really happened in their youth, and by doubt about themselves. In California, Ruyu helps a local woman care for her family and home, and avoids entanglements, as she has done all her life. In Wisconsin, Moran visits her ex-husband, whose kindness once overcame her flight into solitude. In Beijing, Boyang struggles to deal with an inability to love, and with the outcome of what happened among the three friends twenty years ago. Brilliantly written, a breathtaking page-turner, *Kinder Than Solitude* resonates with provocative observations about human nature and life. In mesmerizing prose, and with profound insight, Yiyun Li unfolds this remarkable story, even as she explores the impact of personality and the past on the shape of a person’s present and future.

Kinder Than Solitude Details

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From Reader Review Kinder Than Solitude for online ebook

Jill says

“Perhaps there is a line in everyone’s life that, once crossed, imparts a certain truth that one has not been able to see before, transforming solitude from a choice into the only possible line of existence.”

For four friends, that line was crossed during their late teenage years, when one of them was poisoned, perhaps deliberately, perhaps accidentally, lingering in a physical limbo state until she finally dies years later. The young man, Boyang, remains in China; the two young women, Ruyu and Moran, move to the United States. Each ends up living in what the author describes as a “life-long quarantine against love and life.”

Kinder than Solitude is not primarily a mystery of a poisoned woman nor is it an “immigrant experience” book, although it is being hailed as both. Rather, it’s a deep and insightful exploration about the human condition – how one’s past can affect one’s future, how innocence can be easily lost, and how challenging it is to get in touch with – let alone salvage – one’s better self.

“To have an identity – to be known – required one to possess an ego, yet so much more, too: a collection of people, a traceable track lining one place to another – all these had to be added to that ego or one to have any kind of identity,” Yiyun Li writes.

In the case of Moran, who married and divorced an older man she still cares for, what she called her life “...was only a way of not living, and by doing that, she had taken, here and there, parts of other people’s lives and turned them into nothing along with her own.” Ruyu, the most enigmatic and detached of the characters, is an empty vessel, unable to connect or to experience much pleasure or pain, who strives to receive an “exemption from participating in life.” And Boyang, a successful entrepreneur with a cynical sense of the world, has discovered that “love measured by effort was the only love within his capacity.”

This is a deeply philosophical book, one that delves into its characters, with an ambling narrative that shifts from the shared Chinese past to the present – China, San Francisco, the Midwest. It is not for everyone – certainly not for readers who are anticipating an action-packed, page-turning suspense novel. But for those who seek insights into the human condition and love strong character-based novels, *Kinder Than Solitude* offers rich rewards.

Jenny says

Set partly in China shortly after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, partly in Beijing and America around twenty years later, 'Kinder than Solitude' tells the story of three friends and their slow withdrawal into a self-imposed emotional isolation after their lives are irreversibly altered by an event, that may or may not have been an attempted murder.

The catalyst of the story is Ruyu. Orphaned as a child and raised by two deeply religious 'great aunts', she is sent to Beijing to live with relatives where she meets Boyang and Moran. The two of them - being very close friends that grew up together - befriend her, despite Ruyu offering very little amiable surface as she stays

very contained, drawn back, almost unaffected by human emotion.

The only person to really be able to make Ruyu's surface ripple is Shaoai, the daughter of Ruyu's relatives, a rebel whose involvement in political protest will ruin her future. It is her death the book begins with.

The beauty of this dark novel lies not in its fast pace or its drive to solve the mystery. In fact Kinder Than Solitude is a very quiet, philosophical novel with a prose so mesmerizing I wanted it to never end. Yiyun Li manages very elegantly to give an insight into a time that may have shaped and affected a whole generation in China, but she does so by zooming in on such a microscopical level that in the end, more than anything this novel to me was about the human condition, about solitary existence by nature or choice.

Highly recommended.

SCARABOOKS says

Forse uno stellinaggio di mezzo non gli rende completamente giustizia, però difetti ne ha. Di ritmo soprattutto: più che divagare a tratti si impaluda nel niente. E poi certe pose da teatro di serie B fatte assumere ai personaggi, certi moduli espressivi un po' sciatti (frasi fatte, aggettivi scontati), alcuni spunti di riflessione e di atmosfera, anche promettenti, accennati e poi lasciati là.

Detto questo bisogna anche dire che la storia è bella, incuriosisce, tiene legati. La caratterizzazione dei personaggi è riuscita. La struttura a incastri del racconto funziona. Le ambizioni tematiche sono alte e la qualità con cui poi i temi li svolge (l'adolescenza, l'identità, la religione, la famiglia, la doppia visuale in parallelo sulla Cina della transizione e l'America della crisi) è più che buona. Percorrendo certe pagine pensavo che se nascerà un filone cino-statunitense leggeremo cose molto interessanti.

Anche per questo, chiudo questo romanzo con un appetito non saziato: della Yiyun voglio assaggiare altro.

Cheryl says

Solitude is not kind in the world of this novel. But there is little that is kind, so solitude becomes a refuge and false haven.

This is a powerful and intensely meditative novel. Children on the treacherous shoals of their teenage years sense the dangers, but don't really understand the nature of them, and can be helpless to avoid them, especially if they already feel isolated. They say false things, or do seemingly malicious deeds, without fully appreciating the consequences which may then go on to haunt them.

Li writes exquisite prose — this alone is worth the read. These are intensely wrought sentences of astute insights, illustrating rich complexities of thought.

“A born murderer, she had mastered the skill of snuffing out each moment before releasing it to join the other passed moments. Nothing connects one self to another; time effaced does not become memory”

“...his voice had left a crack through which loneliness flooded into her room.”

“If she had ever felt anything close to passion, it was a passion of the obliterating kind: any connection made by another human being, by accident or by intention, had to be erased; the void she maintained around herself was her only meaningful possession.”

The book is littered with aphorisms and observations about the human condition:

“...one’s preparation for departure should begin long before arrival”

“Do not expose your soul uninvited”

“Nothing destroys a livable life more completely than unfounded hope”

“It takes courage to find solace in trivialities, willfulness not to let trivialities usurp one’s life.”

Solitude and loneliness are tiring to read about, never mind experiencing. By the end I felt exhausted, wrung out, from the tension of repression and loneliness that permeates the story. Nonetheless, highly recommended. Just pair it with the right mood accordingly.

(ARC from Random House via NetGalley.)

Sagahigan says

V?a ?? sâu s?c và tinh t? ?? ta có th? ??c ??n h?t, tuy nhiên thi?u cái h?n có th? g?i là s? "qu? d?" c?a m? nhà v?n xu?t ch?ng.

Patrice Hoffman says

Kinder Than Solitude by Yiyun Li is the enthralling story of three friends who's lives are forever bound by the history they have tried to run from since youth. The news of the death of Shaoai, which is possibly caused by one of the three, jump starts the novel. After more than 20 years in a coma, the one tie holding these three together, is finally severed.

The premise of a mystery is what attracted my attention to this novel initially, by Li's writing kept me engrossed and in need of savoring every word written. Each character in their own way, has chosen a life of solitude as opposed to a true existence filled with love, laughter, and humanity. Boyang, has risen from meager beginnings to become a man who is more wealthy than ever imagined. Moran, once a courteous teen, morphs into a chemist who finds solace in her small apartment and the occasional visits with her dying ex-husband. Finally, the most interesting yet mysterious of the three, Ruyu, lives as the odd-job queen.

Kinder Than Solitude is more than just a mystery of whodunnit but rather a delving into what it means to be human; to seek lasting connections and have a meaningful life full of people who matter. Instead, these characters have chosen a life of being untangled. After failed marriages, passing flings, or basic emotionless disregard, the one thing that they do remain tethered to is the death of Shaoai.

Yiyun Li provides a vivid character study of three people that are unlike any character I've come across to date in the multitude of texts I've read. Who stand out the most for me is Ruyu. She's sent to live with Shaoai's family at the age of 15. Shaoai constantly berates her for her lack of emotion or caring. Ruyu is an enigma the entire novel and never once deviates from that trait. She's logical to a fault and this makes her prime suspect number one. She seems not to care about anyone but not in the cunning way. It's more so that she's even tempered and this baffles all who come across her.

Essentially, Kinder Than Solitude is a well-written exposé of human nature and the beauty of solitude. I enjoyed this novel tremendously and look forward to what's next from this author.

Copy provided by Random House via Netgalley

Christy says

This is a poignant book that revolves around three friends and an event - the poisoning of another friend - that changes their lives forever. It hops back in time between their childhood and the present (twenty years later), to see what sort of lives they live, and how much they are effected by the past. I cared deeply about all the characters, but this is a sad tale of mourning, loss, and broken dreams and to be honest, I felt quite depressed, even after finishing it, a little haunted.

Superbly written, it focuses on the relationships that we forge with each other, loyalty and love, or the lack of it.

Even though this a mystery, and wanting to find out who poisoned Shaoai (or was it suicide?) kept me turning the pages, the actual whodunnit seemed entirely secondary - with the main meat of the book being not what happened, but how did one event resonate through multiple people across the years, who else did it touch, and how did it affect them? For example, Moran, once a young girl who idolised Shaoai is now a quiet woman living in the United States. We watch her interact with her ex-husband, and have to wonder how much did that distance event with Shaoai effect her current personality, how did it touch her ex-husband and her relationship with his family, even though they never even know Shaoai existed.

It is a book about experiences, and how they shape us - although be reassured, the book has a conclusion and felt complete. Overall a very emotive journey that caused me to feel very introspective upon completion.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

It took me over a week to read the first 90 pages of this book. I plugged along because I didn't have a good reason to quit....except that I was not enjoying it. When I recognize the quality of an author's prose, I feel compelled to keep trying even if the book is difficult for me to read. I don't mean difficult in the sense that I can't understand the writing, but difficult because the story is not compelling.

After 90 pages, I realized I was forcing myself to continue, calculating in my head that if I read one chapter per day I could finish it by the library due date. Most of the characters seem flat and affectless to me, forcing themselves to lead drab, solitary lives, and apparently thinking they're superior because they don't need other people. So, I'm letting this one go, and it feels good.

Cheryl says

Loyalty to the past is a foundation of life one does not by happenstance or by will end up living.

To be so consumed with one's choices, so consumed that every present choice is a consequence of the past; to be enveloped by guilt so vexatious that it gnaws your waking thoughts; to want to love and be loved so badly that you stop desiring love.

To live by this code:

People don't vanish from one's life, they come back in disguise.

To live this thought daily, view everyone through lens of skepticism, to know, without a doubt, that happiness is a misnomer.

It's hard to read this book and not drown in the hopelessness of its characters, not be affected by the loss of some redeeming quality:

When people talk about starting over, it is only wishful thinking; what came before, what happened yesterday, did not come or happen in vain.

Here, no one starts over, everyone lives in the past. Present lives muddled by past choices: a disabled friend-who is to blame? Fleeing to America doesn't help because Ruyu and Moran only live lies, struggling to build healthy relationships, always reminded of that past act. In Beijing, Boyang, the man loved by both women, will stick around to take care of what he deems his fault. What happened? This subtle mystery abounds and unfolds through present and past narratives written with clean, intentional prose. But as you read further, you sense that there is nothing mysterious about what happened because the mystery is predictable.

When love overpowers instinct, when loyalty to one's friend deters forgiveness, when silence begets crime and lives are shattered--combined, these form the underlying premise of this slow-moving, thought-provoking, rhythmic, and melancholic tale told with philosophical asides:

Hardships in lives are like bad weather, which one endures because bad weather will break as inevitably as bad luck will run its course. Hope is the sunshine after the storm, the spring thawing right after the bitter winter. The goddess of fate, as capricious as she is, has nevertheless an impressionable mind.

Susan Ovans says

Reading this through to the end was a chore. The three friends at the core of the book are the same remote, unlikable character in different guises. The plot is dull and the "twist" at the root of what may or may not be a murder is implausible. The ending is entirely inadequate. I regret every hour I spent on this and only wish I'd given it up at the start.

Susan says

This poignant novel looks at the relationship between three friends and an event which has shaped their lives. The book begins with Boyang, a 'diamond' bachelor at thirty seven; with a good income and spacious housing in crowded Beijing, he is divorced with no children. When we meet him, he is arranging the cremation of Shaoai, who was poisoned twenty one years ago and has finally died after years of illness and suffering. On the death of Shaoai, he sends an email to his two childhood friends – Moran and Ruyu. Both women now live in America, although both fend off love and loneliness. The three are bound by waiting for Shaoai to die, because the poison was taken from the university laboratory of Boyang's mother, shortly after the three friends visited there.

During this book the storyline swops from past to present, as we learn more about the four central participants of this novel and what happened both before Shaoai was poisoned and how it changed the characters lives. This is a slow moving book, but one which certainly has a lot of impact. There is Boyang, whose parents are more interested in their genius daughter; Moran, whose whole life is set in the Beijing quadrangle – the courtyard of friends and neighbours a communal stage she enjoys and feels safe in – but who now lives a solitary life; the political and aggressive Shaoai, who resents having Ruyu to live as a paying guest in her parent's home and, lastly, Ruyu, the orphan child, self contained and uncommunicative. What happened, all those years ago – was the poisoning attempted murder, an unsuccessful suicide or a freak accident and, finally, who was to blame? With Shaoai now dead, can the three friends finally let go of their self imposed solitude and make peace with what happened? I found this a really emotive, deeply moving and well written book, with characters I cared about and who really came alive on the pages of this excellent novel which I recommend highly.

I received a copy of this book, from the publisher, for review.

switterbug (Betsey) says

In this stunning, introspective novel of loneliness and detachment, two women--Moran, and Ruyu, and one man, Boyang-- are illuminated in the months before and the decades after a tragedy. As teenagers, they banded together in their communal Beijing neighborhood. Shaoai, an outspoken dissident of the Chinese government, was poisoned, apparently an accident, in the shadow of the Tiananmen Square protests. She takes twenty years to die, although the massive deterioration begins early. Soon after this harrowing event, the three friends, in a tacit pact, drift away from one other, circumscribing their adult lives with self-imposed emotional quarantines.

The novel opens in Beijing, and seamlessly alternates in time and place between China and America. As the story examines the lives of Boyang, Moran, and Ruyu, as teens when the tragedy occurred and now as middle-aged adults, their shared parallels of solitude are probed, and the mystery of Shaoai's poisoning is gradually revealed. They haven't spoken to each other in twenty years, and all three are divorced, childless, and detached from passion and fulfillment.

Ruyu, an orphan from the provinces, is sent by her grandaunts at age 15 to live with Shaoai's parents in Beijing. They want her to get a better education. Shaoai and her friends treat Ruyu with a haughty

truculence. Ruyu, however, is an inward girl, lacking social graces, a cipher to others. She is aloof, inscrutable, and privately prays to God. She doesn't seek others out, much to their frustration.

Boyang and Moran, longtime friends, reach out to Ruyu, who accepts their friendship with a general indifference. She is unused to the community spirit of her new home, where many families convene together in the shared quadrangle. Boyang is the son of wealthy college professors, who he visits on weekends; they left him to be raised by his grandmother while they pursued their ambitions. Moran is the equalizer; she is eager to nurture. For her, life was a series of ideal moments, filled with "a larger dose of joy." Unfortunately, Shaoia's poisoning leaves them all contaminated with psychic toxins. As adults, they sought out lives to subvert their memories, at the same time reeling from them.

"Those seeking sanctuary in misremembering did not separate what had happened from what could have happened."

Boyang stayed in Beijing, while Moran and Ruyu left for separate parts of America. All are locked away in prisons they have built for themselves. Boyang, divorced, is a wealthy businessman, getting by in a series of superficial relationships with younger women. Ruyu keeps herself sequestered in a restrained life as an underachiever. Moran, working for a pharmaceutical company in Massachusetts, still keeps in touch with her ex-husband, but divorced him in order to maintain an emotional void. And yet,

"She was afraid of meeting another person like her, but more than that she was afraid of never meeting another person like her, who, however briefly, would look into her eyes so that she knew she was not alone in her loneliness."

Li's measured narrative combines finely calibrated characters and elegant, elegiac prose. The tone evoked a grey chill, but not entirely bleak. There was a haze of something brighter around the edges of the story—a wish for redemption and forgiveness. There was sympathy for their guarded enclosures, like a sweet spot buried under their memories and their isolation.

"To know the world, for a child, is to ask questions, but the situation leading to those questions, once answered, are forgotten; having garnered enough knowledge, one enters adulthood only to be confronted by more questions, which, no longer answerable, form the context of one's being."

Samadrita says

Coping mechanisms. For how long can one cling on to them with a quiet desperation?

Long after grief subsided, long after the ache dealt by the blow of tragedy dulled, Ruyu, Moran and Boyang continued to let their lives revolve around their coping mechanisms. In place of a youthful lust for life and unbounded optimism they made a gaping emptiness their constant companion, drew strength from their blunt indifference to the world at large, never caring for the interminable flow of time and living from one moment to the next one.

No expectations from those who touched their lives fleetingly. Relationships established and subsequently shed like second skins just as easily. An impenetrable fog of nothingness separated these three individuals from the world around them. Deeply afraid of tenuous attachment, they chose the secure comfort of solitude.

Orphaned in infancy, Ruyu had her perception of morality blurred by the blind religious fervor with which her grandaunts tried to indoctrinate her and later by Shaoai's everyday small cruelties. Disillusioned with life at a tender age, she could only snub gentle Moran's offer of friendship with acid contempt and wield Boyang's love for her as a weapon to harm others. Her act of transgression (not without its reasons) - perhaps triggered by the vindictive nature of adolescence - brought turbulence into the lives of three souls and destroyed a fourth, the aftershocks of this incident continuing to haunt them decades later across continents.

Ruyu knew she wasn't going to be let off unscathed by fate either but then what could possibly intimidate a misanthrope who treated life like a prison and considered the act of living akin to a sentence meant to be served out in silent despondency?

"She was not the only one trapped by life. She was afraid of meeting another person like her, but more than that she was afraid of never meeting another person like her, who, however briefly, would look into her eyes so that she knew she was not alone in her loneliness."

Yiyun Li is my new favorite author of Chinese origin simply because she manages not to succumb to the lure of sketching a Beijing under an autocratic regime like so many of her peers, choosing instead to narrate a tale of heartbreak and loss which will remain as affecting even if one strips her characters of their ethnicity and shifts the backdrop of events to any other place and time. It is the flawed humanity of the ensemble characters, none of whom are completely beyond reproach, and their self-inflicted emotional isolation which establishes Li's ability to go beyond the limits of spick and span pigeonholing. The devastating aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre and the agonizing chokehold of the Communist administration over its citizens are simply hinted at and never spelled out for the sake of inducing any cheap sentimentality. And what elevates her craft further in my eyes is the languid beauty of her prose and her accurate portrayal of the melancholia and ennui entailing the quandary of life.

"They were not her stories. They were not about her time, or her people, but what she had once found in these stories-escape-would eventually become her wisdom. Perhaps if she kept these tales going he would one day forgive her stubbornness in choosing solitude, because he, kinder than solitude, was always here for her until death do them apart."

The pleasure of familiarizing myself with an author I know I can unhesitatingly seek out in the future never becomes stale.

Katerina says

The best epithet for this book would be "pensive".

Before she met Josef, she had been in Madison for two and a half months, but those days, like the time since she had left Josef, had been willfully turned into the footprints of seabirds on wet sand, existing only between the flow and ebb of the tide.

(see what I mean? somehow this ostensibly simple passage is my favorite in the whole book, along with this one, where it is not about the wording but about the feeling:

To be brought to an understanding of her own foolishness like that was like walking into a wall she had never known to be there. The pain was so acute that for a moment Moran felt the urge to gasp.)

The book is very slow, don't even start if you like well-paced dramas. It features some memory glimpses and broodings of three childhood companions - not to be confused with friends! - with unpronounceable names, so I'll just call them R, M and B. (R is a b****, B is a m****, M. is a sweet girl and my total favorite). Almost all of them spent their childhood in Beijing and nearly everyone escaped to America when they had a chance. A long-awaited death in China brings back unwelcome memories and makes them recall their past, contemplate their present, and face the future.

I would recommend reading it if you're feeling... pensive, yeah, that's right.

Craig Swartz says

Let me start with the good. Thanks to Goodreads for sending me this book in a giveaway. It's fun to be a winner.

I had never heard of Yiyun Li. She has written a couple of other books and seems like she has a following of people that enjoy her novels. She has a real easy writing style that flows along as you read it. Just as a writer, I would say she has talent.

The problem is what the book jacket led me to believe is the story. "A profound mystery is at the heart of this magnificent new novel" is how the book jacket starts. The book clocks in at 312 pages. I'm not sure 25 pages is devoted to the mystery. The rest of the book is, in my opinion, a meandering of unrelated and rather boring stories of lost marriages, music, school, and so on. In fact, a lot of one chapter was a man and woman discussing whether or not what they were on should be considered a date. Huh?

I suppose some could call this book a character study. I call it boring. It may be for you, it wasn't for me.
