

Review

Hua, Vanessa. *A River of Stars*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2016. 304 pp. \$15.70 Hardcover.

Vanessa Hua's debut novel *A River of Stars* focuses on a Chinese immigrant woman, Scarlett Chen, who builds a life for herself and her baby in San Francisco's Chinatown. While the premise of the novel may seem typical of an immigration narrative, Scarlett's unique past and Hua's colorful and unromantic portrayal of the Chinese American communities capture a diversity that exists within groups of immigrants from the same country, breaking the myth of a monolithic immigrant identity.

To start, Scarlett is a single woman who has escaped devastating poverty in China by becoming a manager of a manufacturing factory in a major city. Her life takes a turn when her affair with her rich, married boss results in an unexpected pregnancy. Ecstatic that her baby is a son, Boss Yeung sends Scarlett to a secret maternity home in Los Angeles to secure American citizenship for their baby. Being in love with Boss Yeung, Scarlett only reluctantly agrees to his plan. From the very beginning, Hua complicates Scarlett's reason for her migration — Scarlett comes to the U.S. not for financial or social security, but for love and the hope of keeping her family together. Thus, this novel serves as a good platform for students to discuss and explore different push-pull factors of immigration, including factors that are not commonly discussed.

After arriving to the U.S., Scarlett lives in a maternity home, cloistered with a group of elite, pregnant Chinese wives who are part of birthing tourism, an industry developed to help tourists travel to the U.S. for the purpose of giving birth on American soil. The choice to depict the industry with vivid details is bold on Hua's part because it is a taboo topic within the Chinese American community. By giving readers an inside look into this complex industry, Hua offers a rare view from the participants' perspectives. Hua's portrayal of the maternity home is scathingly realistic. Shut away from the rest of the society and their men, the women here make no pretenses in keeping up with their social graces. Since they all despise Scarlett for being a working-class woman and a mistress, Scarlett suffers abuses ranging from name-calling to being dragged into physical fights.

Olivia Lee is an MA student in the English and Comparative Literature Department at San José State University.

During Scarlett's stay in this maternity home, she learns that Boss Yeung has never intended to marry her. Instead, he plans to pay Scarlett off for her baby. Afraid of his wealth and power, Scarlett secretly escapes to San Francisco before she gives birth. Throughout the rest of the novel, Scarlett struggles to carve out a place for herself and her baby in Chinatown.

The novel is told in the third-person perspective focusing mostly on Scarlett's narrative, switching between her life in America and her former life in China. The omniscient narrator offers snippets of Scarlett's past either through Scarlett's memory flashbacks or during expanded explanations of a scene. This non-linear narrative can enrich students' reading as they can analyze and discuss how the structure demonstrates and mimics Scarlett's relationship with her past — that for her, building a new life does not mean she would completely abandon the old; and in fact, she may draw strengths from her past just as the narrative itself builds on the past.

The strongest point of this novel lies in Hua's depictions of the vastly different Chinese characters, particularly the people in the Chinese American communities that Scarlett encounters. The ruthless upper-class mothers from the L.A. maternity home — their cattiness toward Scarlett and shallow competition among each other — offer a realism that counters the stereotype of the meek and submissive Chinese woman. Additionally, Hua depicts Chinatown as populated with quirky inhabitants, each with a unique background story: there's the kind and generous Old Wu, a bachelor who hunts for treasures among trash; Widow Mok, with nothing left of her former glory days except her extravagant silk gowns; Auntie Ng, who traded her son's motorcycle for a suit to persuade him of finding a job; and many more. Hua's skillful illustrations create an intimate setup that is at once hilarious and heartbreakingly honest.

The diversity of immigrant characters presented in Hua's work make her novel a useful study in an Asian American literature course — or any American literature course that wishes to broaden its scope to examine characters from the periphery of mainstream society. Each character presents a distinctive circumstance affected by the intersection of race, gender, and class. Even Boss Yeung, a well-respected business mogul in China, is subjected to discrimination due to his ethnicity and inability to speak English as he traces after Scarlett's movements in California.

At the same time, Hua's Chinese characters are driven by a financial self-interest and a sense of solidarity that faithfully show the delicate balance of rivalry and support that exist within a minority community. As a newcomer, Scarlett must learn to navigate the new social norms among these Chinese American communities, made up of people who share the same national background but are irrevocably different from the Chinese back in China because conditions in the U.S. have altered their lives drastically.

And finally, there's Scarlett, who does not fit the typical profile of a Chinese immigrant woman as she is a single mother with no family, connections, money, or property in this country. Throughout the novel, Scarlett depends on her own determination and hard work as she tries to stake a claim in the American dream. Most importantly, as readers follow her journey that is wrought with difficulties and small triumphs, we learn to sympathize with Scarlett despite her status as an illegal immigrant — a lesson that is much needed in the political climate of today.

---Olivia Lee

San José State

University