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Category: FICTION

Starred review: A star is assigned to books of unusual merit, determined by the editors of Kirkus Reviews.

First-novelist Bates (stories: *China Dog*, 2002) explores the Chinese immigrant experience in Canada in a heartbreaking but muted love story.

Su-Jen Chou is seven years old in 1957 when she and her mother come from China to join her father, who has bought into a small restaurant in a town near Toronto. Su-Jen, who becomes Annie when she begins school, narrates the story of her parents' lives and her own developing awareness with an eye for the telling detail, though her understanding evolves with appropriate slowness. Annie quickly assimilates, making friends and becoming a star student, but her still young and beautiful mother, who speaks no English, is deeply unhappy, missing China, where her family had wealth and prestige before the Communist takeover. She argues constantly with Annie's elderly father, who has lived on and off in Canada for many years. The two share no affection, sleeping with Annie in the bed between them until her father eventually moves into another room. After Annie's much older brother, Lee-Kung, who has been working

elsewhere in Canada, comes to help run the restaurant, Annie learns that both parents had previous marriages and children who died, that Lee-Kung is only her half-brother, and that his mother may have committed suicide. Inevitably, Annie's mother and Lee-Kung are drawn toward each other. While Annie witnesses the affair with disgust, she's also caught up in the less interesting complexities of her own pubescent life, particularly her friendship with Charlotte, one of those golden children doomed in fiction to early death. Annie's mother becomes pregnant around the same time that Lee-Kung's bride arrives for the marriage arranged at his father's insistence. Annie sees looks exchanged, hears snatches of conversation. What in lesser hands could have become overwrought remains bittersweet and elegiac as the family struggles to maintain dignity and unity.

Deeply satisfying: a lovely sensuality pervades in spite of the harshness of the world Bates portrays so eloquently.