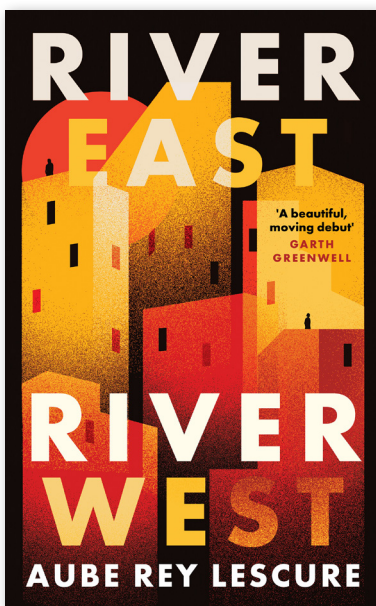


River East, River West

by Aube Rey Lescure



PLOT SUMMARY

A dark and glittering debut that traces a mixed family's troubled trajectory through developing China.

Shanghai, 2007: feeling betrayed by her American mother's engagement to their rich landlord Lu Fang, fourteen-year-old Alva begins plotting her escape. But the exclusive American School – a potential ticket out – is not what she imagined.

Qingdao, 1985: newlywed Lu Fang works as a lowly shipping clerk. Though he aspires to a bright future, he is one of many casualties of harsh political reforms. Then China opens up to foreigners and capital, and Lu Fang meets a woman who makes him question what he should settle for.

A mesmerising reversal of the east–west immigrant narrative set against China's economic boom, *River East, River West* is a deeply moving exploration of race, identity and family, of capitalism's false promise and private dreams.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *River East, River West*, Aube Rey Lescure references various media sources to contextualise Alva's experience of her life in China, which makes sense when we know that Alva's mother Sloan says that she was once a Hollywood actress. Hollywood movies represent an idealised West and are imprinted with the capitalist dreams of freedom that are obsessing China in the early 21st century, and online media is becoming omnipresent in the lives of young people. Yet, how much freedom is available to young people in China, and how much authenticity does Western media really portray?

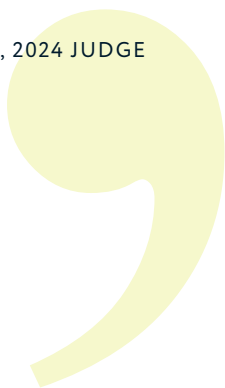


Shortlist
2024



“Set in Shanghai in two timeframes, it’s a very funny book. It’s often heartbreaking, and it’s a totally riveting read.”

MONICA ALI, 2024 JUDGE



Alva and Sloan have a long-time habit of buying pirated Western films on DVD. The film that Sloan says that she was the lead in, Alva discovers from Zoey’s mother, mimics the plot of the novel *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, in which a poor young French girl begins a doomed relationship with the elegant son of a wealthy Chinese family. In fact, Sloan lies about appearing in this film, though it mimics her relationship with Lu Fang, apart from the fact that their relationship eventually has a happy ending.

In her viewing of the film *Farewell, My Concubine*, Alva discovers that it is in itself referencing Bertolt Brecht’s concept of alienation, or distancing and estrangement, originally taken from Chinese opera. Another movie Alva has seen with this same kind of distancing effect is Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Alva finds some comfort in the idea of estrangement when starting at the American school: ‘embrace artificiality, to see the fakeness of appearances as virtue, not shame’.

Taking Sloan’s example of method acting, Alva decides that she will reinvent herself as an American girl at her new school and embrace the estrangement of herself. Yet, there, she finds fakeness in Zoey’s apparently ideal, rich, capitalist American family, who appear to care for her, and yet who manipulate and abuse her.

Posing as HentaiLord online, Alva also posts links on a school online resource to a pornographic site, believing that this is a way to shake things up at her conservative Chinese school. She does not see shame in these actions, and, like Gao Xiaofan does with rooftopping videos, seeks some sense of connection to visceral human experience. HentaiLord also provides Alva with a secret identity, giving her a degree of freedom online that she doesn’t have in her real life. And, in a literal sense, it’s a grimy internet café that provides sanctuary for young people in the city at night.

In all these ways, then, Lescure examines the media influences of the West on China as it became a capitalist power, and asks the reader how real or harmful these messages were, especially to the expectations and lives of young people.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Aube Rey Lescure presents a nuanced and thoughtful picture of the restrictions and freedoms of the China of the early 21st century in *River East, River West*, in which no one’s life is perfect and everyone’s life is subject either to the pressures of new ways of life or the traditions of the past. This is highlighted in the lives of the young people who are growing up in a swiftly changing country.

>



Shortlist
2024

Consider the young people in *River East, River West*: Alva, Zoey, Gao Xiaofan, Doggy, Li Xinwei. For the moneyed elite like Zoey’s family, the privileges of capitalism are available in Shanghai, but how does Zoey’s life compare to Li Xinwei or Gao Xiaofan’s life? Even though Zoey is very privileged, is her life really that admirable?

How do the experiences of Alva and her friends compare with MinMin’s, born a few years earlier, and with Lu Fang and Ciyi’s experience of being young in China? And, how do all of their lives compare to Sloan’s experience of China as a young white woman? Who has the most privilege, and why?

QUESTIONS

How does Lescure use the metaphor of swimming in *River East, River West*?

‘River east, river west’ comes from a Chinese saying suggesting that people’s destinies are in constant change and that there is no fixed path of rise, fall, honour or disgrace. How does Lescure explore this idea in Lu Fang and Sloan’s lives?

Alva’s class watches slides of the Nanjing Massacre, which their teacher describes to them as, ‘the greatest atrocity of the past century’. How does Lescure contrast the education received at Alva’s Chinese and American schools? What is she showing us about them?

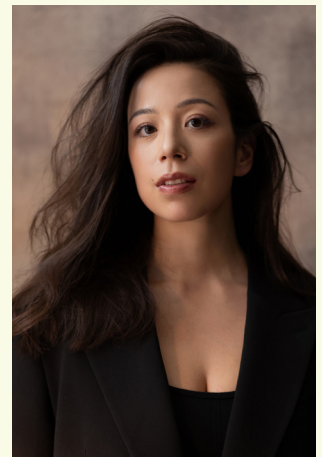
Did you feel sorry for Ciyi? Or MinMin? Should Lu Fang have stayed with Ciyi? Did he have any choice in anything that happened in their relationship?

>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aube Rey Lescure is a French-Chinese writer who grew up between Provence in France, northern China and Shanghai.

She worked in foreign policy before turning to writing full time. Her writing has appeared in *Guernica*, *Best American Essays*, *Litro* and among other publications. *River East, River West* is her debut novel.



If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

NEXT STEPS

Read *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras and consider how it mirrors Sloan and Lu Fang's relationship, and where it is different. You could also watch *Farewell, My Concubine* and consider how both stories enhance your reading of *River East, River West*. What did you enjoy in *The Lover* and *Farewell, My Concubine*, or dislike?

Alternatively, write journal entries from Zoey or MinMin's point of view. How do they see their lives? What is important to them? What do they wish they could change? What do they take for granted? ■

If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

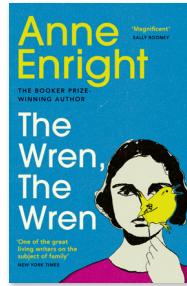
In Mirinae Lee's *8 Lives of a Century-Old Trickster*, the indefatigable Ms Mook tells her life story from WWII Indonesia to Busan during the Korean war; from cold-war Pyongyang to a Protestant church in China. *8 Lives of a Century-Old Trickster* was longlisted for the 2024 Women's Prize for Fiction.

Ghost Girl, Banana by Wiz Wharton is a powerful debut novel about the family secrets unearthed by a surprise inheritance. Set between Hong Kong in the 1960s and London in the 1990s, and revealing the hidden life of a mother to her daughter, it asks questions of identity, race and belonging.

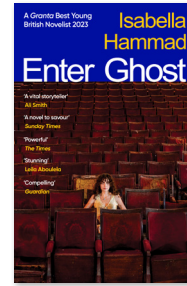
Want more? Our website is packed full of book recommendations, reading lists, author interviews and more. And our Women's Prize library is brimming with books, both fiction and non-fiction, that will satisfy every reader from gripping mysteries and inspiring memoirs to magical romances and thrilling historical accounts.

womensprize.com

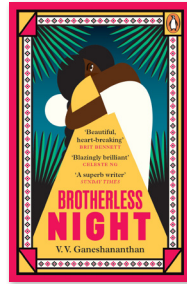
EXPLORE THE 2024 SHORTLIST



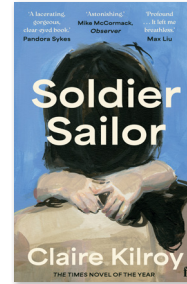
The Wren, The Wren
by Anne Enright



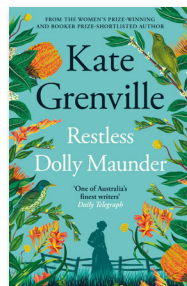
Enter Ghost
by Isabella Hammad



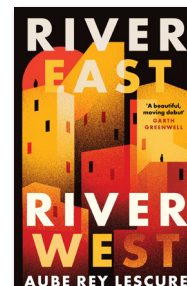
Brotherless Night
by V. V. Ganeshanathan



Soldier Sailor
by Claire Kilroy



Restless Dolly Maude
by Kate Grenville



River East, River West
by Aube Rey Lescure

DISCOVER MORE!

There are many ways to get involved with the Women's Prize. We have a 16-million strong book loving community that subscribe to our newsletter, chat on social media and join us at our events, both in-person and online.

We run free writing workshops, online book clubs and an annual book festival to bring our community together. And listen out for our podcast *Bookshelfie*, where each week a guest picks her five favourite books written by women and

discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

The Women's Prize Trust is a registered charity, and we appreciate donations of any size to support our outreach work with writers and readers from disadvantaged backgrounds. So, however you wish to, **join us and help put more books written by women into the hands of more readers.**

womensprize.com
[@womensprize](https://www.instagram.com/womensprize)



SUPPORTED BY

