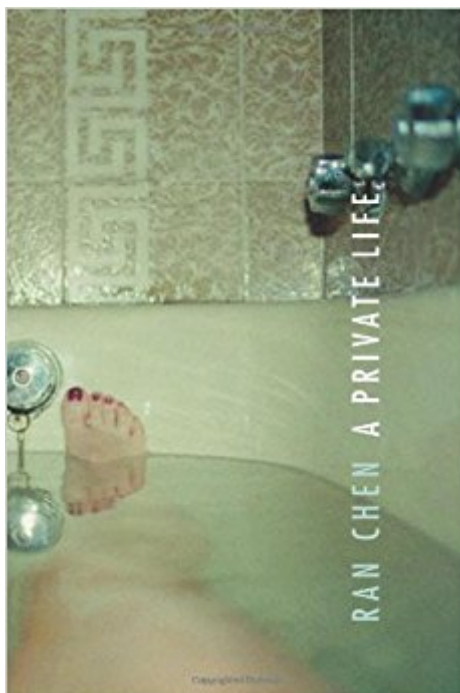


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A Private Life (Weatherhead Books On Asia)



Synopsis

From one of China's most celebrated contemporary novelists comes this riveting tale of a young woman's emotional and sexual awakening. Set in the turbulent decades of the Cultural Revolution and the Tian'anmen Square incident, *A Private Life* exposes the complex and fantastical inner life of a young woman growing up during a time of intense social and political upheaval. At the age of twenty-six, Ni Niuniu has come to accept pain and loss. She has suffered the death of her mother and a close friend and neighbor, Mrs. Ho. She has long been estranged from her tyrannical father, while her boyfriend—a brilliant and handsome poet named Yin Nan—was forced to flee the country. She has survived a disturbing affair with a former teacher, a mental breakdown that left her in a mental institution for two years, and a stray bullet that tore through the flesh of her left leg. Now living in complete seclusion, Niuniu shuns a world that seems incapable of accepting her and instead spends her days wandering in vivid, dreamlike reveries where her fractured recollections and wild fantasies merge with her inescapable feelings of melancholy and loneliness. Yet this eccentric young woman—caught between the disappearing traditions of the past and a modernizing Beijing, a flood of memories and an unknowable future, her chosen solitude and her irrepressible longing—discovers strength and independence through writing, which transforms her flight from the hypocrisy of urban life into a journey of self-realization and rebirth. First published in 1996 to widespread critical acclaim, Chen Ran's controversial debut novel is a lyrical meditation on memory, sexuality, femininity, and the often arbitrary distinctions between madness and sanity, alienation and belonging, nature and society. As Chen leads the reader deep into the psyche of Ni Niuniu—into her innermost secrets and sexual desires—the borders separating narrator and protagonist, writer and subject dissolve, exposing the shared aspects of human existence that transcend geographical and cultural differences.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Chen Ran's *A PRIVATE LIFE* is a small and quiet novel that I simply could not put down, offering up a powerful and beautifully written examination of universal themes: the attainment of womanhood, women's social and sexual roles, their relationships with one another, and the psychological traumas often inflicted upon them by the men in their lives (fathers, teachers, boyfriends, lovers). This book is simultaneously a coming of age story and a deeply moving exploration of a solitary and tortured soul unable (or unwilling) to cope with the world presented to her. *A PRIVATE LIFE* traces the main character, Ni Niuniu, from age eleven to adulthood. Born in 1968, Niuniu traces the arc of her life against the evolving state of women's consciousness in China during the last thirty years of the century. Told entirely in the first person, the narrator provides us a deeply introspective, almost surreal view of her maturation as a sexual being and her difficulties coping with her feelings in a sexually repressed society. Chen Ran's approach is at times humorous, at times sensual, and at times dark to the point of paranoia. She has limned a character who increasingly shuts herself off from the world around her until there is little left but her bathtub, which she has converted into her bed, and a fantasy world she has constructed to shelter herself from the harsh realities beyond her door. Chen Ran's short novel is sad without being maudlin, sensual without being sexual, and horrifying without being melodramatic. She has drawn a character whom we feel compelled to reach out to, to care for, and yet we know that she is beyond help as we watch her personal world evaporate and her mental world deteriorate. The prose is rich in imagery, sharp and evocative from the very first page: "As if being devoured by a huge, pitiless rat, time withers away moment by moment and is lost....Only death, the tombstone over our graves, can stop it." *A PRIVATE LIFE* is a truly literary work, easily readable and profoundly moving. It is perhaps the most un-Chinese of the many Chinese novels I have read, reaching a universal plane that frees it from time and place. Sadly, Chen Ran will not likely be widely read in the United States; it is our loss. *A PRIVATE LIFE* deserves a very large public audience which I fear it will never attain. If you read this review, I urge you to read Chen Ran's wonderful novel; you will not be disappointed.

I must say that Ran Chen knows how to keep the story moving and this book is a page turner. However the story just has way too many flaws especially with its one-sided portray of men as being crude and insensitive. It makes me wonder how much of NiuNiu's experience is autobiographical. Teacher Ti's harsh treatment of his student turns out to be a facade to mask the passion which consumes him. Ti's clumsiness and awkwardness (both physical and emotional) with NiuNiu is painted with a broad stroke, as if it just came out from an old black and white Chinese movie. I can almost sensed the author deriving pleasure from making a mockery of Ti's action. And how can a girl totally inexperienced in love can turnaround after one lovemaking session and starts using Ti to satisfy her sexual need? And after that, Ti just drops out of the story completely. The murder of her neighbor's wife (Ge) again seems to me a gratuitous attempt to make Mr. Ge looks evil. The episode doesn't seem to fit into the storyline at all. Her Platonic lesbian relation with window Ho is more substantial, but the attraction seems to be based on a superficial admiration of her charms. The character NiuNiu is problematic. Even though the author tries to make the reader sympathetic toward her, her inwardness and her lack of effort to understand the male is in a way self-centered and irresponsible. It makes me wonder if Ms Chen is basing her male archetype on Amy Tan's. Overall, I enjoyed reading the story, otherwise, it should be two and a half star.

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