

Booklist

(American Library Association)

Starred review

Su-Jen Chou, six, meets her elderly father for the first time when she and her beautiful mother leave China to join him in a small Ontario town in the 1950s. She sleeps between her parents in the same bed in a room upstairs from the restaurant. "They settled into an uneasy and distant relationship. Their love, their tenderness, they gave to me." Then her adult half-brother joins them, and his mail-order bride is on her way. Su-Jen, now Annie, is soon comfortable in English and makes friends as she grows up Canadian; her mother remains stranded among strangers, unable to speak the language. But even at home, the unspeakable drowns out what is

being said. True to the young girl's viewpoint, the plain first-person narrative tells an immigrant story with rare intensity, the anger and the sadness, as the adults fight about one thing while Su-Jen wants to shout about what they all pretend they do not know. The mounting suspense of family secrets makes this first novel a breathless read, even as the simple, beautiful words make you want to stop and read the sentences over and over again. The haunting characters in that lonely greasy spoon evoke a tradition stretching back to Carson McCullers.

Hazel Rochman