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MIDNIGHT AT THE DRAGON CAFÉ

Judy Fong Bates. Counterpoint, \$14 paper (326p) ISBN 1-58243-189-2

In this deeply affecting debut novel by the author of the short story collection *China Dog*, intrepid Su-Jen Chou, the only daughter of parents who flee Communist China in the 1950s to become proprietors of a Chinese restaurant in an isolated Ontario town, watches as her family unravels. In Irvine, it is "so quiet you can hear the dead," and Su-Jen's mother, Jing, beautiful and bitter, laments her imprisonment in an unfamiliar country. To Jing's chagrin, Su-Jen's father, Hing-Wun, much older than his wife, believes in the traditional method for obtaining wealth: endless hard work. When Su-Jen's handsome older half-brother, Lee-Kung, comes to live with the family and help out in the restaurant, Su-Jen is happy, but soon she notices her mother and Lee-Kung exchanging veiled glances and realizes they're keeping some dangerous secret. Increasingly, Su-Jen finds herself caught between her parents, who have "settled into an uneasy and distant relationship... their love, their tenderness, they give to their daughter." She seeks relief in books and in the Chinese tales her father loves to tell, but the trouble festering comes to a head when a mail-order bride arrives for her brother. Bates conveys with pathos and generosity the anger, disappointment, vulnerability and pride of people struggling to balance duty and passion. *Agent, Denise Bukowski. (Apr.)*