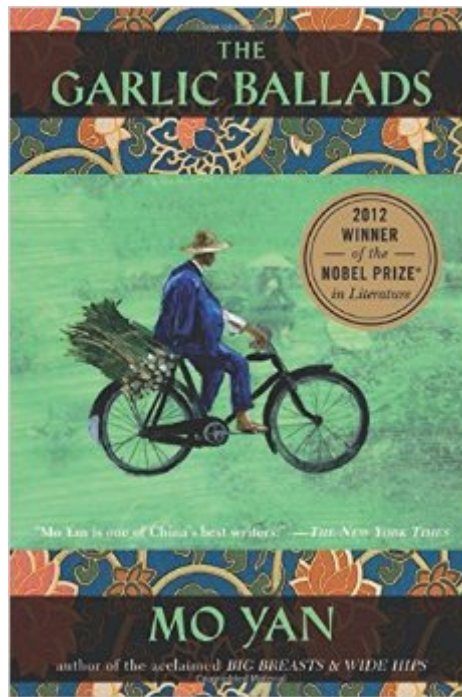


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The Garlic Ballads: A Novel



Synopsis

The farmers of Paradise County have been leading a hardscrabble life unchanged for generations. The Communist government has encouraged them to plant garlic, but selling the crop is not as simple as they believed. Warehouses fill up, taxes skyrocket, and government officials maltreat even those who have traveled for days to sell their harvest. A surplus on the garlic market ensues, and the farmers must watch in horror as their crops wither and rot in the fields. Families are destroyed by the random imprisonment of young and old for supposed crimes against the state. The prisoners languish in horrifying conditions in their cells, with only their strength of character and thoughts of their loved ones to save them from madness. Meanwhile, a blind minstrel incites the masses to take the law into their own hands, and a riot of apocalyptic proportions follows with savage and unforgettable consequences. The Garlic Ballads is a powerful vision of life under the heel of an inflexible and uncaring government. It is also a delicate story of love between man and woman, father and child, friend and friend and the struggle to maintain that love despite overwhelming obstacles.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I discovered Mo Yan and this title years ago through , when it was recommended as an "undiscovered" work. Sadly, it is still the case that very few people have read either The Garlic Ballads or Red Sorghum, Mo's other masterpiece, let alone heard of the author. This is tragic, given that he is immensely talented, one of the true literary masters writing today. The Garlic Ballads tells the tale of a group of Chinese peasants whose lives are dependent upon selling their garlic crop;

when harvests exceed governmental estimates, officials curb the amount of garlic that can be brought to market, setting off a violent chain of events. Against this backdrop, Mo weaves presents three stories: that of two lovers, which dominates the novel, as well as a familial conflict and the relationship between two friends. It is no exaggeration to say that this is the Chinese equivalent of *The Sound and the Fury* or *100 Years of Solitude*; Mo's voice is inventive, poetic and urgent, yet he never loses sight of the plot, making this book difficult to put down. Goldblatt also deserves a great deal of credit for his translation. I do not read Chinese, but I often have the sense in reading English translations, even of great works, that a great deal has been lost, that there is something missing from the original work. Goldblatt's translation is so good as to make the reader mistake this for an English novel; the prose is nearly flawless. Any reader interested in literature would be wise to pick up this novel, if just for the ending, which is unsettling yet poetically rendered, and will stick with the reader for years. Years from now, probably when Mo wins a Nobel, I am sure he will have a wide following, but for now, *The Garlic Ballads* is a novel that cries to be read.

This is one of those book that makes you both depressed and inspired at the same time. Set in rural China, the *Garlic Ballads* explores the misfortune of ordinary Chinese farmers during the post revolutionary period. Having read this book for a Political Science class on China, it was interesting to see how the policies implemented in Beijing could harm the common people so severely. Because the government told these people to grow Garlic, a non-staple food, instead of rice for instance, when they couldn't sell it they were left with nothing. you cannot survive on Garlic. This poor regional planning by the PRC leads to the ruin of many lives. The book, while not overtly political, must have rubbed someone in Beijing the wrong way because it was banned in China. Great Book, Great Author!

I believe Mo Yan is trying to channel Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" and show a society of Chinese people cannibalizing itself. To be fair, the book's criticisms of some government practices (making quotas of what should be farmed, then not being able to pay for the surplus that results) and some social practices (arranged marriages) faces strong criticism much of which is imaginatively expressed. But the relentlessness of the suffering of the people, the casual brutality of the officials, the animalistic brutality of a family towards their rebellious daughter and her lover--well, it gets to be too much, real fast. [For those who don't want SPOILERS (but will wish they had read this, because it may have saved them the purchase and the time, I say here--spoiler alert.)] One of the main characters, for instance, is forced by various people to drink his own urine. Not once, not twice. . .

Copious amounts of it, too. Another man is forced to eat a rich meal--after it has been vomited up by our protagonist (forced vomiting by punching in the stomach). Our one sympathetic female character, pregnant in a love relationship, after a conversation with her fetus dentata, hangs herself on the delivery day. Characters are beaten with wooden stools, strung up from their hands which have been tied behind their back, anally violated with thorny sticks. They have lice eating binges. In one, particularly well-rendered scene, a prisoner with an open sore on his ankle is attacked by a rooster who pecks and pecks at the painfully infected sore until it extracts a tendon, which it gobbles down like a worm. Oh, the balladeer of the title--tasered in the mouth! There are some redeeming qualities to this book, but sometimes it feels like searching for the diamond hidden in a pile of decaying, amputated limbs.

It's difficult to let go of the book. If you consider Arundhati Roy's *A God of small Things* graphic and captivating, this book is ten times more. You can smell Gao Ma's sweat, feel Fourth aunt's anguish, almost to the point of having a lump in your throat.... you want to warn Jinju..... I must say it is one of the best books I have read.... it depicts simple people living in hard times, in very helpless circumstances. Basically there was no way out, and people could only console themselves that their lives were 'fated'. To have a better understanding, it would really help if you read *Wild Swan: three daughters of China* by Jung Chang. It literally gives you heartache.

The scent of garlic permeates this book, to such an extent that it becomes quite visceral and at times -- amazing for such a bulbhead as myself -- even nauseating. Both time and space are fragmented by the writer as he weaves back and forth among his stories of garlic farmers pitted against local corruption and their own at times cruel family traditions. The central event in the book is an invasion and trashing by an angry mob of the local governmental offices. We do not see this event occur until the end of the book, yet it colors every moment in the lives of the Fang and Gao families of Paradise County. It is understandable that the Beijing government would suppress a novel that shows most of its local officials to be bloated satraps and its policing to be little better than thugs, applying cattle prods to their prisoners and beating them mercilessly. Equally villainous, however, are the Fang family, who force their daughter to marry an old man in a three-in-one arranged marriage that guarantees that their crippled eldest son also gets a bride. In a grisly scene, the marriage deal finally goes through after both the daughter and her fiance commit suicide: Their bodies are dug up, their remains are mixed together, and they are re-interred in a single coffin. This is not a pleasant book to read: It takes a strong stomach, especially in the prison episodes. At the

same time, it is, I feel, an important book that is beautifully written.

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