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In Case You Missed It: Repeat After Me

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In 2005, when Rachel DeWoskin published her memoir of living in Beijing during the 1990s, I was so excited that I immediately bought the first copy I saw in a Hong Kong bookstore. Foreign Babes in Beijing represents a rare female voice among the expats-in-China genre of books, and DeWoskin’s tales of working in public relations and acting in a Chinese soap opera are deftly and humorously written. It’s a book that I still recommend to people who want to know more about living in China, and I’m looking forward to seeing the film version that’s currently in development.

After leaving China in 1999 (she has since returned, now living in both New York City and Beijing), DeWoskin earned an MFA in poetry and taught writing at NYU; earlier this year, her first novel, Repeat After Me, was published by Overlook Press. Readers of Foreign Babes will quickly realize that while Repeat After Me is fiction, it is also a vehicle for DeWoskin to reflect again on her years in China, and the novel’s protagonist, Aysha, serves as a stand-in for the author.

DeWoskin builds the story of Repeat After Me around an unusual structure, making each chapter represent one month spanning many years (that is, all events that happened during the month of May, whether in 1990 or 2003, occur in the same chapter). Bouncing back and forth between two main time periods (1989-1991 and 2002-2003), Aysha relates the story of her young love affair with a Chinese dissident living in New York in the wake of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and as her older self, raising their daughter in Beijing and struggling with single parenthood.

Aysha meets Da Ge in the fall of 1989; both are in the early stages of piecing their lives back together after tragedy and upheaval. The previous spring, Aysha spun out of control during her senior year at Columbia, building up to a manic breakthrough, while at the same time, on the other side of the world, Da Ge joined in the Tiananmen protests, only to escape to the U.S. on the orders of his wealthy father. Now taking Aysha’s ESL class in New York, Da Ge is plagued by survivor’s guilt, depression, and anger, which give him a sullen, resentful air that Aysha finds irresistible. Their brief relationship, and its tragic ending (foreshadowed before the book even begins, with a poem by Anne Carson), do not come as a surprise, but the plot is skilfully handled by DeWoskin. The conversations between Aysha and Da Ge — disjointed, elliptical, and frequently frustrating — will ring true for all readers who have struggled to express themselves in a foreign language.

While the 1989-91 narrative is simultaneously unusual yet predictable, the 2002-03 sections of Repeat After Me make DeWoskin’s work shine. Having decided, eight years before, to raise her daughter in Beijing, Aysha and Julia Too (named Julia II after Aysha’s closest friend, now Julia One) have established a comfortable routine as “fake expats,” eating two-dollar bowls of noodles and shopping for knockoffs in the Silk Market, while residing in a spacious new high-rise apartment. They move around Beijing easily, and it is clear that Aysha — who always felt herself an outsider in her hometown of New York — has found a permanent home in China. Da Ge, who is both a fading memory and an ongoing fixture in their lives through the figure of his father, Old Chen, set in motion the events that enabled Aysha to mature and create a community of her own.
Before meeting Da Ge, Aysha knows next to nothing about China, but the stories that he and another Chinese student in her class, Xiao Wang, tell about their homeland quickly capture Aysha’s imagination as she tries to escape her troubles in New York: “The China they described sounded inviting, perhaps complicated with the problems and secret histories of other people, but free of mine. I wanted to go” (40). Upon moving to Beijing, however, Aysha realizes that living there will simply create a new crop of challenges; she cannot escape the complexities of life, but must instead grow up and deal with them as an adult. While her relationship with Da Ge is simply a fantasy — Aysha is entranced by the idea of being in love with a tragic dissident — it enables Aysha to snap out of her paralysis, to create a life for herself and her daughter, and to, in her own way, *xia hai* or “leap into the sea” as she jumps into the ever-changing world of late-20th century Beijing.

*Repeat After Me* is an extended meditation on discovering one’s place in the world: Da Ge, crushed by guilt about abandoning his friends and China, never feels that he has a home in New York, either, and cannot find a way to resolve this conflict. Aysha, on the other hand, realizes that she can make her own home, and forge her own family, wherever she chooses. Beijing, tied to Da Ge, but also a city in which the future never seems clear, offers Aysha the perfect environment to heal herself and teach Julia Too how to be a strong, confident young woman who is unafraid to face uncertainty.

In *Repeat After Me*, DeWoskin has crafted a fictional counterpart to the array of expat-in-China books that have been published during the past decade. As in many of those memoirs, China represents a place where the book’s protagonist can grow and mature; although Aysha is initially “so disoriented that I felt for years as if I might slip off the edge of the world” in Beijing (27), she eventually gains a foothold and envisions a permanent life abroad. This tumultuous process seems to reflect DeWoskin’s own experiences, and reading *Repeat After Me* — especially in conjunction with *Foreign Babes* — provides a fascinating glimpse of expat life in China over a 15-year span.