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## A Review of *The Binding Chair or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society*

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**The Binding Chair or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society**  
by Kathryn Harrison  
Random House  
\$24.95, 312 pages

Author **Kathryn Harrison** has made a literary career of writing about taboo subjects. Witness her shocking memoir, *The Kiss*, about her adult, incestuous affair with her father, her first two novels--*Thicker Than Water* and *Exposure*--also about less-than-acceptable family bonds, and her historical novel, *Poison*, about a troubled woman's lustful pairing with a priest during the dark days of the Spanish Inquisition. But if there were a how-to book on exoticizing and demeaning Asian women, Harrison's latest book would be the manual.

*The Binding Chair or, A Visit from the Foot Emancipation Society* is a long, annoyingly confusing tale of erotic, exotic lust and betrayal. The story opens in the elaborate Cote d'Azur, home of one Mrs. Arthur Cohen. But not all is as it seems: Mrs. Arthur Cohen is anything but French, or Jewish. She's a tiny, elegant Chinese woman with bound feet. Her binding sessions in the chair started at the tender age of five, and as it is too-oft repeated, she never cried out.

As the story unfolds, Mrs. Cohen (a.k.a. May-li) turns out to be a high-priced prostitute who refused to service Chinese men, and who was also once the abused 14-year-old wife of an odious silk merchant. She's also really a lesbian. Back in Shanghai, the nervous virgin Arthur Cohen meets and marries May. He then installs

her in the lavish home of his overzealously hygienic sister, her husband and their two daughters.

May develops a special bond with the younger child, Alice, who idolizes her exotic aunt. Eventually, Alice's father makes it big, her mother burns the house down and the family relocates to Nice where May takes in creative charity cases. And yet she can never get over the loss of her own children: a daughter she gave away during her brothel days, the daughter she and Arthur lost, and even Alice, who was never really hers. So she goes for a swim and never comes back. Yet another Asian woman sacrificed.

Page after page of *The Binding Chair* is filled with offensive scenes. In one scene, May is arrested for going shopping in a fancy department store and creating a ruckus as a "furrener" being carried around by two "furren" boys in furs. The number of pages that could be ripped out of the book for offensiveness would leave only the cover.

Although some offensive works can be interesting, this book is not one of them. For all of her sensationalistic material, Harrison's plot and characters are numbingly boorish and boring. This book is yet another novel about non-Asians exoticizing and objectifying Asian cultures and its people.--G. Scott Hong

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