

The Secrets of Jin-Shei – Alma Alexander

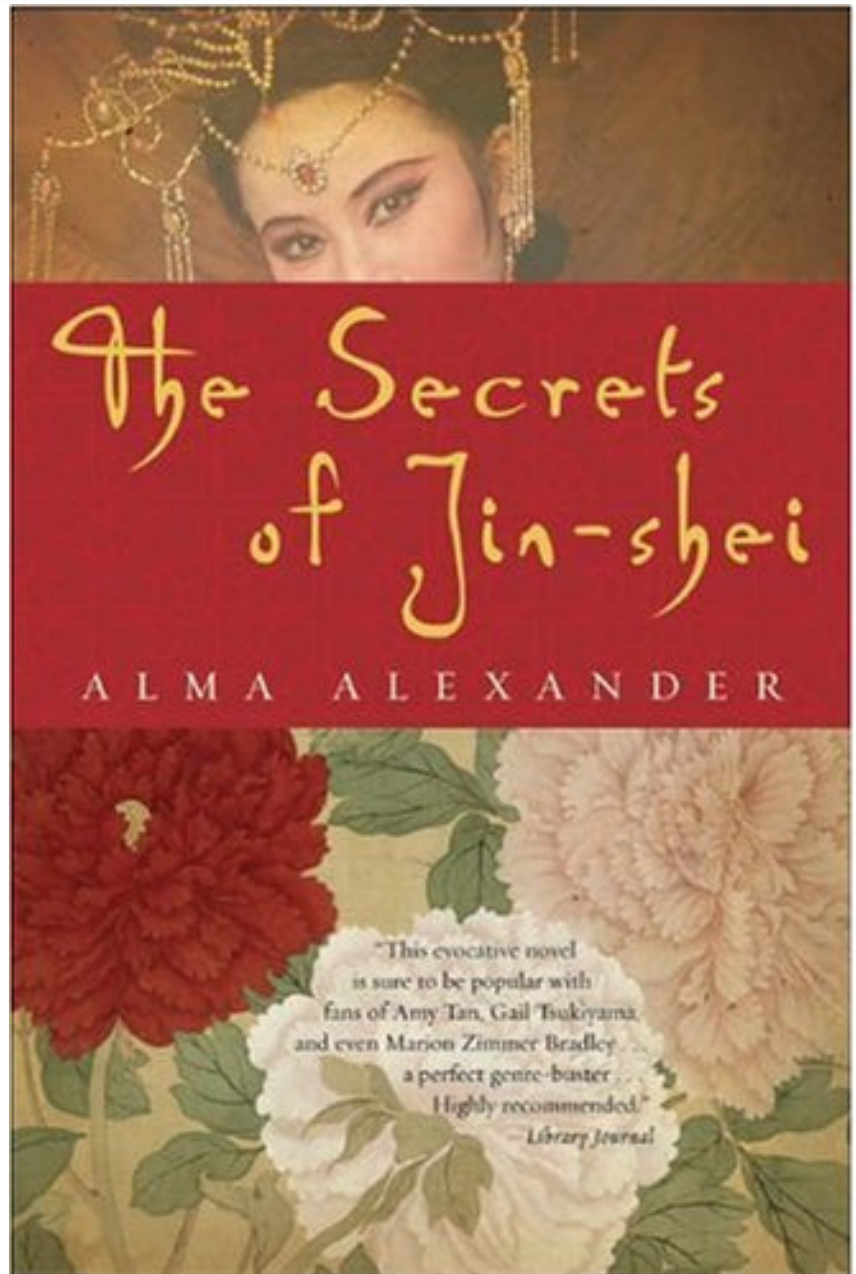
Review by Victoria Hoyle

Sisters, Doing It for Themselves

Let me be frank: Alma Alexander's third novel *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* is about women. It isn't just that it features female characters (although it does, eight of them, and almost entirely to the exclusion of men) or that it is predicated on a matrilineal, matrilocal culture. Rather, it is utterly *about* women, being concerned with their life cycles, their traditions and rituals, their languages, their friendships and their desires. Men get decidedly short shrift in its 492 pages. They turn up to be married, or to father female heirs, or as eunuchs, or as priests, or as monstrous villains (and villainy, for Alexander, always seems an encoded form of rape). They do not, however, have autonomy or genuine individuality.

Such gender-blindness is an inevitable, if slightly disquieting, function of the novel's narrative focus. Set in Syai, an Empire heavily reminiscent of early mediaeval China, it hinges entirely on a traditional bond of friendship made between women – the *jin-shei* vow of sisterhood. This is the central component of a demarcated culture of women in Syai that embraces all post-pubescent girls, from the very lowest to the very highest levels of society, and which is passed down, in secret, from mothers to their daughters. It has its own language – *jin-ashu* – that is only spoken and written by women:

“All women know jin-ashu...it is our language, the language of jin-shei... letting us speak freely of the thoughts and dreams and desires hidden deep in a woman's heart. Of things men do not understand and do not need to know.”



The *jin-shei* vow, once made between friends, is irrevocable and the connection closer than blood: it creates sprawling networks of women bound to each other's desires with threads of love and obligation. One's "sister" may have another "sister" who becomes your sister. This new sister will have other sisters who, again, become your sisters. And so it goes on and on, until all women are linked together, in one way or another, in a huge skein of influence, affection and duty:

"Jin-shei had shaped Rimshi's life – it was jin-shei that gave her the gift of her trade, and it was jin-shei, with another jin-shei-bao who had gone on to be an Emperor's concubine, that had given her the place to practise it."

Alexander's novel is about a singular locus on this web: the Dragon Empress of Syai, Liadun, and her *jin-shei* sisters, a circle of disparate women duty-bound together by friendship, even unto tragedy.

Tai, the creative and mild-tempered daughter of a Court seamstress, is Liadun's first *jin-shei-bao*, obliged to the cold and unapproachable young Empress by a promise she made to a dying friend. In time, she brings her other "sisters" into the Imperial circle: the precise and compassionate Healer, Yuet, and the crippled, club-footed Nhia, a seeker after religious wisdom. In turn, they introduce others: Khailin, a young woman of Court hungry for arcane knowledge; Xaorn, a foundling brought up to a fierce code of honour by the Imperial Guard; Qiaan, a stern advocate of social change and justice; and, finally, Tammary, a half-blood nomad from the mountains seeking her true identity. But Liadun, the circle's centre by virtue of her exalted position, makes for a steely friend. The daughter of a disgraced concubine and originally only third in line to the Imperial diadem, she is both desperate to prove herself and drunk on the authority of her title. While her *jin-shei-bao* try their best to mediate her increasingly risky power plays at Court, she only descends into stubborn self-reliance and mistrust. Finally, declaring herself to be absolute and sole ruler of Syai, she refuses to take a husband to be her Emperor or to father heirs. Forces around the throne are galvanised into open rebellion and it becomes clear that even the sacred trust of *jin-shei* is not above ambition or betrayal.

Equally motivated by the desire for power, and perhaps far more dangerous, is the Ninth Sage Lihui, the youngest and most powerful of the nine high priests of "the Way", the Empire's polytheistic religion. Seemingly charming and handsome, he seduces first one and then another of Liadun's circle into his sphere of influence, offering them both spiritual wisdom and arcane alchemical knowledge in return for their allegiance. Taking them from the city and from the protection of their friends, he secrets them away in his palace-beyond-the-world and sets about manipulating the *jin-shei* vow for his own ends.

The promised "secrets" of Alexander's novel are not in this plot though, which, as it is, is full of more or less believable contrivances – vapidly understanding lovers; knowledge hastily acquired; strangers met in dark alleys – as well as dalliances with *deus ex machina* ("ghost roads", golems and secret elixirs galore!) Rather, they are to be located in its female characters and in the idea of their friendship. The bond of *jin-shei* is by no means a simple act

of devotion between chums: it means something visceral, especially when one of your sisters is an Empress. For Khailin, for example, it means an obligation to do the unthinkable and, subsequently, an obligation to ask the unthinkable of Yuet; for Xaorn it means a complete subjugation of the self. At times it is a strong, necessary support network for the women, but at others it is an institution weakly susceptible to division, suspicion and duplicity. Not all of their bonds are made out of pure love. Liadun gathers *jin-shei* arbitrarily: some to protect herself, some for political gain, some for vanity. Even Tai and Yuet make their bond in a moment of fear and grief, and Tammary is particularly unwilling to submit to her sisters needs. What *jin-shei* is (or can be) is a form of power brokering, a tool of influence to be used as wilfully as affection will allow. It is not unlike a brand of mutual vassalage in which each participant is locked into a network of finely balanced give and take. If the take out-balances the give, even just a little, the whole schema is upset. Thus the *jin-shei* bond is made to carry many of the conflicts and tensions native to narratives of power - pro-action vs. passivity, violence vs. compassion, trust vs. suspicion – and it does so tolerably well.

Alexander also has a good grasp of historicity and of place. Her alternate rendering of medieval China captures something of the exoticism and gruelling etiquette of the period and, taking traditional poetic forms as her guide, she does a good line in seasonal description. She loves colour, particularly reds, golds and whites, and litters her story with embroidered dresses, hair-pins and jewels. The charm of Tai's wedding ceremony, for example, is all in the robes and the shoes; certainly it is not in her plank of a husband. There is some fine dialogue too, rendered in a flowing inflection, that manages to suggest not only the cultural alienness of Syai but also a wider emotional resonance. Tai, the novel's emotional centre, keeps a journal throughout and her allegorical musings are quite lovely, as are the expressive harmonics of the ending. I suspect there is more than a hint of Guy Gavriel Kay's influence in it; she mentions him explicitly as an inspiration in the Acknowledgements and often aims for similar imagistic tableau. She doesn't always manage it, however, and now and then her prose hits a low: there are intrusive and unnecessary qualifying statements and pieces of wince-worthy dialogue. The editing could have been much, much stronger. Too often this happens during love-scenes, suggesting a certain amount of authorial impatience: Alexander wants her characters in love and has little time for nuance, no time at all for subtlety. But this may have a lot to do with the involvement and presence of men – Alexander doesn't seem able to write a credible male character at all.

Finally, then, there is the unavoidable question: if *The Secrets of Jin-Shei* is a novel so determinedly *about* women is it also a novel *for* women? Certainly it is, in some aspects – it's located on an unsteady axis, at some point between Fantasy and, god forbid, "women's fiction." Nevertheless, the concept of, and the play on, the *jin-shei* bond is interesting and compelling beyond questions of gender-bias, and Alexander often writes well. Perhaps we might better read it as an exploration of certain individuals, their friendships and their propensity to mutual support than as an exclusionary novel about women alone.

