



Big Breasts and Wide Hips: A Novel (Arcade Classics)

By Mo Yan

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In his latest novel, Mo Yan—arguably China’s most important contemporary literary voice—recreates the historical sweep and earthy exuberance of his much acclaimed novel *Red Sorghum*. In a country where patriarchal favoritism and the primacy of sons survived multiple revolutions and an ideological earthquake, this epic novel is first and foremost about women, with the female body serving as the book’s central metaphor. The protagonist, Mother, is born in 1900 and married at seventeen into the Shangguan family. She has nine children, only one of whom is a boy—the narrator of the book. A spoiled and ineffectual child, he stands in stark contrast to his eight strong and forceful female siblings.

Mother, a survivor, is the quintessential strong woman who risks her life to save several of her children and grandchildren. The writing is picturesque, bawdy, shocking, and imaginative. The structure draws on the essentials of classical Chinese formalism and injects them with extraordinarily raw and surprising prose. Each of the seven chapters represents a different time period, from the end of the Qing dynasty up through the Japanese invasion in the 1930s, the civil war, the Cultural Revolution, and the post-Mao years. Now in a beautifully bound collectors edition, this stunning novel is Mo Yan’s searing vision of twentieth-century China.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Ripe with spectacular detail and unflinching in its portrayal of the Shangguan family, this latest saga by Mo Yan (*Red Sorghum*) is a lavish feast for the senses sprawling across several decades and political regimes in 20th-century China's quasi-fictional North Gaomi region. Mo Yan's writing is bold and sometimes flinty as it draws humor from the direst of sources, and the story—the elaborate, fleet and episodic plot—is arresting and satisfying. The book opens as two creatures struggle to give birth: Shangguan Lu, the beleaguered mother of seven daughters, and the family donkey, who ends up getting the wealth of aid and sympathy from Lu's mother-in-law. It's a revealing scene that effectively lays out the themes of Mo Yan's brutal, inspired work and suggests the significance of its title: in a harsh environment like rural China where survival is not guaranteed but a privilege fought for every day, humans, and especially women, have only their bodies and their animal instincts to depend on, with fate often stepping in to play a cruel hand. However, this doesn't stop the daughters of grimly resolute Lu from developing into a clan of steely-eyed women who throughout the book make choices and meet destinies that are at turns heartening, vicious and breathtaking. Most of the book is narrated by Jintong, the weak and spoiled son who breast-feeds well into childhood, provoking derision and disgust from his sisters. His lack of stature makes him a compelling narrator, a frontline observer who is invested in the outcomes but always something of an outsider. The constant violence, rendered in Mo Yan's powerhouse prose, may make this too graphic a read for some, but those who are able to see the violence for what it is—an undeniable aspect of rural Chinese life—will find this a deeply rewarding book.

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From [Booklist](#)

Chinese writer Yan is both revered and reviled for his blistering takes on modern China's political landscape. (His acclaimed 1987 novel, *Red Sorghum*, was adapted into a major motion picture). This latest controversial epic, spanning the country's blood-splattered twentieth century, is set in fictional Northeast Gaomi County and narrated by fair-haired Jintong, the ninth child (and first son) of an indomitable woman known only as Mother. (Jintong's siblings all have different fathers, none of them Mother's impotent blacksmith husband.) Fathered by the town's Swedish pastor, spoiled Jintong takes full advantage of his role as the family's only male; at the age of seven, he still suckles at his mother's breast. In Yan's world, men are cowardly while women are admired for their courage and curves. His images run the gamut, from brutal renderings of war to a bizarre transformation of human to bird. The novel is, above all, a paean to the power of the female sex, but its voluptuous title scarcely reflects its tone. This is a haunting, daunting read that seldom loosens its gloomy grip. *Allison Block*

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Review

“[A] sprawling energetic novel.” (**Donald Morrison - *Time***)

“A groaning table of brutal incident, magic realism, woman-worship, nature description, and far-flung metaphor. . . . Impressive and ardent.” (**John Updike - *New Yorker***)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Thomas Depew:

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