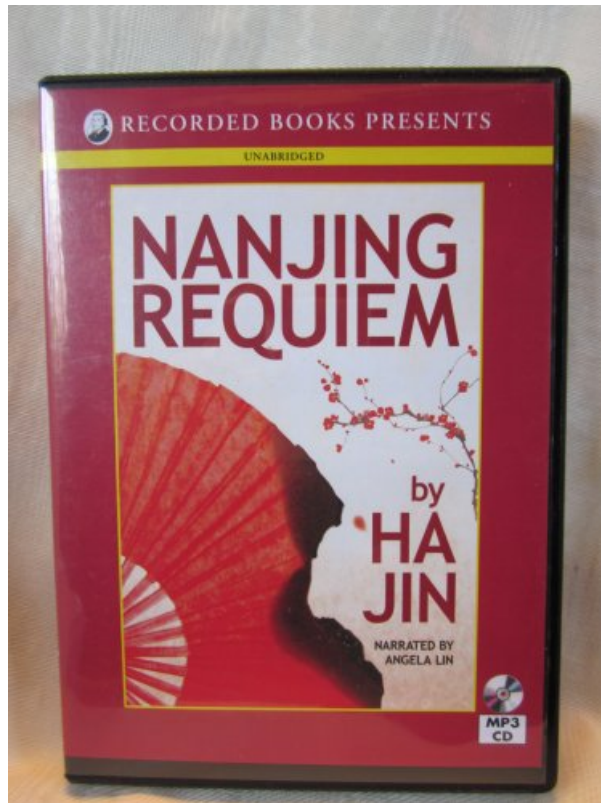
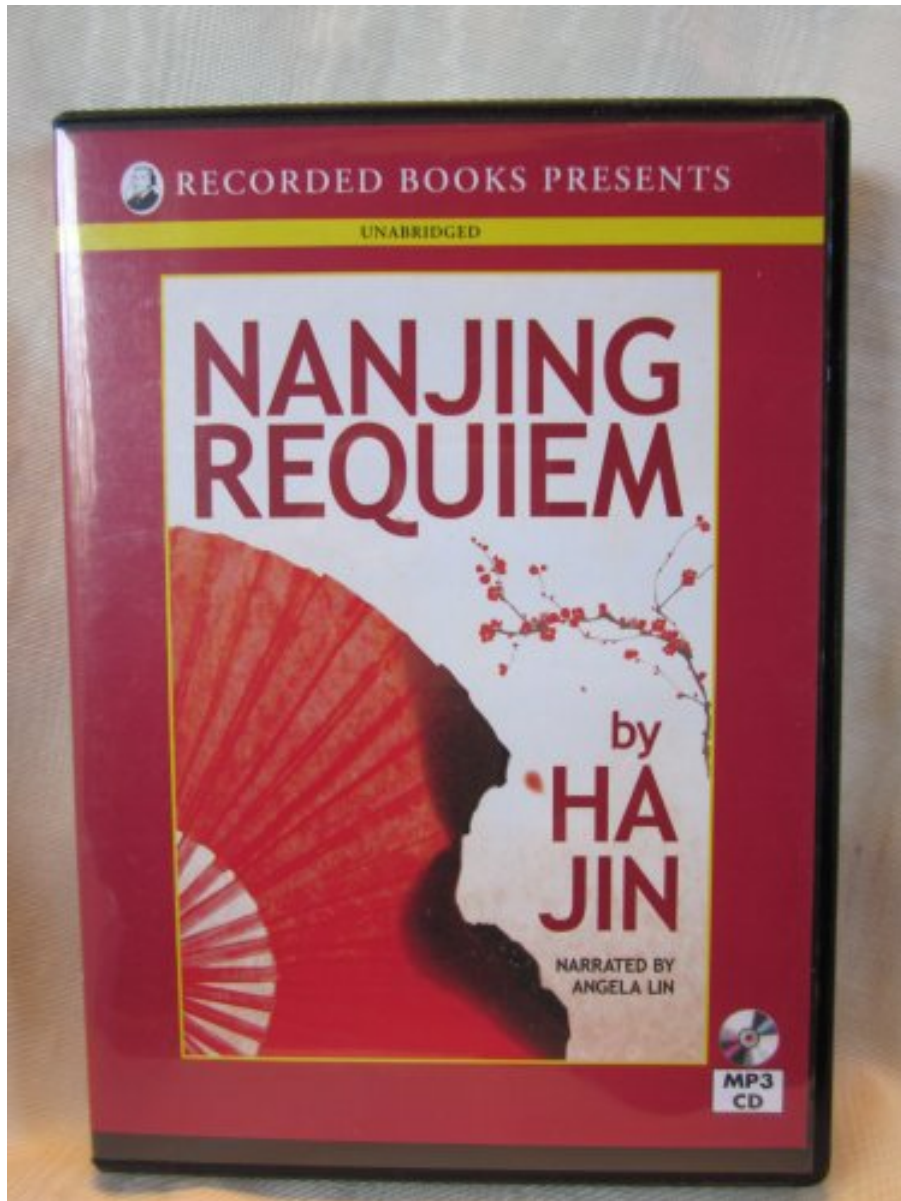


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## NANJING REQUIEM BY HA JIN PDF

It's 1937, and the Japanese are poised to invade Nanjing. Minnie Vautrin, an American missionary and the dean of Jinling Women's College, decides to remain at the school, convinced that her American citizenship will help her safeguard the welfare of the Chinese men and women who work there. She is painfully mistaken. In the aftermath of the invasion, the school becomes a refugee camp for more than ten thousand homeless women and children, and Vautrin must struggle, day after day, to intercede on the behalf of the hapless victims. Yet even when order and civility are restored, she remains deeply embattled, always haunted by the lives she could not save.

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Most helpful customer reviews

47 of 50 people found the following review helpful.

Wonderful

By John Jorgensen

First, a few words on my background with this author. I was required to read *Waiting: A Novel* in college, and while I didn't mind reading it, I found it pretty dry and knew I would never have chosen to read it on my own. I did choose to read *War Trash* a few years ago when it was recommended by a coworker after we toured the Korean DMZ together one weekend. I started it, and while I didn't dislike it, it didn't grab my interest. Eventually I gave up on it somewhere in the middle chapters when another book which I'd been dying to read for months finally came out. I told myself I would return to it after I finished the new book, but I never did.

So I was a bit ambivalent about reading another Ha Jin book; somewhere along the line I came to associate him with dry, slow-paced, mediocre writing. The subject matter did grab my attention this time: A literary celebration of the heroes of the Rape of Nanjing is certainly an interesting premise. But I wondered whether the author could do it justice.

Did he ever! This is a wonderful book. It tells the tale of Minnie Vautrin, an American missionary and acting president of Jinling College during the Japanese capture of Nanjing. Vautrin joins a number of other Westerners in making property in the Western district available for refugee camps, banking on the hope that Japan will be too concerned with maintaining good relations with the West to violate Western property. Chinese from other neighborhoods in the city as well as the surrounding countryside came pouring into the Safety Zone these foreigners established and soon every refugee camp was filled to capacity several times over. Discipline broke down in the Imperial Army's ranks after China's Republican capital fell, and soldiers engaged in a stomach-churning orgy of violence throughout the region that lasted for months. They sometimes respected the Safety Zone's neutrality, but often they did not. Minnie Vautrin and others like her were constantly confronting Japanese soldiers within their refugee camps, trying to repel them with bluster and bluff and little else. Complaints were lodged with the Japanese authorities, but nothing came of them.

Evidence of war crimes was quietly gathered, but by the time Japan had been defeated and the war crimes tribunals were seated, the West was more concerned with the Cold War and went easy on prominent Japanese officials so as not to antagonize a strategically-significant potential ally.

The first forty percent of the book or so tells of refugees seeking admission to the Safety Zone and of desperate attempts to protect these refugees from harm. Jinling admitted only women; the only males in the camp (aside from staff) were boys under thirteen fleeing with their mothers. This made the camp a particular target for Japanese who looked forward to the opportunity to carry out sexual assaults without the danger that their victims would be defended by adult male relatives. So much rape in those chapters, and we see Minnie Vautrin come to regret her decision to set up an all-female camp, as well as wrestle with impossible moral dilemmas in the interest of protecting as many women as she can.

The remaining three fifths of the book deal with the aftermath of the Rape of Nanjing. Discipline in the ranks was eventually restored, and the refugee camps finally emptied as civilians could feel relatively safe. But the occupation continued, and the destruction of property and farmland left so many people displaced and impoverished. Among some characters there's a sense of "The worst is over, time to move on." I realized with a bit of a shock that their side had won the battle to write history: I was familiar with the orgy of violence that followed the fall of Nanjing, and as I read the first two sections of the book much was familiar to me; but the rest of it was completely unknown to me, and I realized I'd never thought to ask how long the aftermath and privations lingered on.

Minnie starts two new programs at the once-exclusive women's college designed to equip poor women with economically valuable skills so that they can survive the bold new world in which they find themselves. She eventually meets stiff resistance in the form of Mrs Dennison, the retired President of Jinling who was in America during the Rape of Nanjing and returns unable to understand the depth and breadth of the inhumanity that had so recently visited the city. She is determined to see Jinling regain its elitist college reputation as soon as possible and fights Minnie's attempts to minister to Nanjing's destitute. She, the Japanese authorities, and various Chinese all attack Minnie's reputation, asking painful questions about impossible decisions Minnie made in the heat of the moment, all of which were intended to minimize refugee suffering but many of which had unfortunate side effects. Minnie is already haunted by the memories of the many refugees she couldn't save, and this defamation of character overwhelms her. . . . But then, I'd better not spoil something so close to the novel's ending.

Minnie Vautrin and the Americans and Germans with whom she coordinates attempts to save refugees were all real, as were a host of other VIPs who appeared or were referenced in various roles. Ha Jin researched Vautrin extensively, using her diaries as well as primary sources of people who knew her during the crisis. We are also introduced to a range of Chinese characters who suffer mightily and tell stories full of pathos. I'm not sure whether any given one of them was historical or fictional; I am sure that they are moving and sympathetic.

The viewpoint character is Anling, forewoman of Jinling and Minnie's tireless assistant. I don't know whether she is historical either. I found her less well-realized than many of the characters with whom she interacted. She just didn't come across as being all that interesting, and my interest definitely tended to flag during chapters where she attended to her own affairs instead of helping Minnie attend to hers.

Otherwise, my judgment that Ha Jin's writing is slow-paced and dry has not been borne up by this book. The post-Rape of Nanjing storylines develop at a slower pace than those that developed during the hectic worst of the crisis; indeed, they feel downright leisurely by comparison. But they never feel like they're dragging. Despite what I said in the previous paragraph about Anling-centered chapters, none of the subplots ever feel

dull. Characters, especially Minnie herself, are strong, and carry many a scene that might otherwise have fallen flat. Also, the book's pacing is helped by the fact that the slightly less than 300 pages are divided into no fewer than fifty-two chapters. As I've said elsewhere, I heartily approve of short chapters; they prevent a book from bogging down and indicate that the author has put a great deal of thought into what he or she wants to say, what is relevant to a given subject, what is not, and how different aspects of the narrative should lead from one to the next.

There is room for a bit of nitpicking: The book got Shiro Ishii's rank wrong, and in one very odd scene, Anling and her daughter--both Christians--suggest that their son/brother--also a Christian--might want to consider becoming a polygamist. Umm. . . .

I'm not inclined to criticize, though. The stronger a story is, the more willing I am to overlook such peccadilloes, and this is an extremely strong story, one of the strongest I've read this year. It carries my highest recommendation.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Big Disappointment

By Toronto

I read "Nanjing Requiem" authored by Ha Jin whose books had in the past received many awards and honors because its description leads me to believe that it is an epic which soothes the souls of the victims of the Rape of Nanking and tells of the courage of Minnie Vautrin. Yet, the book turns out to be a total disappointment. It appears to be a book written and rushed to meet a deadline; the storylines do not connect and a chop suey style of writing mixes bits and pieces of writings from other sources.

The book provides no insight to the real suffering of the victims or the courage of Minnie Vautrin. I do not expect or wish the book to sensationalize the horrors of the Rape of Nanking, but I also do not expect the book to turn the victims into insensitive vicious mobs either.

Maybe the author wants the readers to do some soul searching by showing decent people who at the point of becoming a victim of atrocity can be changed to nasty human beings during the Nanking Massacre. With the flat and robotic writing, the author fails to depict the passion deep enough to reveal the suffering of the soul of the victims. Worse, the victims are painted as thugs in some incidents.

Weaving the fanatical mentality of Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution in the tragic Rape of Nanking era, instead of telling how the refugees helping each other, Ha Jin presents the refugees as heartless riotous mobs against a poor woman who stole a mug of rice to feed her 15 years old son jailed by the Japanese. This shows his complete lack of empathy and respect for these victims. Even in fiction, when the victims were made to lie against Vautrin for their own survival is, I feel, defamatory to the many real victims who could no longer defend their honor against the author's slanderous insinuations.

In addition, the language and more specifically the 21st century swear words that come from Vautrin's mouth are so atypical not only of a female but also of a female missionary of that era. Through Anling's narratives, Vautrin is presented inconsistently that she is also shallow, indecisive and without a level head, at times, with self-glorification. These are not the facts according to the historical documents. Such description becomes a sacrilege to this missionary loving courageous soul.

If I were the victims and Minnie Vautrin, and this is how I am memorialized, I would cry out from the grave against such distortions of the truth.

I expect much better writing from an English Professor and the many award-winning author. All of the above makes it a torture to finish reading the book.

For those who are interested in knowing the real Minnie Vautrin and the historical facts of the Nanking Massacre, Hua-ling Hu's "The American Goddess at the Rape of Nanking: Courage of Minnie Vautrin" and "The Undaunted Women of Nanking - The Wartime Diaries of Minnie Vautrin and Tsen Shui-fang" would provide a much more accurate account and deeper insight into the times and Vautrin's character. For those who are interested in the horrors of the Nanking Massacre, they can read Iris Chang's "The Rape of Nanking".

12 of 14 people found the following review helpful.

A Failure as Historical Fiction

By L. Young

The intent of Ha Jin's new novel "Nanjing Requiem" is to bring the atrocities of the Japanese, during what is known as "The Rape of Nanjing" to a wider public, as well as to celebrate the bravery of several Westerners who lived through this period and sought to stand up to the Japanese and protect innocent Chinese from slaughter. In particular the novel focuses on real life, Minnie Vautrin, an American missionary and the Dean of Jinling Women's College, which she used to shelter thousands who sought to escape the atrocities.

"Nanjing Requiem" is a piece of historical fiction. In this genre an author takes a story of real and or imagined characters and brings the immediacy of their historical period to life through the interplay of history and the intimacy of the characters lives. Unfortunately as a piece of historical fiction "Nanjing Requiem" fails. There is no underlying intimate storyline. We merely have here a seemingly endless recitation of facts. For example on Dec. 8., Minnie went here and confronted the Japanese authorities. On Jan. 10 she went there and confronted the Japanese. There is no underlying story that holds the historical facts together and makes those facts real and immediate to the reader. The writing is so wooden that the endless description of brutality loses all emotional power to move the reader. I can only compare this novel to another work of historical fiction which is vastly superior, Ballard's "Empire of the Sun", also concerned with Japanese brutality.

"Nanjing Requiem" sadly is a terrible disappointment, as The Rape of Nanjing is a story that needs to be told.

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