

City on the Sea: Timeless novels about 1930s Shanghai

Writing saved Vicki Baum's life. A mother of three, Baum started writing in her native Vienna at night after her children went to bed. She rose to fame in German-speaking Europe in the late 1920s as a popular novelist and romance writer. But it was her 1931 novel *Grand Hotel* that catapulted Baum to international fame and thus changed the course of her life and that of her family.

After *Grand Hotel* was adapted to the stage in London and New York, Baum traveled to the United States on a two-week trip in 1931 and fell so in love with the country, she brought her family over to settle in California. It was from her new home in Los Angeles and her successful Hollywood writing career that allowed her to sail across the Pacific to Shanghai in 1937, which resulted in her next epic novel, *Shanghai '37* (Doubleday, 1939).

Shanghai '37 is a straightforward, thorough look into the lives of nine people who perished in a bombing at the fictional Shanghai Hotel, fashioned after the Cathay, or present-day Peace Hotel, including its grand lobby and alluring rooftop bar.

The first part of *Shanghai '37* presented the early years of each of the nine characters, which include a fictionalized Tu Yueh-sheng*, the notorious gangster; his American-trained doctor son; a coolie named Lung Yen; a young American couple; a German-Jewish refugee; a young German pianist refugee; a White Russian who passed herself off as a British aristocrat; and a Japanese journalist.

Baum frequently incorporated the idiom, better a dog in peace than a man in war, into her story. This theme is present throughout the book, especially in the second part, in which each character found misfortune on the eve of the Japanese invasion.

For someone who only spent a year in Shanghai, Baum had an incredible knack for understanding the many layers of the decadent and desperate Shanghai society the year before the war reached the City on the Sea. She clearly comprehended Chinese culture, British customs, American naivety, and the desperate plight of her fellow German-Jews once Hitler descended upon Europe.

American writer Emily Hahn could be a character in *Shanghai '37*, but instead was the protagonist in her own memoir from the same era, *China to Me* (Country Life Press, 1944). Hahn, with her sister, sailed to China in the mid 1930s for vacation. When the pair arrived in Shanghai, Hahn was so taken with the city that she remained—for years—while her sister traveled north and later returned to the US.

Like Baum, Hahn hung out on the rooftop bar of the Cathay Hotel. While she mentioned famous writers and other personalities she met at the Cathay, Emily Hahn never wrote about meeting Vicki Baum. She did, however, become close to Victor Sassoon, a prominent Jewish Iraqi businessman, and was a frequent guest of his at the racetrack.

During Hahn's years in Shanghai (from the mid-to-late 1930s), she lived according to her own rules. Besides renting a flat in the red light district and dating a married Chinese man, she owned a monkey named Mr. Mills and brought him—dressed in a diaper—with her wherever she went in Shanghai.

Hahn left Shanghai for a three-month trip to Hong Kong for a research trip while she was working on the Soong sisters' biography. But the war got in the way and Emily Hahn was never able to return to Shanghai. She'd earlier met the acquaintance of Charles Boxer, the head of British Intelligence in Hong Kong, and became intimately reacquainted with him on her extended Hong Kong stay. The two would have a daughter together before they married in 1945.

While Vicki Baum's Jewish background was manifested in her character, Dr. Hain, Emily Hahn didn't write explicitly about her Judaism, except for her close relationship with Victor Sassoon and how, through him, she became involved in the plight of the German Jewish refugees who fled to Shanghai in the late 1930s.

But Hahn never compared herself to these refugees, even though her family was of German-Jewish descent. At one point she even wrote that there were too many of these refugees. However, when she described the tensions between the White Russians and the German Jews, she clearly demonstrated that her sympathy rested with the latter.

Other references to her Judaism included a conversation in Chungking, while Hahn was working on her biography of the Soong sisters, with an American missionary couple. On page 129, when Hahn and the missionaries discussed God and extramarital affairs, she said to them, "...do you think that is the sort of thing your sort of person ought to say to my sort?" Not only was Hahn referring to her married Chinese boyfriend, but also to her religious difference.

As both *Shanghai '37* and *China to Me* show, writers Vicki Baum and Emily Hahn lived unconventional lives for women of that time. As Jewish writers, they braved the turbulent waters of a brewing world war and educated their readers about Shanghai at the end of an era we've never seen again. ♪

* We use the Wade-Giles spelling to stay true to the fashion of 1930s Shanghai.

