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Maggie Shen King

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From debut author Maggie Shen King, *An Excess Male* is the chilling dystopian tale of politics, inequality, marriage, love, and rebellion, set in a near-future China, that further explores the themes of the classic *The Handmaid's Tale* and *When She Woke*.

China's One Child Policy and its cultural preference for male heirs have created a society overrun by 40 million unmarriageable men. *An Excess Male* is one such leftover man's quest for love and family under a State that seeks to glorify its past mistakes and impose order through authoritarian measures, reinvigorated Communist ideals, and social engineering.

Wei-guo holds fast to the belief that as long as he continues to improve himself, his small business, and in turn, his country, his chance at love will come. He finally saves up the dowry required to enter matchmaking talks at the lowest rung as a third husband—the maximum allowed by law. Only a single family—one harboring an illegal spouse—shows interest, yet with May-ling and her two husbands, Wei-guo feels seen, heard, and connected to like never before. But everyone and *everything*—walls, streetlights, garbage cans—are listening, and men, excess or not, are dispensable to the State. Wei-guo must reach a new understanding of patriotism and test the limits of his love and his resolve in order to save himself and this family he has come to hold dear.

An Excess Male Details

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From Reader Review An Excess Male for online ebook

Roy says

What starts off as a great concept becomes a rather over written slow novel where nothing really happens. Don't go in expecting a smart sci fi dystopian concept novel. Its really just a literary drama in disguise. The scifi concept is just a very fine mist. The characters are rather uninteresting and the plot overly slow. Not sure if this is based on any potential facts but it does feel realistic in the authors writing style.

Wanda says

Rating: 4.25 stars

Better than just your four star, but not quite to the pinnacle of 5 star-ness. I have to hand it to Maggie Shen King—she takes several assumptions and trends, plays them out to their logical conclusion, and makes a dramatic book out of it. Plus I always enjoy speculative fiction that isn't set in North America!

First, take the Chinese one-child policy. Add to that the preference for having a male child to inherit your goods. Mix in a good dose of authoritarian Communist party, which like most authoritarian regimes is ultra-conservative. This is the world that King introduces us to—where women are so scarce that men compete to be second and third husbands in polyandrous households. We meet Wei-guo, an excess male, who is rather desperate to become someone's husband and the household that he aspires to join: that of May-ling and her two brother husbands.

Unattached young men are always a dangerous potential source of upheaval in a society, so despite the extreme shortage of women, the Chinese government frowns on single men. Many of these men, like Wei-guo, spend their free time playing war games out in the countryside, something that the government keeps close tabs on, seeing it as a potential challenge to the state instead of a way of venting aggression. Illogically, the government also disapproves of homosexuality, which really they should welcome in their demographic predicament. When the government disapproves of both of these safety values for their society, things are bound to go wrong.

All of these tensions come together to produce a human drama that is well worth your reading time.

Justine says

4.5 stars

A compelling and emotional read. I loved the close examination of what constitutes family, love, and happiness for the four main characters, and how wonderfully interconnected they were with each other.

The totalitarian regime combined with the regressive sociopolitical views forced by the government on the population made for a sufficiently frightening and depressing backdrop.

Definitely recommended, particularly if you like rich, character driven stories.

Rhode says

Torn. It's a great book both as an extrapolation of how the near future may look based on where we're going now, and also as a nuanced novel showing four adults (three men and one woman) falling in love with each other (in most cases platonically) and forming a true family unit.

We see through each of their eyes — the views through the woman's eyes and the autistic man's eyes were the most engrossing. It's well done. But it's also hard to take for two reasons beyond the whole real-feeling privacy invading authoritarian government. The reasons are the world the characters inhabit is full of sexism and homophobia, although they themselves rise above bigotry in most ways.

I have no doubt the author is reflecting a truth about the direction modern Chinese culture may take. She's not seemingly using the novel to put forth those views herself, but rather to combat them.

Yet. It's hard to take in parts. When the woman is ordered to have sex with a husband she very much never wants to touch again. When she has to cook and care for a child fulltime although it's clear these are not her talents. And, although the gay men in the book are allowed to exist but never marry or have families. (We do not see any other part of LGBTQ but given the worldbuilding, things must be dreadful in particular for lesbians)

The worst part for me: although the characters together are able to overcome a terrible government conspiracy, their family unit is shattered in the end. The heterosexual characters are able to salvage a family together and be happy — but the gay character pretty much loses everything except for his life.

A het-only HEA is sickening.

So, realistic or not, I am unable to give this book the five stars it otherwise deserves.

Aditi says

"Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong...it is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum not as two opposing sets of ideas."

----Emma Watson

Maggie Shen King, a Taiwanese bestselling author, has penned a highly thought-provoking dystopian novel, *An Excess Male* that revolves around a not-so young man longing for companionship with a woman while getting wrapped up in a government-influenced deadly drama and scandal and is set in not-so-distant future in China, where male to female sex ration has become tremendously high, gradually making women almost extinct from the face of the Earth. This is the Handmaid's Tale for the men set the year of 2050.

Synopsis:

From debut author Maggie Shen King, An Excess Male is the chilling dystopian tale of politics, inequality, marriage, love, and rebellion, set in a near-future China, that further explores the themes of the classic The Handmaid's Tale and When She Woke.

Under the One Child Policy, everyone plotted to have a son.

Now 40 million of them can't find wives. China's One Child Policy and its cultural preference for male heirs have created a society overrun by 40 million unmarriageable men. By the year 2030, more than twenty-five percent of men in their late thirties will not have a family of their own. An Excess Male is one such leftover man's quest for love and family under a State that seeks to glorify its past mistakes and impose order through authoritarian measures, reinvigorated Communist ideals, and social engineering. Wei-guo holds fast to the belief that as long as he continues to improve himself, his small business, and in turn, his country, his chance at love will come. He finally saves up the dowry required to enter matchmaking talks at the lowest rung as a third husband—the maximum allowed by law. Only a single family—one harboring an illegal spouse—shows interest, yet with May-ling and her two husbands, Wei-guo feels seen, heard, and connected to like never before. But everyone and everything—walls, streetlights, garbage cans—are listening, and men, excess or not, are dispensable to the State. Wei-guo must reach a new understanding of patriotism and test the limits of his love and his resolve in order to save himself and this family he has come to hold dear.

In Maggie Shen King's startling and beautiful debut, An Excess Male looks to explore the intersection of marriage, family, gender, and state in an all too plausible future.

Lee Wei-guo, a 40 year old award-winning physical trainer has now only one dream to get married to a woman and start his loving family. But in the year of 2050 in China, when the male-to-female ratio has drastically gone up, it is real difficult to find a woman to get married to, as a result, government of China has set certain laws to maintain a balance, starting with the allowance to the handful of desirable and marriageable women left in the country to have a maximum of 3 legally-wedded husbands and to have one child with each of her husbands, not only that, the husbands must pay dowry to the woman and her family while getting married to her. Yet Lee has hope that he will get married to his dream woman someday even though getting married through matchmakers is a luxury now. And he does meet the woman of his dreams with her two husbands and her child, but sadly his road to happiness become too dangerous when Lee gets caught up in a Government-initiated deadly conspiracy in a country where being gay and mentally retarded will label you as a criminal.

Its not hard to imagine a dystopian future like that, when the preference for male children has given rise to a drastically high rate of male-to-female sex ratio, turning female human species almost extinct from the world. This is a hardcore soon-to-be-reality, if female infanticide is not stopped or banned either by the government or by the world health organization. I was not at all feeling sorry for the men while reading this book, I felt like they deserved such a poor fate of not being able to get married or not being able to indulge in physical bodily pleasures in our near future. Even though I strongly condemn the issues of female infanticide and gender inequality, I know that this is how our society or the world is going to go on till the end of the time and this author has done a brilliant job in re-imagining on what might happen and how is it going to finally affect the men, if we do not stop or address to those grave issues growing like a wild fire in the societies we live in.

The author's writing style is exquisite and evocative enough to move the readers deeply with the voices of

the protagonists. There is a subtle hint of a love story centered around the political conspiracy against those are Willfully Sterile men meaning gay, and those romantic scenes and emotions are dealt with utmost sensitivity and feels to keep the readers hooked on to the story line. The narrative of the four main characters are very well portrayed with enough realism and is articulately penned to make the readers contemplate with the plight of the characters. The pacing is steady and smooth, laced with gripping tension and nuances of a deadly and clever conspiracy is bound to keep the readers glued till the very end of the story.

The world imagined by the author, so rather say the future depicted by the author is logical, full of sense and is extremely believable. Hats off to the author for trying to make us show the ugly truth behind our constant preference for male children and preferring men over women. The characters are extremely well painted by the author into the story line. The voices of the four protagonists, two brother, Hann and XX, their wife, May-ling and her soon-to-be-husband, Lee, are vividly arrested by the author with layers of back story and character development to make them look real in the eyes of the readers. Hann is a headstrong man who only wants to keep his family happy, nerdy XX is busy in his world and has little to do with his wife or the child or his brother, May-ling is a compassionate and thoughtful woman who cares for all the men in her life despite of a broken past and Lee is a determined ordinary man with dreams and aspirations.

In a nutshell, this book is going to resonate with all the human beings of this world, and trust me, this is a must-read book that is an sure-shot eye-opener for many who turn a blind eye to gender inequality and female infanticide.

Verdict: *A compelling, an enlightening and a must-read dystopian science-fiction.*

Courtesy: *Thanks to the author, Maggie Shen King for giving me an opportunity to read and review her debut book.*

Ninitha (Niko) says

A dystopian novel that doesn't explain the dystopian lifestyle in detail is a let down. There are great elements in this book, but somehow the characters feel under developed, and some plot twists unwarranted. It also seems deeply depressing that even in a matriarchal society, women are subjected to patriarchy. I'm not sure I like this book. But then again, I don't hate it either. It just all seems a little vague and all over the place, much like this review.

Jessica Woodbury says

AN EXCESS MALE imagines what happens in a China where the One Child Policy and the preference for male children leads to a society where men vastly outnumber women but society frowns on unmarried men. In this world, women can take up to three husbands and have one child with each of them. What's so interesting about the world King imagines is how patriarchy and bigotry still persist despite the fact that they no longer make sense.

Told through 4 different points of view, we follow Wei-guo, a single man nearing middle age as he attempts to join a family as a third husband. This family, made of May-Ling and the brothers she has married, Hanh and XX, is not what they seem. My favorite kind of novel with different points of view is one where we learn new things every time we switch narrators and realize that things were not as clear as we thought. This is definitely one of those novels, at least for the first half. May-Ling's family has secrets, a lot of them, and it's unclear whether bringing Wei-guo into their family will help them deal with their problems or create more of them.

If you enjoy speculative novels that explore gender and sexuality, this is an excellent choice. It gets overly complex in the last third, with some thriller-style plot thrown in that seems out of place with the rest of the book. But the character portraits here are very strong and well done. One character is potentially Autistic, which usually sets off alarm bells for me, but I never felt like this character came off as false and it was generally a strong portrayal of the complexity of emotion and social behaviors with neurodiverse people. 3.5 stars.

Major subplots include stigmatization of LGBTQ and mentally ill characters, which may be difficult for some readers.

Sarah says

This ended up being entirely different from what I expected. From the cover I was expecting something action packed and adrenaline heavy. It actually ended up being a character driven story.

The story is set in the future in China when there are far too many men and too few girls due to girls being killed/aborted/genetically engineered into boys. Wei-guo is an "Excess Male" and is trying to enter into a marriage contract as a third husband. While the book starts with his POV, it shifts throughout the book between him, the two other husbands, and the wife, May-Ling.

The book primarily shows how difficult it is to live in this culture when you're different. Of the two husbands one is gay, or "Willfully Sterile," and the other is a "Lost Boy," who I think was autistic. Each of the characters is desperately unhappy, which was a bit heartbreakingly to see. I really liked the characters and seeing their lives progress was really interesting.

Lindsay says

China's One Child Policy will result in around 24 million more men than women of marriageable age by 2020. That's a fact, not science fiction and takes into account that the One Child Policy has been wound up. This novel extrapolates a future where the One Child Policy continued and caused lasting social adaptations, but even so, most of the underlying issues explored in this book are now inevitable, if somewhat exaggerated here.

The Excess Male at the heart of this book is Lee Wei-guo, a 44-year old moderately successful personal trainer who has acquired the means to court a wife. However, even after saving his entire life the best he can hope for is as a third husband of an already-established family. He's looking to marry into the Guo family, with the senior husbands being Hann and Xiong-xin, both in their 50s, and the wife is 22-year old May-ling.

They also have a young child. But nothing is straight-forward. The Guo family have secrets, and their own reasons for wanting a third husband for May-ling, reasons that put the entire family in dangerous opposition to government policy. But government policy in this future China is regressive and prescriptive, pushing even the straight-laced and honorable Wei-guo into danger.

This is an important book, looking at a very real future that China faces soon (if not now), but through a dystopic lens. A very believable one unfortunately. The treatment that same-sex attracted males receive in this book and by this version of the Chinese government is horrible, as is the direct intervention by the government into people's marriages. The implementation of family planning policy in that country also makes the setting unfortunately plausible; with the Chinese government having form in the area.

But all of that is just background to a beautifully human story of four people developing deep relationships with each other, only one of which is actually sexual. It focuses a lot of time and energy on the inter-relationships between the spouses, many of which show simultaneously the deep understanding of each other while still showing just how annoyed or frustrated they can be with themselves. There's also great positive depictions of older gay men as well as someone with Asperger's (or somewhere on the ASD anyway), neither of which leaves out the negatives.

As I said, this is an important book for anyone interested in China and its social issues, if not dystopian science fiction in general.

Ran says

Wei Guo wants to become the third husband in a marital arrangement that happens in this envisioning of near-future China (where the one-child policy with preference to sons has imbalanced the population so there are too many sons and not enough wives). But the family he may marry into has their own problems with both orientation and the state. That might be the tag line of this book which drew me into it, but really what I took away from it was that forged families (to protect those outside heterosexual norms) make choices to protect each other, love each other, and raise the next generation together. Those choices are important beneath the politically dystopian intrigue story set in this China.

Terri Jacobson says

It's China in the not-too-distant future. Because of the Chinese "one child" policy and many families choosing to have sons, there is an excess male population. There are not enough women to marry. The Chinese solution is polyandry--each woman can have up to 3 husbands.

We meet Wei-guo, a young man nearing 40 who has finally come up with the dowry money to enter the marriage market. The matchmaker introduces Wei-guo and his 2 fathers to May-ling, a woman with 2 husbands and 1 child. In Chinese society, gay people are ostracized and cut off from family relations. May-Ling's first husband, Hann, is homosexual. Her second husband, Hann's brother, Xiong-xin (known as "XX"), is a computer genius, but he's not comfortable dealing with people. He is in many ways emotionally stunted, and often he just wants to be left alone. *An Excess Male* tells the story of these characters, as they come to know each other and figure out if they can be a family.

The story is told alternately from the point-of-view of Wei-guo, May-ling, Hann, and XX. Somewhat to my surprise, I came to care deeply for these characters. Their struggles to come to know each other, their difficulties dealing with society and with each other, make a compelling story. Through these characters, Maggie Shen King explores ideas about families, marriage, gender, and the all-powerful state. A thoughtful and provocative reading experience.

(One of the things I like about this book is the coming-to-life of a real problem facing Chinese society in the future. By 2030, it's estimated that more than 25% of men will not be able to find a wife. *An Excess Male* offers a creative solution to this problem.)

Sadie Forsythe says

[Hann (hide spoiler)]

Trin says

An interesting concept -- an exploration of the possible consequences of the One Child policy, where it has resulted in a population of dangerously few women. But this is painfully slow. Scene after scene that cover the same ground, restating the characters' thoughts and motivations again and again. XX -- the character who's on the spectrum, what this dystopia terms a Lost Boy -- was the most interesting and well developed to me; sadly, the three other POV characters came across as quite flat, in particular the sole female character, who is given almost no personality at all, outside of how she relates to the men in her life.

Also this book contains one of the most annoying child characters ever, with a *lot* of the total page count given over to his insufferable dialogue. Dear lord.

There are some tense, horrifying passages, but also a lot of coincidences and dangling threads, and I had to force myself to finish.

Billie says

An interesting concept and characters get bogged down by over-writing. There isn't much that actually happens here and it doesn't happen for hundreds of pages. Part of the problem is that the book is being published by Voyager, which specializes in Science Fiction and Fantasy and this reads more like a literary novel with the trappings of S-F/dystopic fiction. Marketing shapes expectations and perception and this is being marketed to the wrong audience.

I saw all of the five-star reviews for this and thought I was missing something. Those reviews, though, are all from new or long-dormant accounts and appear to be from friends of the author, which makes me like the book less. I'm almost feeling perverse enough to give it a one-star rating to bring the overall score to something more in line with where it probably should be.

Jennifer says

I have every incentive to procrastinate right now, yet **An Excess Male** wastes away by my bed, unfinished. I think I'd rather do the dishes than keep reading it, to be honest, which is frustrating because it really is a well-considered, carefully constructed, scarily plausible thought experiment.

The basic premise: near-future China is having a woman crisis. After decades of its one child policy and strong cultural preferences for boys ('to carry on the family name'), there are too many young men and not nearly enough women. The government's solutions to this shortage are to a) allow every woman up to three husbands; b) institute a government-run prostitution service (euphemistically known as Helpmates); and c) enlist the young men in highly competitive military games to provide an outlet for their sexual frustration.

You might think that the scarcity of women would finally give women the upper hand in Chinese culture. Wrong. Instead, they're still pawns in which their parents receive huge dowries when they're married (to someone of the parents' choosing), forced into marriages in which they could easily find none of their husbands desirable, yet have to follow strict baby-making regimes, and controlled by husbands who still have all the power. They seem to have little choice except to be homemakers with no independent income.

And men don't seem to have it all that great, either. Our protagonist Wei-Guo, a single man in his 40s, has finally saved up enough dowry to consider becoming a third husband to Mei-Ling. But as always, in Chinese culture, you marry a family rather than an individual, and Mei-Ling's family - two brothers as her previous husbands, a problem child toddler - is a rabbit warren of secrets.

This is a grim read. The culture that our hapless protagonists find themselves in is heavily repressive of anything that doesn't speak of filial and governmental piety, including homosexuality, neural atypical-ness, and independence of thought and action. Also, **An Excess Male** has some of the baldest, most cringe-worthy, and actually painful to read sex scenes ever.

There's plenty to admire in here: it's a bold exploration of how wrong things can go when you combine a patriarchal culture and an autocratic government. But it's not a pleasant read, and when things go sour for the characters (sourer than they started out, anyway, and no one in here was dealt a good hand of cards to begin with), I found myself reluctant to continue. The pacing also feels a little off, since over the first half of the book feels like set up...for a world I found intensely claustrophobic and a denouement I didn't ultimately care about enough to continue.

I should note that plenty of my distaste stems from personal baggage. This is at least in part the culture of my grandparents - my grandmother was from the last generation of rural Chinese women to have bound feet, and she was angry when I was born that I turned out to be another girl (and blamed my mother, which might say something of her grasp of biology). **An Excess Male** is profoundly uncomfortable reading for me, perhaps in part because I was lucky enough to escape that culture.

Your mileage may vary. It's not a bad book. It's just not one I care to finish.
