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BOOKS & FILM



Ahoy!

Thievery on the high seas **goes 3-D** in *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*

▶ According to a recent article in Britain's *The Independent*, Somali pirates are set to take in roughly US\$400 million in 2015. But that number pales in comparison to the profits generated by Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. The world's most profitable pirate enterprise has raked in over \$26 billion worldwide, and is set to add to its substantial treasure chest with a fourth installment this summer. This sequel centers on Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) and his ex-love (Penélope Cruz) as she leads him on a dangerous mission to discover the Fountain of Youth. To get there though, Sparrow also is forced to cooperate with his longtime rival, Barbossa (Geoffrey Rush). On top of the new storyline, there is a number of interesting additions, from sexy, evil mermaids to zombie pirates. Shot in 3-D, *On Stranger Tides*, has come under fire by critics who have noted that production values have suffered under a tighter budget than previous editions of the series, but recent test screenings Stateside have shown the audience doesn't mind a lower-budget flick as long as it pops out at them in 3-D. Whether or not *On Stranger Tides* is worth the loot it's expected to rake in is up to you to judge. Check it out at IMAX at Peace Cinema and Wanda. In English.

■ **Feer Han**

Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides premieres on Fri. May 20 at Peace Cinema, Wanda and UME

Frequent Flyer

Xu Xi's *Habit of a Foreign Sky* is the subtle story of love and loss spread across continents

▶ Spanning New York City, Hong Kong and Shanghai, Xu Xi's seventh novel is the story of a high-flying career woman whose tightly-wound life has unravelled. Gail Szeto is the illegitimate daughter of an American businessman and a Shanghainese dancehall escort. Having worked herself out of a poverty-stricken childhood in Hong Kong, she lives the life of an international businesswoman, her sterile existence warmed only by the presence of her young son, Gu Kwun. As the novel opens, Gail receives the news that her elderly mother, Fa-Loong, has been hit by a bus. Two years previously, Gu Kwun was also killed in a freak accident while Gail was away on business.

As the novel unfolds, Gail comes to terms with the fact that her roles have changed. She is no longer a mother, a daughter or—since her company plans to relocate her to New York City—a Hong Kong businesswoman. She becomes reacquainted with her half-brother, Gordon “Gordie” Ashberry, the son of her American father. She also discovers that her mother has left her a surprisingly generous inheritance, acquired from an amateur stock market habit.

Into Gail's life comes Xavier Doupoulos, a businessman of French and Chinese heritage with a thorny and complicated personal life that includes a young daughter, Kina. The relationship between Gail and Xavier is fraught with the challenges of distance, a clash of personalities and a mutual reluctance that battles with attraction.

Gail Szeto is described by one of the peripheral characters as a “cold fish,” and

this is a fair description. Although she is the protagonist, the narrative is shared between a variety of characters. The omniscient narrator even finds a voice in Gail's Filipina maid, Conchita, and her friend Bonnie as they gossip on the back steps. This splintered narrative can be distracting, but succeeds in draping the plot over a variety of pegs.

For a novel set among three of the world's most colorful and dynamic cities, the paucity of geographical detail is surprising, but doubtlessly meaningful. In a narrative stripped of detail, the characters move anonymously, unbound by physical landmarks and the cliché of cityscapes. The book's title is taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson, and refers to those who are “away from home.” This underpins the themes of displacement (voluntary or otherwise) and the search for identity.

Habit of a Foreign Sky was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize, and was described as “an indispensable work of contemporary fiction by a

novelist at the height of her powers” by judge Nicholas Jose. Xu Xi has described it as her “woman novel,” and Gail certainly embodies her feminist principles. Although Xu denies that she based Gail on herself, the similarities are obvious. The author was born to Javanese-Chinese parents, grew up speaking English and Cantonese and had a successful career in international marketing before turning to writing full-time. It is a subtle book, bereft of brash characters and striking description, but full of the nuances that characterize real life, love and loss. ■ **Susie Gordon**



She is no longer a mother, a daughter, or a Hong Kong businesswoman

Habit of a Foreign Sky is available at www.havenbooksonline.com for HK\$120