



Ghost Month

Ed Lin

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August is Ghost Month in Taiwan—a time to commemorate the dead: burn incense, visit shrines, commemorate ancestors, and avoid unlucky situations, large purchases, and bodies of water. Jing-nan, a young man who runs a food stand in a bustling Taipei night market, doesn't consider himself superstitious, but this August is going to haunt him no matter what he does. He is shocked to the core when he learns his ex-girlfriend from high school has been murdered. She was found scantily clad and shot in the chest on the side of a highway where she was selling betel nuts to passing truck drivers. Beyond his harrowing grief for this lost love of his life, Jing-nan is also confused by the news: "betel nut beauties" are usually women in the most desperate of circumstances; the job is almost as taboo as prostitution. But Julia Huang had been the valedictorian of their high school, and the last time Jing-nan spoke to her she was enrolled in NYU's honor program, far away in New York. The facts don't add up. Julia's parents don't think so, either, and the police seem to have closed the case without asking any questions. The Huangs beg Jing-nan if he can do some investigating on his own—reconnect with old classmates, see if he can learn anything about Julia's life that she might have kept from them. Reluctantly, he agrees, for Julia's sake; but nothing can prepare him for what he learns, or how it will change his life.

Ghost Month Details

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From Reader Review Ghost Month for online ebook

Hallie says

A sidewalk noodle shop in Taipei City's Shilin Night Market during summer's Ghost Month (when "supposedly the gates of the underworld are opened and spirits of the dead are allowed to walk among the living once again") is the vivid backdrop for Ed Lin's "Ghost Month." Protagonist Jing-nan has no interest in appeasing ghosts. He's still bitter that a few years earlier his parents died and left him the noodle shop saddled with staggering debt. Meanwhile, his high school sweetheart and love of his life has been murdered. He hadn't seen Julia since they were both students at NYU. He was appalled to learn that she'd been working in a betel-nut stall where girls wear next to nothing as they hawk the addictive nuts to "disgusting men with ugly, red-stained teeth" who try to cop a feel along with their betel-nut chew.

The novel starts slowly, hooking the reader with a rich sense of place, exotic food, and delightfully eccentric characters as each night Jing-nan turns on his "Johnny-night-market persona." <25> Like a carousel barker he lures tourists to his noodle stand. During the day, he's himself again, and the story turns dark as he's increasingly convinced that there is more to Julia's murder than the news reported. Police are at best inept and at worst corrupt, and when he begins to investigate he's threatened by a local gang and, more ominously, by a pair of American thugs. The plot twists come fast and furious as the story reaches its climax.

Come for the exotic food and rich setting; stay for the characters.

Review originally appeared in The Boston Globe

Susan Shea says

Ed Lin opens a window into a wonderful world I knew nothing about, Taiwan, its night food markets, and the rush of modern life among older traditions. It's fast-paced and off-beat and I liked it a lot.

Jen Sinclair says

We selected "Ghost Month" as our monthly book club read under the recommendation of one of our members who had visited Taiwan and was looking forward to revisiting the area. I found the setting of the story and tidbits about the culture interesting, yet explained in not-infrequent information dumps that could be tedious and in a narrative that changed from first person storytelling to second person tour guide. For example, when the protagonist, Jing-nan, suggests that while tourist brochures tell how to get to the Shilin Night Market in general, "I'll tell you how to get to my specific flavor emporium, Unknown Pleasures. Here's what you do..." and provided a 7-paragraph description, I kept thinking I'd rather experience the walk as part of, not an interruption to, the story. His "Johnny" alter-ego could have easily given directions to tourists, and let us discover more about his character, viewpoint, and home. This might be why I found it hard to get into the story. I did enjoy the insider/local point of view versus the tourist/outsider and how the main character, Jing-nan, started to recognize he needed to move on emotionally. Unfortunately, by then I just didn't care for this "every guy" turned "still every guy" or how he used/treated the secondary characters around him. He changed, at least in his internal dialogue/narration, but then acted in more of the same manner. The Glossary at the end of my hard cover was a nice touch, as I was thinking I wanted to look into some of the culture further. In short, while I appreciated the setting and that Lin had followed the conventions of a mystery, I

found it difficult to get into due to the narrative style and the (lack of) character depth.

Jennifer says

I won this on the Goodreads giveaway. And I am SO happy I did!! Bear with me I'm not great with reviews but I'm going to try because this book is excellent. Jing-nan and his high school sweetheart ,Julia, made a promise to each other that they would not speak until they went to America ,graduated from college and made a life for themselves. Jing-jab would then go find his love and they would marry. Things don't work out that way. Julia was killed and Jing-jan gets in deep when he tries to figure out what really happened. I couldn't put this down. The story was so engaging. I love Ed Lin's writing style and his wit. The story kept me guessing the entire time. I loved the characters, they were so real. I loved their sincerity. He described Taiwan, the scenery and culture so well I almost felt like I have been there before. This book had it all. I can't say enough about this. I can't wait to read more of his work. A MUST READ!!

Julie says

The setting is pretty amazing--Taipei, about which I know almost nothing. It's a diverse and vibrant place, corrupt and lavish and full of contradictions. The food, too, is really remarkable. Lots of descriptions there. And the main character is an interesting figure. The problem is that the plot felt sort of slack to me--as the main character seems to be sort of slack. So I had to push myself through the book in the end. Not sure I'd go for a second if there really is one.

Martha Bullen says

I sought out the mystery author's table at Book Expo in May to pick up a signed copy of Ghost Month for my husband, who often travels to Taiwan. I was intrigued to hear that the book is set in one of Taipei's famous night markets.

Unfortunately, the night market is the most engaging character in the book. Lin is a Taiwanese American, and he does a terrific job bringing the vivid sights, sounds, aromas (sizzling meat skewers, burbling hot pot and the noxious stinky tofu) to life. If only he could have done the same for his characters.

Sadly, I found the purported "hero" of the story, Jing-naan, a stall owner at the night market, completely charmless. In fact, he came across as whiny, self-absorbed, narcissistic and remarkably obtuse. He spent most of the book mourning the murder of his high school girlfriend, Julia, who he intended to marry someday. But he hadn't seen her for years because he was too proud to admit he had left college in the U.S. after the death of his parents and was barely scraping by, living in an illegal building and driving an old moped.

Jing-nan is surrounded by stock characters - the only interesting ones are his employees at the market, and the new girl he meets at his favorite music store. I found him more and more annoying as the story progressed. What a shame Lin didn't create a protagonist with some depth, nuance and spice to match his setting. The resolution of the plot felt very formulaic as well.

His previous series was highly praised by S. J. Rozan, a mystery author I greatly admire. So perhaps it is

worth a try ... but I will not be back for a return helping if Jing-nan makes a return appearance. He is definitely not my cup of green tea.

Chana says

This story is set in Taiwan and uses the setting to give us history of the island and the people who live there, in particular the local character and color of Taipei. It felt fine to be in this book. Jing-nan runs a food stand in the Taipei night market, a stand that his grandfather started and has been passed down through his father to him. One day he sees in the news that a binlang girl (betel-nut beauty) has been killed and it is his girlfriend that he had been planning to marry. He had not seen or talked to her in seven years but they had an agreement. He is shocked as he thought she was in the U.S. Being a binlang girl is I guess the equivalent of being one of those mostly naked baristas at a drive through coffee house, except that betel-nut is less acceptable than coffee and these betel-nut beauties are often offered as prostitutes as well. Jing-nan's betrothed had always been top of her class, tons of potential. So why had she been working such a low class job and who killed her? Jing-nan sets to find out. He gets threatened, beat up, lied to, his bike is tampered with so to cause an accident, his house is set afire. Someone does not want him to find out. As well, it is Ghost month and most people are being very careful not to anger ghosts and to burn effigies of money and possessions to their ancestors. Jing-nan doesn't believe in any of that stuff. But his dead girlfriend comes to him in his dreams. And there is a new girl in his life. Can he/should he fall in love again? What does he owe to his old girlfriend?

So, this book goes. I really liked the characters, the setting and the normality of the life that goes on around the central drama. I particularly like the night market and Jing-nan's employees and friends; Frankie and Dwayne.

Frank Chen says

A fun romp through Taiwan. Having partially grown up in Taiwan, it was fun to see an entire novel written in English set in the city. The author sets a good pace that moves the narrative long, though perhaps does a too much direct explanation for my tastes ("now let me give you a Wikipedia-esque article about the origin of the various ethnic groups on the island"). I would have preferred more "learn-by-observing" rather than "learn-by-lecture".

The author's English is grammatically flawless but manages at the same time to feel foreign. Arguably, the phrases thicken the atmosphere, but I found it somewhat distracting.

I'd recommend the book for anyone who grew up in Taiwan or is curious about the island. It "feels" authentic and is a fun way to get a taste of the people, the food, and the culture while following the adventures (and misadventures) of the like-able protagonist.

Carol Jean says

Lin is a vivid writer, and this mystery novel has a fascinating premise. Its protagonist has been waiting, running his family's stall in Taipei's night market, to become a success so that he can marry his childhood

sweetheart. He hasn't seen her in 10 years, but he is sure she has done well at her American university, and that she is waiting to hear from him. He is shocked to discover that she has been murdered a short distance from his market, while engaged in a questionable profession. This is an excellent tale of a man finally returning to the real world from an odd fantasy which has held him captive for most of his adult life.

Constance says

It was so great to read a book set in Taiwan (and I learned a lot about the country!). But the mystery part of it wasn't that well-executed.

Tate says

I picked up this book (not my usual type, as I'm usually a science fiction/fantasy fan) because a friend of mine has recently moved to Taiwan, specifically Taipei. What I wanted from this book was a sense of day-to-day life in Taipei. I hate to admit it, but I literally knew next to nothing about Taiwan or its people and was really looking for an easy way to absorb some information about a country that is completely new to me.

I got exactly that experience from GHOST MONTH.

Or, at least, I got enough of it so that I feel that when I write to my friend (we've become old-fashioned pen pals), I will be able to do so with a better sense of the sort of things she might be seeing as she takes the train to work or wanders through the various night markets.

I'm not sure about the mystery. I've only ever been a casual fan of mysteries, so I can't really say how well this book performed within its genre. All I can say is that I enjoyed having a kind of travelogue of the place my friend now calls home.

Carina says

Enjoyable enough as place porn for Taiwan-heads. I felt that the mystery/thriller story could have been pretty good too, if I'd been able to care even a little bit about the protagonist. But he was just...empty. I feel like the author tried too hard to make him an "ordinary guy"; especially compared with the other characters, who were mostly caricatures. The crazy nerd loser, the crazy obsessive rich bitch, the manic pixie dream girl. Meanwhile, Julia, clearly the most interesting of the bunch, is dead the whole time. Too bad.

Maggie says

I had a lot of mixed feelings about this book. The setting of the night market in Taiwan was fascinating and I loved learning about Ghost Month and other elements of Taiwanese culture. But I often felt as if the narrator was explaining things to an audience instead of conducting an inner monologue, and I eventually found this part of the book tedious. The information was interesting but it felt out of step with the story. The story was a pretty straight-forward whodunit but it lacked the suspense or development of a mystery. I liked the main character and the other characters in the story a lot, but it was hard to be too invested in them, because in

certain ways this book remained lightly on the surface of things, without being a breezy read.

James Thane says

Ghost Month is set mostly in the bustling night market in Taipei. The protagonist, Jing-nan runs a food stand there, which he inherited from his parents. He also inherited a huge debt that was initially incurred by Jing-nan's grandfather and which has been passed down to him along with the food stand. Jing-nan once had dreams of escaping to America, going to college there, and then remaining in the U.S., along with his girlfriend, Julia, who has been the love of his life since high school. But the death of Jing-nan's parents has left him with no choice but to drop out of college, return to Taiwan, and take over the family business.

His dreams shattered, Jing-nan returns home, still harboring the faint dream that he will someday, somehow escape this destiny and reunite with Julia. He has told her, though, that he will have no contact with her until he is able to do so. Several years have now passed, and his dream has largely disappeared.

Ghost Month, which generally falls in August, is a very superstitious time for many residents of Taiwan. They are particularly attentive to the spirits during the month, and their conduct is circumscribed by the traditions that accompany the month. Jing-nan is not religious and believes in none of this "nonsense." But reading the paper one morning, he is shocked to see that Julia has been murdered. Without his knowing it, Julia too had returned to Taiwan and had been working as a "betel nut beauty"--a scantily clad woman who sits in a roadside stand and sells betel nuts to passing motorists. The job is only a small step short of prostitution and Jing-nan is stunned to learn that Julia has returned and that she has been reduced to these circumstances.

Grieving, Jing-nan pays a courtesy call to Julia's parents. They believe that the police are making no significant effort to find Julia's killer and ask Jing-nan to see what he can discover. Jing-nan agrees and soon finds that he's stirred up a hornets' nest and that he's now in serious danger himself.

This is on the whole, a very good book. My only complaint is that Lin has spent so much time developing the setting that the story suffers in the process. He devotes a great deal of time to the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions on Taiwan, and as a result the reader feels as if he or she were actually on the island, riding behind Jing-nan on his moped. The problem, though, is that every time the story begins to gain momentum, Ling detours off into a discussion of local customs or some such thing, and the tension drops about four levels.

Reading this book, I kept thinking about Martin Limon and his excellent series which is set in South Korea. Those books are also excellent in describing the setting in which the plots play out. But Limon has a way of working these details into the stories so that they don't interfere with the action. Lin's book suffers a bit by comparison and thus three stars for me rather than four.

S says

I really wanted to like this book and was thoroughly entertained through the build up. Being Taiwanese-American, it was fun to read about Taiwan. However, the big reveal lost me. The pieces don't fit together and you're left with a feeling that all the history about Taiwan, ghost month, and politics was gratuitous. It was almost like the author wanted to write about Taiwan and needed an excuse to do so, thereby creating a mystery that came out of left field.

