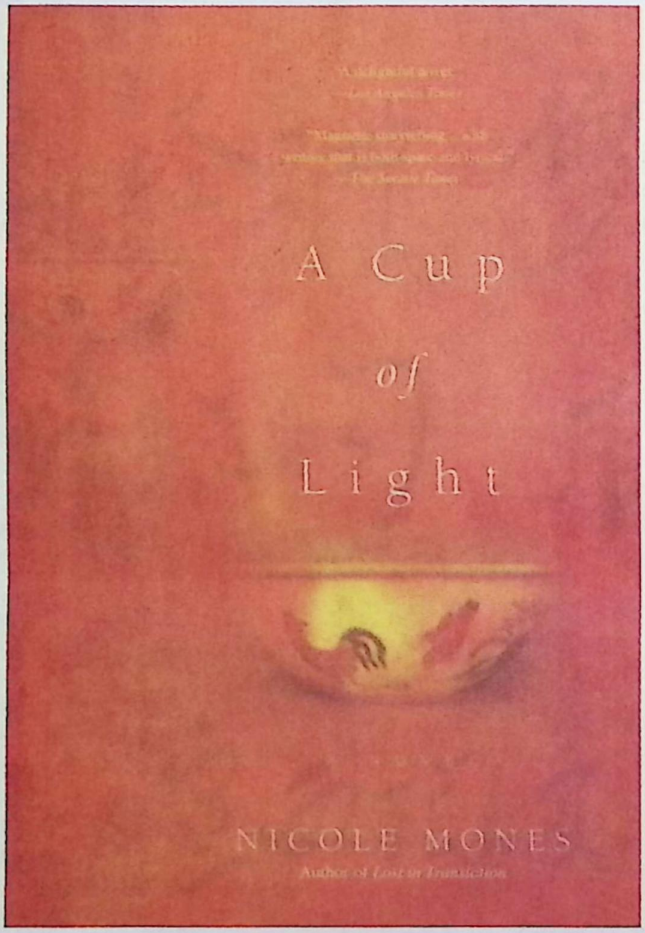
Cup of Light

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A hearing-impaired art appraiser with a knack for memory. A coldly materialistic businessman seeking to fill a void in his life with money and power. A greedy middleman seeking enough wealth to be able to buy prestige. A mixed-heritage immigrant seeking to establish his identity. A medical researcher, recently recovered from the double-blow of cancer and a divorce, seeking to bury the past. Separate lives running parallel to one another, connected by a series of events in which each player has a special role to play. From start to finish; Cup of Light is a riveting read served up in a luminous porcelain package.



When the Japanese invaded China during World War II, fears arose that they would steal China's prodigious art collection. As a result, the Chinese scattered much of the collection throughout the Middle Kingdom. Presently, the collection is worth millions, and a large portion of it finds its way into the hands of a businessman Gao Yideng, who intends to traffic it out of China. He hires Lia Frank, an American appraiser to separate the originals from the (still expensive) fakes, and he also employs a middleman or *ah chan* to smuggle the pots out of China.

Now, the Chinese government wants the ancient pottery, but has neither the clout nor the cash to get it. To compensate, the government is known to execute art traffickers. If the stash makes it to Hong Kong, the deal is a success; if it doesn't, axes may fall.

As the clock races, Lia works frantically, relying on her inexhaustible memory to help her complete her inventory. The discovery of some skillful fang hu (fakes) leaves her shaken and unsure of herself, and into her life enters Michael Doyle, a medical researcher who is trying to forget, just as Lia is trying to remember. He exudes confidence while Lia is struggling to believe in herself. Opposites attract, and a love affair develops. But is this the real thing, or a fang hu, just like the clever little chicken cups in the collection? You'll have to read and find out.

A compartmental narrative is difficult enough to write, what with different threads that need to be woven together into a cohesive plot. When you're writing one that involves a culture different from your own, it becomes that much harder because there's always the risk of misrepresentation and 'offending the natives' (consider the criticism against Monica Ali's Brick Lane). Nicole Mones, however, manages to draw from 20 years of experience of living in China to deliver a story steeped in the essence of Chinese history and culture.

Reading Cup of Light, you have to appreciate the sheer volume of research put into tracing the history of Chinese porcelain. At times the reader may tend to feel that Mones focuses more on the porcelain than the plot, but the stories and anecdotes are so fascinating, one has to forgive her. The plot develops like a cross between Nicholas Sparks and Oceans Eleven, with the exotic Orient theme fusing a special flavour into it. If you enjoyed Nicole Mones' Lost in Translation, this book will certainly not disappoint you.

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