

## BOOK WARS

DIFFERENT SIDES OF THE FAR EAST BATTLE IT OUT

FIVE STAR BILLIONAIRE  
VS BEND, NOT BREAK

Head to modern China to make billions or escape the old China to make a new life? Two tales of Eastern destiny compete

FIVE STAR  
BILLIONAIRE

**Stylist's busy fashion director Alexandra Fullerton says you should make time for *Five Star Billionaire* by Tash Aw, out 28**

**February (£18.99, Fourth Estate)**

Curling up with a book has become the most prized of luxuries. Life has stripped back my 'me time' to the merest moments each day. So, when I do have the opportunity to indulge in reading for pleasure, it has to be that. A book I can escape into; engaging but not overwhelming. While *Bend, Not Break* was jaw-droppingly intense – at times Ping Fu's life felt like that of an adversity-battling Dickens-era heroine – it's just not what I would choose to read with a cup of tea.

Fu's life story is epic and her journey from victim of Mao's Cultural Revolution to becoming a consultant to President Obama deserves a standing ovation, or indeed several. The starkness of the scene in which she is gang-raped aged 10 – and knowing that the book is fact, not fiction – made it impossible for me to enjoy. Dipping in and out of Tash Aw's *Five Star Billionaire* is much more my style. Following five residents of Shanghai, the novel charts their lives, how they cross over, interact and, at times, are totally unaware of each other (the near-misses are excruciatingly poignant).

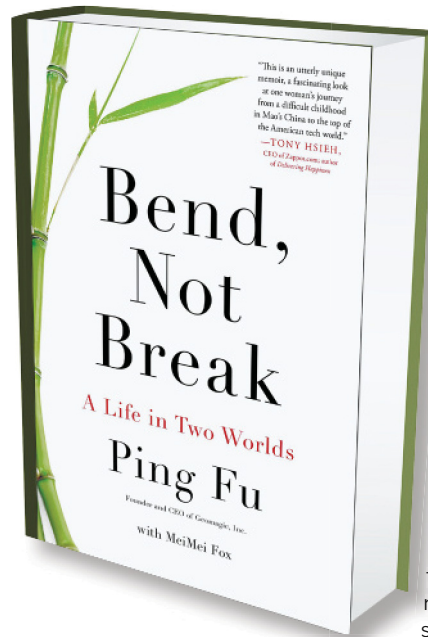
With any novel, I always want to know why I should care about the non-existent people I'm devoting my time to (cynical but true). Each chapter of *Billionaire* is devoted to an



episode in each of the characters' lives. To begin with, some I devoured in detail (Phoebe the eager gold-digger), while others I speed-read (I'm less interested in business mogul Walter Chao). As they intertwine and crash and burn their way through the book, though, I start to believe in each of their journeys.

Creating characters who are real (but not real enough to scare an anti-memoir reader like me) is a true skill. Aw has that, along with that hackneyed old cliché of novel reviewing, lilting prose. The pictures he draws of locations, from the shiny marble spa where Phoebe finds a job to the rural dirt tracks where Walter grew up are as realistic as a glossy travel brochure while his description of falling asleep ("like a stone dropping through water") is the most brilliant I've ever read.

★★★★★



## BEND, NOT BREAK



**Stylist contributor Jess Whiteley sings the praises of *Bend, Not Break* by Ping Fu, out now (£12.99, Portfolio Penguin)**

Confession time: I'm not a massive fan of memoirs either. *Five Star Billionaire* is exactly the type of book I usually go for – slick, clever fiction that comes together gradually, told through a variety of characters whose lives fit together like jigsaw pieces. It's brilliant, bold and powerful, capturing a China that's both beautiful and spiteful.

But few things are more compelling than the truth, and it was Ping Fu's story – an astonishing tale that takes you from the horrors of Mao's China to the shiny screens of

America's Silicon Valley and beyond – that stuck with me.

Today, Fu is one of the world's most celebrated female entrepreneurs (she founded Geomagic, a global 3D software company). She's also an advisor to President Obama. Pretty impressive when you consider she arrived in the US with just three words of English and \$80 in her pocket.

But that's not even half of Fu's story. She was eight when Mao's Cultural Revolution changed her life forever, the Red Guard ripping her from the Shanghai home of the couple she thought were her parents and leaving her in Nanjing to look after her four-year-old sister. For the next 10 years, she led a life ravaged by hunger, violence and shame; she was beaten, forced to eat dirt and gang-raped. Throw in a spell in prison, exile and a kidnapping, and you're getting closer to the whole story. 'Triumph over adversity' doesn't even come close.

It's a memoir so gripping that it reads like fiction. Occasionally, I found the structure somewhat 'bitty' – flitting between past and present, it inevitably loses momentum when it veers into business territory – but this does allow Fu to reveal how specific childhood experiences shaped her future decisions.

The most compelling part of the story, though, is Fu's resilience. Her determination and passion for education is inspirational. She describes her life as an American dream story, but the memoir's ending is strikingly modest. As Fu explains: "I write today not because of what I have become, but because of the nobody I once was."

★★★★☆

**VERDICT: TRY *FIVE STAR BILLIONAIRE* FOR A HUMAN ACCOUNT OF MODERN CHINA**

Perhaps Oscar Wilde was right: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." Ping Fu's memoir, harrowing and uplifting as it may be, isn't going to connect with the emotions of every reader. By foregoing the first person, meanwhile, Tash Aw frees himself to delve deep into the characters of *Five Star Billionaire*, uncovering the affecting stories of modern China's migrant workers. A story worth reading.

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