

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Everything I Never Told You*

Celeste Ng

BOOK GROUP

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Celeste Ng is the author of the novel *Everything I Never Told You*, which was a *New York Times* bestseller, a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2014, Amazon's #1 Best Book of 2014, and named a best book of the year by over a dozen publications. *Everything I Never Told You* was also the winner of the Massachusetts Book Award, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, the ALA's Alex Award, and the Medici Book Club Prize, and was a finalist for numerous awards, including the Ohioana Award, the John Creasey (New Blood) Dagger Award, and the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award.

Celeste grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Shaker Heights, Ohio, in a family of scientists. Celeste attended Harvard University and earned an MFA from the University of Michigan (now the Helen Zell Writers' Program at the University of Michigan), where she won the Hopwood Award. Her fiction and essays have appeared in *One Story*, *TriQuarterly*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, the *Kenyon Review Online*, and elsewhere, and she is a recipient of the Pushcart Prize.

Currently, she lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

## BOOK SUMMARY

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*Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet...*

So begins the story of this exquisite debut novel, about a Chinese American family living in 1970s small-town Ohio. Lydia is the favorite child of Marilyn and James Lee; their middle daughter, a girl who inherited her mother's bright blue eyes and her father's jet-black hair. Her parents are determined that Lydia will fulfill the dreams they were unable to pursue—in Marilyn's case that her daughter become a doctor rather than a homemaker, in James's case that Lydia be popular at school, a girl with a busy social life and the center of every party.

When Lydia's body is found in the local lake, the delicate balancing act that has been keeping the Lee family together is destroyed, tumbling them into chaos. James, consumed by guilt, sets out on a reckless path that may destroy his marriage. Marilyn, devastated and vengeful, is determined to find a responsible party, no matter what the cost. Lydia's older brother, Nathan, is certain that the neighborhood bad boy Jack is somehow involved. But it's the youngest of the family—Hannah—who observes far more than anyone realizes and who may be the only one who knows the truth about what happened.

A profoundly moving story of family, history, and the meaning of home, *Everything I Never Told You* is both a gripping page-turner and a sensitive family portrait, exploring the divisions between cultures and the rifts within a family, and uncovering the ways in which mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives struggle, all their lives, to understand one another.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the relationships between Nath, Lydia, and Hannah. How do the siblings both understand and mystify one another?
2. Why do you think Lydia is the favorite child of James and Marilyn? How does this pressure affect Lydia, and what kind of impact do you think it has on Nath and Hannah? Do you think it is more difficult for Lydia to be the favorite, or for Nath and Hannah, who are often overlooked by their parents?
3. “So part of him wanted to tell Nath that he knew: what it was like to be teased, what it was like to never fit in. The other part of him wanted to shake his son, to slap him. To shape him into something different... When Marilyn asked what happened, James said merely, with a wave of the hand, ‘Some kids teased him at the pool yesterday. He needs to learn to take a joke.’” How did you react to the “Marco Polo” pool scene with James and Nath? What do you think of James’s decision?
4. Discuss a situation in which you’ve felt like an outsider. How do the members of the Lee family deal with being measured against stereotypes and others’ perceptions?
5. What is the meaning of the novel’s title? To whom do the “I” and “you” refer?
6. What would have happened if Lydia had reached the dock? Do you think she would have been able to change her parents’ views and expectations of her?
7. This novel says a great deal about the influence our parents can have on us. Do you think the same issues will affect the next generation of Lees? How did your parents influence your childhood?
8. “It struck her then, as if someone had said it aloud: her mother was dead, and the only thing worth remembering about her, in the end, was that she cooked. Marilyn thought uneasily of her own life, of hours spent making breakfasts, serving dinners, packing lunches into neat paper bags.” Discuss the relationship Marilyn and her mother have to cooking and their roles as stay-at-home mothers. Do you think one is happier or more satisfied?
9. The footprint on the ceiling brings Nath and Lydia closer when they are young, and later, Hannah and James discover it together and laugh. What other objects bring the characters closer together or drive them further apart?
10. There’s so much that the characters keep to themselves. What do you wish they had shared with one another? Do you think an ability to better express themselves would have changed the outcome of the book?

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