

A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet author Celeste Ng, who grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Select from a range of discussion questions and extension activities to deepen the experience of reading and sharing *Everything I Never Told You*.

Discover interviews, websites, and companion books to explore topics and themes in depth.

Everything I Never Told You

By Celeste Ng



About the Book

"Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet." So begins this exquisite novel about a Chinese American family living in 1970s small-town Ohio. Lydia is the favorite child of Marilyn and James Lee, and her parents are determined that she will fulfill the dreams they were unable to pursue. But 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.

A profoundly moving story of family, secrets, and longing, *Everything I Never Told You* is both a gripping page-turner and a sensitive family portrait, uncovering the ways in which mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives struggle, all their lives, to understand one another.

Book Details

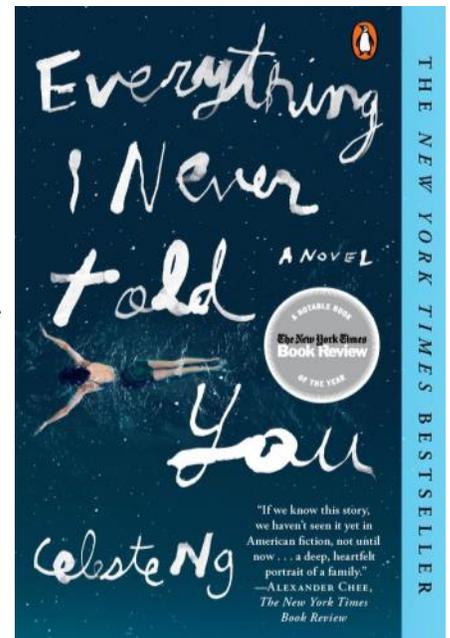
Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng. Penguin Books. 2014. ISBN 9780143127550. 320 pages. penguinrandomhouse.com/books/314573

Available as an ebook and digital audiobook through the Ohio Digital Library: ohiodigitallibrary.com

Available as a downloadable talking book through the State Library of Ohio Talking Book Program: klas.com/talkingbooks/ohio

Everything I Never Told You has been awarded the Asian/Pacific American Award for Fiction by the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, and the Young Adult Library Services Association's Alex Award, which is given to books, written for adults, that have special appeal for teens. It is also a selection for the National Endowment for the Arts' NEA Big Read: neabigread.org.

Celeste Ng's second novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, will be published in Fall 2017.



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Credit: Kevin Day Photography.

About Celeste Ng

Celeste Ng grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Shaker Heights, Ohio, in a family of scientists. She earned an MFA from the University of Michigan. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *One Story*, *Five Chapters*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Millions*, and elsewhere, and has been awarded the Pushcart Prize. Celeste Ng lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband and son.

Author Resources

Celeste Ng's official website

celesteng.com

Author page on Penguin website

penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/229987/celeste-ng

NPR interview with Celeste Ng, from *All Things Considered* (with audio)

npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/06/28/325927002/

Cleveland Plain Dealer interview with Celeste Ng

cleveland.com/books/index.ssf/2014/07/writer_celeste_ng_talks_about.html

For speaking engagement inquiries:

Contact Juli Kiyan at Penguin Books, juliana.kiyan@us.penguinroup.com.

“Whenever he remembered this moment, it lasted forever: a flash of complete separateness as Lydia disappeared beneath the surface. Crouched on the dock, he had a glimpse of the future: without her, he would be completely alone. In the instant after, he knew it would change nothing.”

Talk About It

Topics to share when discussing *Everything I Never Told You*.

- Discuss the relationships between Nath, Lydia, and Hannah. How do the siblings both understand and mystify one another?
- 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?
- The novel explores Hannah's life and viewpoint less than those of Lydia and Nath. What does the character of Hannah bring to the story? What if Nath and Lydia had been the only siblings?
- “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?

Talk About It (continued)

- What is the impact of racism on James' self-image and his behavior? Would you consider James traumatized by the racist behavior of others?
- 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?
- The story is set in the 1950s through 1970s. In your view, would James' experience as a Chinese American be different today? In what ways? Is life easier now for interracial couples and families than it was in the time in which the story is set? How or how not?
- Celeste Ng writes in the Reader's Guide (link below), "In writing ***Everything I Never Told You***, I was surprised to remember how different things were just a generation or two ago—and how much they've stayed the same." Select several scenes to discuss that illustrate to you how much things have changed in recent decades, and how much they have stayed the same.
- What is the meaning of the novel's title? To whom do the "I" and "you" refer?
- 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?
- 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?
- *"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? What does Marilyn's cookbook tell Lydia about Marilyn and about their mother-daughter relationship?
- 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?
- How does the Lees' insularity impact the lives of each family member? Why do James and Marilyn make so little effort to get to know other people in town and to make friends?
- What role does Jack, the neighbor, play in the story? What is the significance of Jack being in the final scene with Nath and Hannah?
- 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?
- The story shifts points of view and goes back and forth in time. How would the experience change if the novel were written in a more linear fashion? What do you think about the author eliminating all suspense about the fact of Lydia's death by stating it in the very first sentence?

Go Further

Ideas for extending the experience of reading **Everything I Never Told You**.

- The novel ends with a reflection on the Lee family members' futures in light of their memories of the mysterious Lydia: "And tomorrow, next month, next year? It will take a long time. Years from now, they will still be arranging the pieces they know, puzzling over her features, redrawing her outlines in their minds." Imagine a future for Nath, Hannah, Marilyn, James, or Jack. What are their lives like today, 40 years after Lydia's death?
- At the time of James' and Marilyn's wedding, interracial marriage was illegal in two dozen U.S. states. The novel refers to Mildred and Richard Loving, whose Virginia marriage would lead to the Supreme Court ruling that state bans on interracial marriage are unconstitutional. Learn more by watching the 2016 historical drama **Loving** or by reading **Loving vs. Virginia: A Documentary Novel of the Landmark Civil Rights Case** by Patricia Hruby Powell, illustrated by Shadra Strickland (2017). Find these and other resources on the Loving case at your local library. For a list of Ohio public libraries, see Find A Library: oplin.org/fal.
- Learn about the Chinese American experience by reading **The Chinese in America: A Narrative History** by Iris Chang (2004), recommended in the **Everything I Never Told You** Reader's Guide, or by asking your local librarian for suggestions, or by exploring articles on Chinese Americans via EBSCOhost and other subscription research resources freely available to all Ohio residents through the Ohio Web Library (ohioweblibrary.org).

Explore More

Additional ideas and resources to use with **Everything I Never Told You**.

Readers' Review: **Everything I Never Told You** by Celeste Ng

thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2015-06-24/readers-review-everything-i-never-told-you-by-celeste-ng

NPR host Diane Rehm discusses the book with author and scholar Patricia Chu, director of the *Asian American Literary Review* Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, and NPR correspondent Lynn Neary. With audio.

Celeste Ng: For Book Clubs

celesteng.com/book-clubs

Exclusive extras from the author's website include a vintage recipe for Galaxy Cookies and a thoughtfully annotated playlist of "songs that the characters themselves might have heard on their radios or their record players and that might have meant something to them."

Asian Nation

asian-nation.org

A project of University of Massachusetts sociology professor C. N. Le, Asian Nation is presented as an "information resource and sociological exploration of the historical, demographic, political, and cultural issues that make up today's diverse Asian American community." It includes profiles of major Asian American ethnic groups, articles on major events and trends in Asian American history, and examination of a wide array of issues of relevance to Asian Americans.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors, illustrators, and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits:
library.ohio.gov/ctro

This toolkit revised
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