

# The Year She Left Us

by Kathryn Ma

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## About the Book

From the winner of the 2009 Iowa Short Fiction Prize --- comes the extraordinary, unexpected debut tale of three generations of Chinese-American women in a San Francisco family who must confront their past and carve out a future.

The Kong women are in crisis. A disastrous trip to visit her "home" orphanage in China has plunged 18-year-old Ari into a self-destructive spiral. Her adoptive mother, Charlie, a lawyer with a great heart, is desperate to keep her daughter safe. Meanwhile, Charlie must endure the prickly scrutiny of her beautiful, Bryn Mawr educated mother, Gran --- who, as the daughter of a cultured Chinese doctor, came to America to survive Mao's Revolution --- and her sister, Les, a brilliant judge with a penchant to rule over everyone's lives.

As they cope with Ari's journey of discovery and its aftermath, the Kong women will come face to face with the truths of their lives --- four powerful intertwining stories of accomplishment, tenacity, secrets, loneliness, and love. Beautifully illuminating the bonds of family and blood, THE YEAR SHE LEFT US explores the promise and pain of adoption, the price of assimilation and achievement, the debt we owe to others, and what we owe ourselves.

## Discussion Guide

1. What are the various effects of having four different narrative voices: Ari and Gran's chapters in first person, Charlie's in third person and Les's told from an omniscient point of view? Which do you find most compelling? Why?
2. Charlie names her adopted daughter Ariadne Bettina Yun-li Rose Kong as a gesture to positively influence her fate. What does each of these names represent? In what ways is naming a powerful and important act?
3. Allusions to classical mythology appear often in the novel, including the tale of Demeter and her daughter, Persephone. What does each add to the story? What purpose and place do mythological stories have in contemporary

culture?

4. Gran warns Ari not to dwell in the past and to "look forward, look forward, look forward." Why is this? In what ways does she follow her own advice or not? What's the best way to handle difficult memories or past mistakes?
5. How might one explain Ari's profound act of self-injury? How does her experience in Alaska, along with her special connection to Gran, help her heal?
6. Should Ari have visited the orphanage she lived in as a baby? Why or why not? What do you make of the interesting act of holding the small, plastic camera in front of her face for much of the visit?
7. Ari's best friend, A.J., has a very different view of visits to the orphanage than Ari does. What do the actions and feelings of the other Whackadoodle girls suggest about the range of adoption experiences?
8. Consider the forceful character of WeiWei. What does she bring to the story? How do WeiWei's choices in life illustrate Gran's words that "Need means *there are no other options*"?
9. Compare sisters Charlie and Les. What qualities does each have that are helpful or problematic for Ari? How do their professional lives affect the way they view family issues, and vice versa?
10. What do Steve and Peg Ericsson, the couple Ari lives with in Alaska, bring to the story? What do they show Ari about compassion, kindness and the nature of friendship and family?
11. What do Ari and Noah have in common, and how are their situations different? What does Ari learn from Noah that is helpful to her in her journey toward acceptance and understanding?
12. In an important moment of self-awareness, Ari wonders to herself: "If I didn't have real problems, why did I feel as if I did?" What does she mean by "real" problems? Can suffering be measured and compared in objective ways or is it always relative?
13. Burial and mourning are repeating motifs in the story. On Qingming, April 5, both Gran and Ari make visits to honor the dead. Later, Ari writes a letter to her biological parents and buries it on Lushan Mountain. Is there power in rituals, whether ancient or invented?
14. By the end of the book, we learn that each of the main characters has experienced a profound loss or separation. How do their intertwined stories build on the novel's themes of identity, loss and healing?

## Author Bio

Kathryn Ma is the author of the story collection *ALL THAT WORK AND STILL NO BOYS*, winner of the Iowa Short Fiction Award. The book was named a *San Francisco Chronicle* Notable Book and a *Los Angeles Times* Discoveries Book. She is also the recipient of the David Nathan Meyerson Prize for Fiction. Before becoming a writer, Ma was a

partner in a California law firm. She lives with her family in San Francisco. This is her first novel.

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