



Our Missing Hearts

By Celeste Ng

Book Discussion Guide

Summary

Twelve-year-old Bird Gardner lives a quiet existence with his loving but broken father, a former linguist who now shelves books in a university library. Bird knows to not ask too many questions, stand out too much, or stray too far. For a decade, their lives have been governed by laws written to preserve “American culture” in the wake of years of economic instability and violence. To keep the peace and restore prosperity, the authorities are now allowed to relocate children of dissidents, especially those of Asian origin, and libraries have been forced to remove books seen as unpatriotic --- including the work of Bird’s mother, Margaret, a Chinese American poet who left the family when he was nine years old.

Bird has grown up disavowing his mother and her poems; he doesn’t know her work or what happened to her, and he knows he shouldn’t wonder. But when he receives a mysterious letter containing only a cryptic drawing, he is pulled into a quest to find her. His journey will take him back to the many folktales she poured into his head as a child, through the ranks of an underground network of librarians, into the lives of the children who have been taken, and finally to New York City, where a new act of defiance may be the beginning of much-needed change.

OUR MISSING HEARTS is an old story made new, of the ways supposedly civilized communities can ignore the most searing injustice. It’s a story about the power --- and limitations --- of art to create change, the lessons and legacies we pass on to our children, and how any of us can survive a broken world with our hearts intact.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel takes place in a world that “isn’t exactly our world, but it isn’t *not* ours, either,” writes Ng in the Author’s Note (327). What elements of the novel’s setting align with your understanding and experience of the events of the 21st century thus far? How close do you think we are to a society like that described in the novel?
2. There are two epigraphs that open the book --- one (real) poem by Anna Akhmatova, and one (fictional) excerpt from PACT literature. How does their juxtaposition set up the invitation to compare reality and imagination, and see our present moment through a historical lens as well as the one devised by Ng for the novel?
3. The connection between literature and protest is powerful in the novel --- from the proliferation and censorship of Margaret’s poetry to the network of librarians caring for the relocated children. Why do you think this form of communication is so resilient against forces and events as big as the Crisis and PACT? How does it inspire individuals and groups in the novel to act?
4. Ethan is originally hired at the university as a linguistics professor, and his obsession with words seeps into his daily habits, such as reading from the dictionary: “His father’s oldest habit: taking words apart like old clocks to show the gears still ticking inside” (18). How does sharing this love of language help Bird in his quest, and ultimately reconnect their family, albeit indirectly, by the end of the novel?
5. Both Bird and Sadie struggle with missing parents, yet their approach to seeking a deeper understanding of their past is vastly different. What about their personalities guide their respective strategies, and why do you think their friendship is so strong?
6. Margaret and Domi’s parting during the Crisis is devastating to them both. Why are they able to restore their friendship once Margaret returns seeking help? What do each of them gain by working together on Margaret’s plan, even beyond the emotional healing of their split?
7. Discuss Margaret’s transformation when she becomes a mother. How is she able to adapt to so many different circumstances --- from her rebellious and resourceful youth to the comfort of her life with Ethan to the purpose driving her life and survival when she goes into hiding? What about Bird’s existence makes her willing to sacrifice it all for the children she tries to honor in her final act?

8. Bird's trip to and through New York City reveals all the ways, big and small, the city had been reshaped by the current, post-Crisis, PACT-enforcing government. Have you ever been to a familiar place that changed radically over time, or after you yourself had changed radically? What was your experience in encountering its newness, or through new eyes?

9. Although Bird dislikes the name his father gives him, Noah, how does it relate to his mother and father's names, which have etymological roots in plants and the natural world? What does it mean for him to reclaim the name his mother called him?

10. What is the special allure of the stacks in the university library for Bird and for Ethan? Do all libraries carry the same quality of discovery and comfort, and have you been to a library that held that "mix of dust and leather and melted vanilla ice cream. Warm, like the scent of someone's skin" (68)?

11. Discuss the chain of events --- political, economic and social --- that accumulate in the Crisis and lead to the eventual formation of PACT. What events, from history close and farther in the past, resemble this trajectory, in the United States and abroad? What is common among those chains of events, real and fictional, that reveal tendencies of the human psychology, the need for power and blame, and the fear of the unknown or unfamiliar?

12. We see several events in the novel --- such as the moment when Margaret leaves the family home --- from two perspectives, Bird's and his mother's. How do these two perspectives shape your understanding of the family dynamic, as well as each of their motives to find each other?

13. Which form of storytelling resonated with you most in the novel, or in life in general: written or oral? How are they each used in ways to preserve the truth of lived experience when history or other dominant powers tried to erase them --- such as the missing children, and Margaret herself?

Questions courtesy of <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/our-missing-hearts/guide>



Author Celeste Ng

Celeste Ng is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU*, *LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE* and *OUR MISSING HEARTS*. Ng is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, and her work has been published in over 30 languages.

Celeste Ng's Dystopia Is Uncomfortably Close to Reality

“Our Missing Hearts” explores a fictional world where Chinese Americans are spurned and books are recycled into toilet paper.

Stephen King, New York Times, 9/22/22

The definition of “dystopia” in the Oxford English Dictionary is bald and to the point: “An imaginary place in which everything is as bad as possible.”

Literature is full of examples. In “The Time Machine,” the Morlocks feed and clothe the Eloi, then eat them. “The Handmaid’s Tale” deals with state-sanctioned rape. The firefighters in “Fahrenheit 451” incinerate books instead of saving them. In “1984”’s infamous Room 101, Winston Smith is finally broken when a cage filled with rats is dumped over his head. In “Our Missing Hearts,” Celeste Ng’s dystopian America is milder, which makes it more believable — and hence, more upsetting.

Noah Gardner, known as Bird, is a 12-year-old Chinese American living with his father in Cambridge, Mass. His mother is a fugitive, on the run because she wrote a supposedly subversive poem titled “All Our Missing Hearts.” America is living under PACT — the Preserving American Culture and Traditions Act — which became law during a confused and economically disastrous period known as the Crisis. (We’re given more details about this Crisis than we actually need.)

Before the Crisis, Bird’s father was a linguist. Now he works in a library, shelving books. In Ng’s version of the American Nightmare, there’s no need to burn books. “We pulp them,” a helpful librarian tells Bird. (Bird doesn’t tell her he’s picturing book bonfires, but she intuits it.) “Much more civilized, right? Mash them up, recycle them into toilet paper. Those books wiped someone’s rear end a long time ago.”

Under PACT, the children of parents considered culturally or politically subversive are “re-placed” in foster families. When Bird is given a clue to his mother’s whereabouts he goes in search of her, and much of Ng’s firmly written and well-executed novel deals with his adventures along the way. In that sense, the book is a classic tale of the hero’s journey, said hero young enough to make the trip from innocence to experience with surprisingly little bitterness directed toward the parent who has abandoned him. That his mother, Margaret Miu, had no choice would make no difference to most children, it seems to me; abandoned is abandoned.

We have heard this tale of government scapegoating before, which adds to its power rather than detracting from it. Hitler blamed the Jews for Germany's economic malaise. Trump told us to fear migrant caravans full of "bad hombres." Here it's Asian people in general and Chinese Americans in particular who are held responsible for everything that's gone wrong — blame those who don't look like White America. In New York's Chinatown, street names have been censored: "Someone — everyone — has tried to make the Chinese disappear." Flag pins decorate every lapel.

Because Ng's storytelling is so calm — serene, almost — the occasional explosions of violence are authentically horrifying, as when Bird observes a man punch a Chinese woman, knock her to the ground, then kick her repeatedly. There is no reason except for her otherness ... and perhaps the fact that she looks well off. He then kills her little dog, breaking its back "the way he might crush a soda can, or a cockroach."

On another level, "Our Missing Hearts" is a meditation on the sometimes accidental power of words. Why are Mr. Gardner's library shelves so empty? Because students must not have access to books that "might expose them to dangerous ideas." This isn't dystopian fiction but actual fact, as rancorous school curriculum meetings and protests across the United States have proved. The Florida Parental Rights Bill, signed by Governor DeSantis in March of this year, is basically a free pass to text censorship.

When a Black girl is shot dead at an anti-PACT rally, the phrase "Our Missing Hearts" — emblazoned on the sign she was carrying; she'd read Margaret's poem — becomes a rallying cry. Bird's mother had no intention of achieving fame or infamy because of that line; it was from a poem about — of all things — pomegranates. Rodney King ("Can't we all just get along?") and George Floyd ("I can't breathe") weren't intentionally phrasemaking either. King's line was an off-the-cuff plea for peace and Floyd only wanted to get the cop off his neck before he died. Yet these lines resonate. Governments are right to fear words. They can change hearts and topple tyrannies. By the same token, they can increase the chokeholds of some tyrants: witch hunt, fake news, I rest my case.

I won't give away the splendid conclusion of Ng's book; suffice it to say, the climax deals with the power of words, the power of stories and the persistence of memory. It's impossible not to be moved by Margaret Miu's courage, or to applaud her craftiness. Is her final word to the world a kind of propaganda? Yes, but sometimes you have to fight fire with fire.

There are peculiar lapses that must be noted. Covid-19 doesn't exist in "Our Missing Hearts," although there can be no doubt that the pandemic has given rise to dark conspiracies having to do with China, where Covid first appeared. Donald

Trump and others were happy to call it the China Flu. Ng likewise ignores social media — there's a single glancing mention near the end of the book — although few innovations in human history have done more to focus and amplify racist tropes. In fact, social media encourages large numbers of people to deliberately turn away from the truth.

Ng succeeds in spite of these occasional blind spots, partly because her outrage is contained and focused, and mostly because she is often captivated by the very words she is using. Bird's father's oldest habit, we're told, is "taking words apart like old clocks to show the gears still ticking inside." The gears in this story for the most part mesh very well. And Bird is a brave and believable character, who gives us a relatable portal into a world that seems more like our own every day.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/22/books/review/celeste-ng-our-missing-hearts.html>