



Summary

"We didn't call the police right away." Those are the electric first words of this extraordinary novel about a biracial Korean American family in Virginia whose lives are upended when their beloved father and husband goes missing.

Mia, the irreverent, hyperanalytical twenty-year-old daughter, has an explanation for everything—which is why she isn't initially concerned when her father and younger brother Eugene don't return from a walk in a nearby park. They must have lost their phone. Or stopped for an errand somewhere. But by the time Mia's brother runs through the front door bloody and alone, it becomes clear that the father in this tight-knit family is missing and the only witness is Eugene, who has the rare genetic condition Angelman syndrome and cannot speak.

What follows is both a ticking-clock investigation into the whereabouts of a father and an emotionally rich portrait of a family whose most personal secrets just may be at the heart of his disappearance. Full of shocking twists and fascinating questions of love, language, and human connection, *Happiness Falls* is a mystery, a family drama, and a novel of profound philosophical inquiry. With all the powerful storytelling she brought to her award-winning debut, *Miracle Creek*, Angie Kim turns the missing-person story into something wholly original, creating an indelible tale of a family who must go to remarkable lengths to truly understand one another.



About the Author

Angie Kim moved as a preteen from Seoul, South Korea, to the suburbs of Baltimore. After graduating from Interlochen Arts Academy, she studied philosophy at Stanford University and attended Harvard Law School, where she was an editor of the Harvard Law Review. Her debut novel, *Miracle Creek*, won the Edgar Award and the ITW Thriller Award, and was named one of the 100 best mysteries and thrillers of all time by *Time*, and one of the best books of the year by *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and the *Today* show. *Happiness Falls*, her second novel, was an instant *New York Times* bestseller and a book club pick for *Good Morning America*, *Barnes & Noble*, *Belletrist*, and *Book of the Month Club*.

Discussion Questions

- What were your first impressions of each member of the Parkson family? How did your perceptions evolve over the course of the novel?
- How would you describe Mia’s voice as a narrator? Is she “reliable”? How would the book be different if Angie Kim had written it in the third person?
- How did the structure of the book, including footnotes and charts, influence your reading experience?
- Discuss the relationships between the Parkson siblings—and among the three of them. What do they learn about one another? How do you envision their relationships evolving after the events of the book?
- Do you think it can be more difficult to see the people closest to us as they really are? Why or why not?
- As Kim explores in *Happiness Falls*, we tend to equate oral fluency with intelligence (and vice versa). How did the character of Eugene challenge your assumptions about nonspeaking people?
- How does race—including the perceived race of mixed-race characters—play into the novel? What biases and stereotypes must each character contend with?
- Discuss Adam’s Happiness Quotient project. Do you agree with his theories? What do you consider your baseline? Do you think it needs adjusting? Do you think it’s possible to intentionally lower it? If so, do you think that would make you happier?
- Do you think Adam was right to keep Eugene’s progress from the rest of the family? Why or why not?
- 10. What did you think of the ending? What do you think really happened—did Eugene repeat parts of John and Mia’s conversation, either subconsciously or intentionally? Was the note real? Do these answers matter?

Author Q & A

A conversation between Angie Kim and Erin Sheldon. Erin is a board member of CommunicationFIRST, the only civil rights organization led by and for the estimated 5 million children and adults in the US who cannot rely on speech alone to be heard and understood.

ERIN: I just finished your new novel, and I have to say I loved it. I read a lot of books, but I have never felt as much recognition as I have in reading your two books. I felt so represented, and I recognized my own family's experience. (I have a teenage daughter with deletion-positive Angelman syndrome and autism, and I also have a younger child with autism who likes to point out all my own neuro-divergent traits, as I'm neurodivergent in all kinds of wacky ways.) It was cathartic to have someone "go there." Brutal, gorgeous honesty. And a riveting mystery.

ANGIE: I can't tell you how happy that makes me. I've been sharing this story with people in the Angelman syndrome and nonspeaking communities in the last few months, and getting feedback like yours, that it feels true to your own experience—that's so important to me.

ERIN: When I heard an author was writing about a character with Angelman, I was instantly cautious. The "angel" trope is pervasive. But you clearly don't fall for tropes. There's so much complexity and humanity in your characters. They're so unique and real. How did you even come to write about Angelman? How much did you know about it?

ANGIE: I've been working on this story for over ten years. One of the first short stories I ever wrote and published (back in 2013) is a magic realism story about a pair of twins in Korea, Mia and John, trying to find their nonspeaking baby brother's voice in a graveyard using a haunted stethoscope—in the novel, this would become the Graveyard Incident. When I wrote that story I thought the brother, Eugene, had autism, just as his family in the novel does at first. I didn't know about Angelman back then, but I'd always seen Eugene in my mind with this beatific smile, even when he was screeching, which we come to realize is from pain and sensory overload. Several years ago, I was looking up Soma Mukhopadhyay, a leading therapist for nonspeakers learning to communicate through a letterboard. I saw on her website that a board member for her organization is a parent of a child with Angelman syndrome. I thought, What? What is this? And I looked it up and got chills, because everything I read reflected how I'd been seeing Eugene in my mind for the past decade—the smile, drawn to water, motor issues, nonspeaking, considered a severe cognitive impairment, often misdiagnosed as autism. I'm very into kismet, fate, those types of things, especially when it comes to writing, and I instantly knew Eugene had Angelman syndrome and this would play an important role in his family's story.

Author Q & A continued

ERIN: The Angelman smile gets a lot of attention in the literature, but there's a lot of misunderstanding about it and it confuses people. Our kids smile for attention and social interaction, but also a lot for anxiety and discomfort and pain sometimes. Is that how you came to put the dad's ideas about happiness and quality of life in the story?

ANGIE: Actually, the dad's happiness experiments came first, before anything else, even the mystery of him being missing. I've always seen this family as a quirky, endearing, funny group of philosophizing types. (Both Mia and the dad do a lot of pontificating even in the short story.) I majored in philosophy in college, and I've always been fascinated by theories and studies about quality of life and what factors determine happiness. I think my interest probably comes from my experience as an immigrant—having been really poor but very happy in Korea and then completely miserable my first years in America even though my family was so much better off objectively. But even though I always saw Eugene with a smile, laughing a lot, I didn't equate that with happiness because I knew that he smiles for so many other reasons, like you say—embarrassment and shame; to connect and join in socially with others; distress.

It wasn't until really late in the writing process—when I was reading the debate about whether genetic “fixes” for Angelman should be pursued, given that Angelman kids seem so much happier than

the general population of teenagers—that I went, Wait! I'm writing about this father who's obsessed with trying to maximize happiness, and his son has something people call “the happiness syndrome”: he has a smile, an objective marker of happiness, but he may be in pain. That was a huge breakthrough in the story for me. I wrote furiously for like seven hours straight after that. Everything came together, all the threads—the dad being missing, the happiness experiments the dad was doing, and Eugene's struggle to communicate—that had coexisted but not necessarily been tightly woven before that.

ERIN: The way you wrote this book from the sibling's perspective was so cool. It's funny because in the first chapter, I wasn't sure if I was going to like Mia—she has quite an attitude!—but she totally grew on me and she's so fun and funny. I thought you did a fantastic job capturing the sibling dynamic. The Cake Incident early in the book is so classic, both the rage episodes that can happen to kids like Eugene at that age and Mia's hatred of her brother in that moment, her general comment that their mom treated Eugene like he lacked free will— I just thought, Oh wow, I just love that you said it out loud, the shameful things we think, just like you did in *Miracle Creek* with respect to moms. I just love that. I am the oldest of six, and I was a caregiver to my five siblings, like Mia is, and it's so true, so honest. You said you consider this the other side of the coin from *Miracle Creek*, and I can really see that. Because that book is focused on the parents' angle, the extreme parenting sacrifices.

Author Q & A continued

ANGIE: Exactly, whereas Happiness Falls focuses on the siblings' intense ups and downs and more directly on the nonspeaking child's journey. I think I'm obsessed with sibling dynamics because I'm an

only child and I grew up wanting siblings so badly, and now, having three boys of my own, I'm fascinated by how they interact, all the facets of their relationships. And I'm so glad you liked Mia's voice because humor is important to me—I love humor writing, and it's a big element in my short stories and essays—but something that wasn't a major part of Miracle Creek.

ERIN: I think the communication element for Eugene is such an important story to bring out. The child's and family's struggle and frustration, not being able to express their own ideas, being told they're "low functioning" because they can't or won't point to pictures saying which food or toy they want. Our kids have been traumatized.

ANGIE: That, to me, is the heart of the story. If there's one thing I hope people take away from Happiness Falls, it's to question the assumption I think most people have that oral fluency is equivalent

to intelligence. This is an issue that's really important to me, not only because I have a child who had oral fluency issues and speech delays as a child with apraxia, dyspraxia, and unilateral auditory neuropathy (single-sided deafness), but because, when I first moved to America as an eleven-year-old in middle school, I was bullied and felt so ignorant and stupid because I couldn't speak English. I know this is 1/1000th of the pain of not being able to communicate in any language that nonspeaking people feel before they learn to communicate, but it was debilitating for me, and something that's stayed with me long after I became fluent in English.

ERIN: Again, I found the story so compelling. So deeply powerful. You just gripped me from the beginning, and once again, you just said things out loud that really need to be said, and I loved it.

ANGIE: The most important research I conducted in writing this book, without a doubt, came from the real-life stories of people like you, and I can't thank you enough.