

Celeste Ng - BIO

Wikipedia

Celeste Ng's parents moved from Hong Kong, China in the late 60's.^[1] Her father, who passed away in 2004, was a physicist at NASA in the John H Glenn Research Center (formally known as the NASA Lewis Research Center).^[3] Her mother was a chemist who taught at Cleveland State University.^[3]

Celeste Ng was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1980??)

At 10-years of age she moved from Pittsburgh to Shaker Heights, Ohio^[3] with her parents and sister (who is now an engineer).^[5] She attended the schools in the Shaker Heights City School District, from Woodbury elementary all the way up to Shaker Heights High School.^[3] While attending Shaker Heights High school, she was involved with a student group on race relations and a co-editor of the school literary magazine. She graduated from high school in 1998.

After high school, she studied English at Harvard. She then went to graduate school at the University of Michigan where she earned her Master of Fine Arts in writing—now the Helen Zell Writers' Program. While attending the University of Michigan, Ng won the Hopwood Award for her short story, *What Passes Over*.^{[3][6]}

Ng currently lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband and son.^[3] While on a book tour for *Everything I Never Told You*, Ng stated that her favorite book when she was little was *Harriet the Spy*.^[5] Currently her favorite book is *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy.^[3]

The novel *Everything I Never Told You*

<http://www.celesteng.com>

Celeste Ng is the author of the novel *Everything I Never Told You* released on June 26, 2014

- a New York Times bestseller
 - New York Times Notable Book of 2014
 - Amazon's #1 Best Book of 2014
 - named a best book of the year by over a dozen publications
 - winner of the Massachusetts Book Award
 - the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature
 - the ALA's Alex Award
 - the Medici Book Club Prize
 - a finalist for numerous awards, including the Ohioana Award, the John Creasey (New Blood) Dagger Award, and the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award.
 - Best Book of the Year: NPR • Entertainment Weekly • Huffington Post • BuzzFeed • Grantland • Booklist • San Francisco Chronicle • St. Louis Post-Dispatch • Shelf Awareness • School Library Journal • Time Out New York • and more
 - Rights sold in over 15 territories
- took her six years to write and four drafts – Between draft 3 and 4 she had a son and this experience made her more sympathetic to the parents:
 - o “I started to understand how deeply parents want the best for their children, and how that desire can sometimes blind you to what actually is best...Now I identify with the parents at least as much as I identify with the children.”

Reviews

“Alexander Chee, [The New York Times Book Review](#): If we know this story, we haven’t seen it yet in American fiction, not until now... Ng has set two tasks in this novel’s doubled heart—to be exciting, and to tell a story bigger than whatever is behind the crime. She does both by turning the nest of familial resentments into at least four smaller, prickly mysteries full of secrets the family members won’t share... What emerges is a deep, heartfelt portrait of a family struggling with its place in history, and a young woman hoping to be the fulfillment of that struggle. This is, in the end, a novel about the burden of being the first of your kind—a burden you do not always survive.”

Los Angeles Times: “[A]n accomplished debut... It’s also heart-wrenching. Ng deftly pulls together the strands of this complex, multigenerational novel. *Everything I Never Told You* is an engaging work that casts a powerful light on the secrets that have kept an American family together — and that finally end up tearing it apart.”

Entertainment Weekly: “Both a propulsive mystery and a profound examination of a mixed-race family... [an] explosive debut.”

O Magazine: A “cleverly crafted, emotionally perceptive debut ... Ng’s themes of assimilation are themselves deftly interlaced into a taut tale of ever deepening and quickening suspense.”

Novel Basics

Characters

The Lee Family

- Father – **James P.**, a history professor at a small college in Ohio

James came into the [English language](#) from the [Old French](#) variation *James*^[1] of the late Latin name *Iacomus*. This was a dialect variant of *Iacobus*, from the [New Testament Greek](#) Ἰάκωβος (Iákōbos), from Hebrew יַעֲקֹב (Ya‘aqov) ([Jacob](#)). Diminutives include: Jim, Jimmy, Jimmie, Jamie, Jimbo and others. James was the most common male [name](#) in the [United States](#) in 1990.^[2] Likewise, in [Northern Ireland](#), the name has appeared among the 10 most popular for the last quarter of the 20th century and into the 21st.^[3] It is currently the fifth most common name in the United States. 1/32 of all Americans are named James (3.1%)

James is described as one of the first disciples to join Jesus. James was one of only three apostles whom Jesus selected to bear witness to his [Transfiguration](#) The [Acts of the Apostles](#) records that "Herod the king" (traditionally identified with [Herod Agrippa](#)) had James executed by sword. He is the only apostle whose martyrdom is recorded in the New Testament. He is, thus, traditionally believed to be the first of the twelve apostles martyred for his faith. Nixon suggests that this may have been caused by **James' fiery temper**.^[3] for which he and his brother earned the nickname *Boanerges* or "Sons of Thunder".^[Mark 3:17] [F. F. Bruce](#) contrasts this story to that of the [Liberation of Saint Peter](#), and notes that "James should die while Peter should escape" is a "mystery of [divine providence](#)."

- Mother – **Marilyn**, a homemaker who had wanted to become a medical doctor

Marilyn is a blend of the English given names [Mary](#) and [Lynn](#).^[1] It began to be used in the 1920s, and it reached its peak of popularity in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Notable bearers of the name: Marilyn Monroe

- She cries tears of blood
- Eldest child – Nathan called Nath
- Middle child (the favourite!) – Lydia
- Youngest – Hannah

Background Family Characters

- Marilyn's mother, Doris Walker
- James' parents, unnamed – his father is a 'paper' son

Neighbours

- Dr. Wolffe and her son Jack
- Mrs. Vivien Allen, the lady across the street

Lydia's friends (?)

Other characters, interaction with whom by the main characters cause turning points/climaxes that lead inevitably to the main ordeal and the quest to discover why and how Lydia died.

- Professor Stan Hewitt
- Tom Lawson, a professor in the chemistry department
- Mr. Kelly, Lydia's physics teacher
- Dr. Greene – emergency doctor in Toledo who stitched Marilyn's hand and diagnosed her pregnancy with Hannah
- Louisa Chen – Dr. Lee's teaching assistant – 23 years old
- Officer Fiske

Setting

– “small town Ohio instead of Boston” – an hour away from Toledo – an hour away from Cleveland
“A beautiful location...Five minutes to the grocery store and the bank. And think of it, the lake practically at your doorstep.”

- Middlewood High

- Middlewood College where James is a tenured professor

-Other places:

Doris Walker's home town 80 miles from Charlottesville, West Virginia

James was born in California then went to school in Iowa—the centre of US

Harvard in Cambridge, Mass.

Plot

Lydia the favourite 16-year-old daughter drowns in the local lake on May 3rd, 1977— the story is a whodunnit or a why-dunnit and it isn't clear until the end which mystery it is.

12 chapters

Timeline

Begins with Lydia's death on May 3rd, 1977 – Ends two months later – July 3rd-ish (?) – flashback back covers Marilyn and James lives before the meet and then when they meet and throughout their marriage – Foreshadowing by way of verb tenses – the conditional perfect.

1 – Present – Lydia has died and her body is discovered in the lake

2 – Flashback to Marilyn and James meeting and marrying

3 – Present – Lydia's funeral and the start of James's affair with Louisa

4 – Flashback – Death of Doris Walker and Marilyn's abandonment of her family to go back to school

5 – Present – Hannah retraces Lydia’s 2 am trip to the lake – the police continue investigating and chat separately with Nath – Marilyn and James fight – Nath listens to the police interviewing Jack

6 – Flashback – Marilyn quits school because she is pregnant with Hannah and returns home on July 3rd – Nath’s interest in space flight begins as an escape from his loneliness – Marilyn decides that “she will help Lydia do everything she was capable of, sheltering her, the way you tended a prize rose.” – Nat pushes Lydia into the lake and then rescues her. (p154)

7 – Flashback – Covers ten years in the life of the Lee family focusing on the tight bond between Nath and Lydia and the burden on Lydia of being her parents’ favourite child and their hope that she will accomplish the impossible by fulfill each of their opposite goals and dreams: to stand out and to fit in. – Nath is accepted to Harvard – Lydia starts hanging out with Jack and lying about her activities and her declining grades – We learn about that Jack’s focus is not girls but Nath.

8 – Present – early June 1977, one month after Lydia’s funeral - James carries on his affair with Louisa by pretending he is at work even though he has been given time off – He is angry P197 – Marilyn hides out in Lydia’s room – Officer Fiske tells James the police investigation is over and they are ruling the case a suicide – “Circumstances suggest suicide is by far the most likely scenario. No evidence of foul play. A history of loneliness, Her grades were slipping, Going out on the lake when she knew she couldn’t swim.” P200-201 – Marilyn and James fight: “If she were a white girl they’d keep looking.” P202 – James goes to Louisa – On July 4th Marilyn goes to Louisa’s apartment looking for James: “If you see him, tell my husband that I’ll see him at home.”

9 – Close in Flashback– Lydia and Jack’s developing friendship – Jack tries to teach Lydia to drive standard but she can’t master it – Lydia meets Louisa who is catching a ride from James – Lydia fails her drivers test – Lydia’s 16th birthday party: special cake is re-iced, Hannah sees that “something had shifted inside her sister, that she was balanced on a dangerous, high-up ledge. She sat very still, as if one wrong move might tip Lydia off the edge, and Lydia blew out the flames with one quick puff. (Foreshadowing).

10 – Present – James leaves Louisa to return home – James and Marilyn fight over his affair and Nath and Hannah overhear them – Marilyn’s despair and discovery of her mother’s cookbook hidden by Lydia as a child – Marilyn sees Lydia in Hannah – James storms out, drives to Toledo, recalls why he loves Marilyn and why her search to be different is at the root of their love for one another – Nat storms out drives to the liquor store, gets drunk and is rescued roadside by Officer Fiske: “Son, it’s time to go home.”

11 – Close in Flashback – May 2nd and 3rd–Nath is away from home for his 4-day Harvard visit and doesn’t call Lydia as he promised he would – She calls him and Nath is impatient and says “Take your problems to Jack”. - Lydia discovers Hannah wearing the locket James had given her to remind her of what “**really matters. Being sociable. Being popular. Blending in. You don’t feel like smiling? Then what? Force yourself to smile.**”

– Lydia kisses Jack then learns from him that he loves Nath “No one would ever suspect.”

Lydia “Actually, I’m sorry for you. In love with someone who hates you.”

Jack: “ At least I don’t let other people tell me what I want...At least I know who I am. ...What about you Miss Lee?”

– Lydia’s last family dinner – Lydia’s trip to the lake and her new set of promises and “new beginning” – “She will stop pretending to be someone she is not. From now on she will do what she wants.” P275

- **She dives into the lake from the boat to swim back to the dock. It will be alright, she told herself, and she stepped out of the boat into the water. P276**

12 – Present – James drives back home thinking “It is not too late.” - James, Marilyn and Hannah are reunited – Nath follows Jack to the lake and punches him in the face thinking what happened to Lydia was “all Jack’s fault.” Jack doesn’t fight back. Hannah tries to break up the fight and in the process pushes Nath into the lake. Nath imagines what Lydia must have experienced and thinks he will drown himself too but “**he’s too familiar with the water, his body already knows what to do...On its own his body rights itself...**” P290

“He can’t know what it was like, not the first time, not the last. He can guess, but he won’t ever know, not really. What it was like, what she was thinking, everything she’s never told him. Whether she thought he’d failed her, or whether she wanted him to let her go. This, more than anything, makes him feel that she is gone.” P290 – Jack pulls him out of the lake – Narrator sketches the immediate and the longer term future for the three of them and how their thinking about Lydia will develop and change.

Themes

Connecting with others

mixed race families in America
heterosexuality – a sanctuary— and romantic love
parental love
sibling love
homosexuality in small town America in the 70’s
friendship – importance and meaning friendship – how to make friends
cooking and housewifery
grief and grieving

Disconnecting

communicating— ‘groping for the words that say what they mean’
pretending –not being authentic
abandoning and being abandoned
not cooking – Marilyn’s liberation manifesto
being unfaithful
losing a loved one
grief and grieving

Connecting with yourself

Female liberation
Schooling to get ahead in America
Cowboys and astronauts — outsiders at the frontier
Science vs the humanities
Intuition and automatic reflexes
Water and swimming and drowning - symbolism

My questions

Did Lydia commit suicide or was her death accidentally self-caused?

Who is the hero of this novel? One or many?

Is the narrator trustworthy? - Conditional perfect suggests all-knowingness but some of the interpretations of the character’s thoughts and behaviours are downright weird

Verb tenses? – so many – conditional perfect e.g. “She would have been there”

Geography – Why this setting? Why Middlewood lake and not Lake Erie? Why mid-way between two cities?

Food – Why so many details and why so unappetizing and unappealing?– physical nourishment vs. spiritual nourishment

Where is God? What guides these people? – Married by a JP – Minister conducts Lydia’s funeral but he is not their minister because they do not belong to a church – In the service James is offended by the modernization of Psalm 23 The Lord is my Shepherd – “It feels disrespectful, a corner cut. Like burying his daughter in a plywood box.” P60

Who is Marilyn? Why this name? Why does she want to be a doctor? – for status and pride of accomplishment

Who is James? Why this name? Who is he? Does he lack ambition? Why no friends?

A concoction – feels focus group tested – output from a creative writing program ...BUT...See article

So many unknowns – too brief

- Why is Marilyn's relationship with her mother so broken? Is this believable?
- Why is James so needy and hence vulnerable when he is so intelligent and learned? Is this believable?

Does the timeline work to empower the resolution or is it too confusing? After first reading I had only the vaguest understanding of each character's epiphany/moment of insight and understanding in the role they played in Lydia's death and how they can nevertheless move forward in life. Still struggle.