

Bone Study Guide

Bone by Fae M. Ng

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Plot Summary

Bone is a debut novel by author Fae Myenne Ng, who has published short stories in *Harper's* and other magazines. In this novel, Leila Fu, the eldest of three daughters in a Chinese family narrates the story. Leila takes readers into the lives of her family and the other people living in the Chinatown area of San Francisco.

As the story unfolds, the reader learns about the many secrets the Fu family has—"the skeletons they have in their closet"—which is symbolic of the title of the novel, *Bone*. Leila has two sisters, Ona and Nina. While all three girls have the same mother, Mah, Leila has a different father. Leon, Mah's current husband, is the father of Ona and Nina.

Leila takes readers through the various customs of the Chinese culture. She also reveals the culture clashes between old times and modern times, from living in China and living in America, and even from living in Chinatown or living outside of Chinatown in the San Francisco area.

The novel describes the trials and tribulations Leila's family goes through, including the suicide of her sister Ona. As is the case with every family, Leila's family has a certain dynamic, secrets, a way of handling and not handling things, cultural traditions and rituals—all of which unfold as Leila tells her story.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1. Leila, the main character and narrator of the story, returns to San Francisco from a visit with her sister, Nina, who lives in New York. Leila provides a brief description of her current family situation: she had two sisters, but one of them, Ona, jumped off a building and killed herself. Leila's mother owns a baby clothing store and her step-father Leon no longer lives with her mother. While Leila was in New York, she married her long-term boyfriend at City Hall with her sister as the witness. Now that she is back in San Francisco, she has to break the news to Leon and her Mah. It turns out t both are thrilled with the news.

Chapter 2. Leila describes what life was like for her and her family after Ona's suicide. Essentially, no one talked about it or really acknowledged it happened. Nina offers to take Mah on a trip to Hong Kong, back to her native country, as a break from Leon and Ona's death. Nina admits to Leon and Mah she had an abortion, for which both show great disapproval.

Leila also reveals to readers that Leila and Nina are in fact half-sisters. They have the same mother, but different fathers. Leon and Mah blame Leila for Nina's abortion and the suicide of Ona because, as the eldest daughter, she should have known something was wrong and corrected it. Nina ends up staying in Hong Kong working as a tour guide, rather than return to San Francisco.

The chapter reverts back to the trip Leila took to visit Nina in New York. Nina had just returned from her tour guide job in China, which lasted for about 27 days. The girls talked a little about their childhood and the cultural differences between their generations—theirs and their parents'. By the time Nina returned to New York, her parents had forgiven her for the abortion. It appears as if the work as a tour guide and the trip she took Mah on to Hong Kong has put Nina in a better light in her parents' regard.

Analysis

The first chapter provides insight into the Chinese culture. Leila talks a lot about the difficulties of Chinese who come from China to San Francisco to transition from the "Chinese way of life" to the "American way of life." Leila also introduces the secrecy and unaddressed issues of the Chinese culture, such as the fact that her family does not talk about, or has never really addressed, the suicide of her sister, Ona.

The number three plays a symbolic role in both of these chapters. In Chapter 1, Leila mentions the fact Mah having three daughters is unlucky. In Chapter 2, however, when Leila and Nina are having dinner in New York, they clink together their Johnnie Walker highballs three times for good luck.



The bone symbol is also introduced in Chapter 2. Bone is a reference to doves. When the girls were small, they picked out three doves as their pets. Then, one day when they came home from school, their mother had cooked the doves for dinner. Mah would check the bones from the girls' plates to make sure that they were "clean" so as not to waste anything. The bones were then placed in a brown paper bag.

The clash of Chinese culture in China in America is constant. For example, Nina mentions at dinner with her sister she never uses chopsticks to eat. She uses a three-pronged fork instead. Nina says she only uses chopsticks to put her hair up. Leila and Nina also discuss how Leila wants to marry Mason, but she doesn't want to have the traditional banquet. Leila, however, also struggles with her guilt because everyone is always inviting Mah to banquets, but she has never had the opportunity to invite any of their friends back in return.

Another line between the culture in China and for the Chinese in America is marriage. Leila and Nina seem to see marriage in old China as a necessity, where in America it is out of love, rather than the for necessity of having two adults working hard to provide for a family.

Leila mentions the baby clothing store Mah owns is a symbol of Nina's father, but does not elaborate on what she means by this yet. It is foreshadowing some of the family secrets set to unfold in the book.

There is a mesh of what symbolizes luck in the Chinese culture and what the Chinese-Americans choose to adopt or not, while the old Chinese will not let certain traditional customs go.

Vocabulary

remnant, tattered, interrogation, translation, overwhelmed, rummaged, expectant, rendered, vigorous, rapped, lament, despised, temperament



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3. This chapter reverts flashes back to a time before Leila and Mason make the trip to New York to visit Nina. Mason is a mechanic and is working on his cousin's car. Mason had applied for a job with Audi, but did not get hired. Leila has a phone conversation with her mother, who blames her for the problems of her sisters because Leila is the eldest. After fixing his cousin's BMW, Mason and Leila deliver it to his aunt and cousin's house. Zeke, Mason's friend from the mechanic shop, and his girlfriend, Diana, follow them to take them back after dropping off the BMW. Mason asks Leila to marry him on the way to drop off the car.

Chapter 4. The chapter opens with one of Leila's parents standing her up for a meeting at school. Leila heads to Mah's house to gather some of her things, so she can go to Mason's apartment to cook dinner and presumably stay the night. Leila finds her mother sitting in the dark drinking tea. Leila and Mah have a discussion about why Leila should not always eat American food.

Leila then goes into a narration about the bad luck of the family. She discusses how each family member takes on the responsibility for why bad things have happened over the years.

Leila moves the story back into the present, taking the jar of ginseng tea Mah has brewed for Leila to take to Mason. When Leila gets in her car to leave, Mah appears with another jar of Ginseng tea, asking Leila to take it to Leon because the San Fran is on the way to Mason's apartment. When Leila gets to the San Fran, Leon isn't in his room, so she leaves the tea with the manager's desk for Leon.

The chapter closes with Mason and Leila installing the lights in the Baby Store; Mah had been complaining Leon had not replaced them for her.

Analysis

Leila has an inner struggle with herself about whether or not being the eldest of the three daughters truly makes her responsible for what happens in her family and the lives of her sisters. The guilt and sense of responsibility causes Leila to move out of Mason's apartment and back in with her mother after Ona commits suicide. Leila is really struggling with her responsibility to handle everyone else's lives and to have a life and make decisions of her own. Leila also feels pulled between her Mah and Mason, which is causing her to have headaches and feel other symptoms related to stress.

In several chapters, including Chapter 4, there is mention of lights. It seems to symbolize the good and evil or the good and bad things that happen in life and in the book.



There is an additional reference to bones. In this case, the bones correlate with the bad luck the family has experienced. Leon believes the family experiences bad luck because he made a promise to Grandpa Leong to send Grandpa's bones back to China after he died. Since Leon did not do this, he feels this is the root of the family's bad luck.

A sense of foreshadowing and symbolism also exist in mentioning Grandpa Leong is only Leon's father on "paper." In other words, Grandpa Leong sponsored Leon's entrance into the country by saying Leon was his son.

Vocabulary

swooped, accelerating, mechanics, bummed, spit-quick, jagged, flickered, ritual, overlook



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5. Leila convinces Leon he needs to receive a consistent income in order to continue staying at the San Fran. She gets him to agree to apply for social security, under the condition he can still pick up the odd jobs he likes to do, as long as his income does not exceed \$6,000 per year. The problem is the information Leon has on paper is not always truthful, which backfires when Leila and Leon try to file the social security application. The social security interviewer questions why Leon has so many aliases and different paperwork. After Leila and Leon get in an argument in the social security office, the social security interviewer suggests they make another appointment when Leon gets the proper paperwork together.

Leila takes Leon's suitcase full of old papers and photos to Mason's apartment after dropping Leon off at the San Fran. She finds rejection letters for jobs and apartments and years of disappointment as she looks for the paperwork that should contain Leon's real information, since the information he has been using for the 40 or 50 years he has been in the country was bought. While Leila is going through the paperwork, she finds the Chinese marriage license for Mah and Leila's real father. Leila sets this aside for now and comes across Leon's affidavit of identification, which should be adequate for him to apply for social security.

Chapter 6. Leila cannot find Leon. He seems to have gone missing. Mason suggests she contact the fishermen's union and finds out that Leon has signed up to ship out again for 40 days. When the ship returns, Leila and Mason plan to meet Leon when the ship docks. Because of a combination of events, they are delayed, but find Leon standing with some other men at a bus stop near the pier.

Leon remains rather quiet throughout the trip back home, although Leila recalls he is typically full of stories when he returns from a trip. Leila tells Leon Mah is cooking a meal consisting of all of his favorite dishes, but this still doesn't elicit a response from Leon. Leon refuses to go to Mah's apartment, asks to be taken to the San Fran and says he has already paid for his same room there. Leila helps Leon with his suitcases and tries to convince him to come for dinner saying they'll bring him back to the San Fran afterward. Leon refuses so Leila leaves him there.

Mason suggests to Leila they pick up Zeke to come for dinner because Mah hates it when food is wasted. When they arrive at the apartment with Zeke, Mah has all the lights turned on so the apartment is warm and welcoming. Leila goes into the kitchen to tell Mah Zeke is joining them but Leon is not. Mah stomps off to her bedroom and slams the door. Leila sets the food on the table and she, Mason, and Zeke eat anyway. While they are eating, Leila hears her mother running the sewing machine, but the sound of the machine sounds sharply metallic, as if her mother doesn't have any fabric in the machine.



Analysis

Paper represents the trail of history. For example, when Leon buys his way into the country, he acquires a “paper” father. Leon also has a “paper” son that saves numerous hours of paperwork over the years. These papers document all of the work and money Leon has earned in America, proving his rights to earn the amount social security is now asking America to pay him. Leon equates paper with blood because on paper he is someone else, and this is the situation for many of the Chinese immigrants who bought their way into the country.

Leon insinuates to Leila when she drops him off at the San Fran that there is more to the story between Mah and Leon than Leila knows. Leila tries to get Leon to tell her, but he says he'll tell her later.

Vocabulary

social security, loophole, lugged, black-market, interrogation, naturalization, rejection, old timers, schemer, hollowness, flushed



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7. Leon shows up at Mason's job one day asking for a ride to the cemetery. Leon gets them lost trying to find the cemetery, so they end up driving around for a while only to arrive at the wrong cemetery each time. Once they find the Chinese cemetery, Leon wanders around mumbling but never seems to find what he is looking for. A security guard tells them they have to leave and should visit during normal visiting hours, and they have to have proper paperwork proving they have family buried there. Leon shows the security guard a gap in the fence where he sneaks in after hours. Later, when Mason is telling the story to Leila, he tells her she needs to handle getting the paperwork and getting Leon to visit his father's grave because he is aggravated Leon caused Mason to lose half a day of pay for nothing.

Leila relays the story to Mah, who writes down the information on Leon's father and suggests Leila go down to the Hoy Sun Ning Yung Benevolent Association to find out where the grave is. When Leila takes the information to the society, she finds out the body of Leon's father has been moved because the cemetery ran out of space. The man explains they placed ads in various newspapers for family members to come and claim the bodies. If the bodies are not claimed, then they are dug up and reburied according to families, in group graves. When Leila asks how to get the bones back, the man at the association tells her she can't; it's too late.

Leila remembers how Grandpa Leong had lived and what he ate. She also remembers Mah is the one who found him dead in his apartment, and they had to send a telegram to Leon at one of his ports because he was out to sea. Mah had to ask for donations to bury him and make all of the arrangements. Mah was not even sure Leon would be able to make it home for the funeral.

One day, when Tommie Hom, the owner of the sewing sweatshop where Mah works, comes through the door and Mah runs to him and he embraces her to comfort her. The other ladies in the shop join them to comfort Mah as well.

Leila remembers back to the day of Grandpa Leong's funeral. She describes how pitiful and poorly put together everything was. She describes some of the Chinese funeral traditions. Leila also remembers visiting the grave when Leon returned from his trip out to sea.

The chapter flashes back to the present and Leila takes Leon to the cemetery to visit the Leong mass grave. They stop along the way so Leon can buy oranges as an offering for the grave. Leila shows the guard their permit to enter, and they find the mass Leong grave. Leon places the oranges and a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes on the grave.



Chapter 8. The chapter flashes back to right after Ona commits suicide. Leila tells how all Mah and Leon do is argue and how Leon sleeps almost anywhere around town, except at home. This is when Nina, who is already living in New York, suggests she take Mah to Hong Kong and arranges everything for the trip.

After dropping Mah off at the airport, Leila buys a bottle of champagne and drives to Mason's apartment, where Leila intends on staying for the 10 days Mah is gone. Mason pulls out hash laced with opium for them as well.

Leila calls Mah's apartment, on the chance Leon is there, and Leon answers the phone. Even though he hasn't stayed in the apartment in a month, since he heard Mah is gone for 10 days, he intends on staying in the apartment. Leila describes how when Mah is gone, it is a much more relaxed time for everyone, including her, Leon and Mason.

When Nina and Mah return from Hong Kong, Mah looks younger, refreshed and as if she has put on some weight. When they return to the apartment, Leon has fixed Mah's sewing machine, polished it up, cleaned the apartment and even cleaned himself up.

Analysis

Miss Tsai, one of the sewers in the sewing sweatshop where Mah works, insinuates that Mah is having an affair with Tommie Hom during the time after Mah finds Grandpa Leong dead. Miss Tsai suggests she understands why Mah would do something like that since her husband, Leon, is gone all of the time.

When Leon visits Grandpa Leong's grave with Mah, Leila, Ona and Nina, he takes pictures with a new 36mm camera he bought when he was in Japan, Ironically, the only picture that turns out is the one of Ona standing in front of the gravestone holding an orange.

Leila believes Leon leaving the Lucky Strike cigarettes is a symbol of breath—to bring the breath back. It is a similar symbol to the butterscotch lifesavers given at a Chinese funeral to bring back the sweetness. Leila also believes Leon blames himself for the movement of Grandpa Leong's bones and how it relates to the bad luck of Ona killing herself.

There is a lot mentioned about the relationships the characters have with each other. Leon and Leila feel relieved and less stressed when Mah is not around. Leila is slightly jealous of how generous her sister Nina is and that Nina makes more money.

How people deal with grief is different. By the end, Leila realizes each of them deals with the loss of Ona in their own way when she finds out Leon has built an altar around the jar that holds Ona's ashes.

Vocabulary

glare, sleek, suburban, rituals, deferential, manner, defensive, ingratiating, gossip, urn, beamed, jagged, liaison,



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9. The chapter reverts back in time to the period right after Ona commits suicide. Ona killed herself right before the Chinese New Year. Leila describes how her family and everyone in the neighborhood and their lives dealt with the aftermath of Ona's suicide. Ona's suicide even brings people back into Leila's life that she hasn't seen or heard from in years.

As Leila and Nina come across the people in their lives, everyone questions why Ona would commit suicide. Each person remembers her as a child, recalls all of Ona's good qualities or tells the story about the last time they saw her, including her co-workers and manager on the last night she worked as a hostess at the restaurant, which is also the night she committed suicide.

In the beginning of the chapter, there is a mention of a laundry business Leon started with a family friend. Toward the end of the chapter, it seems as if Ona was in love with the son of Leon's partner in the business, Osvaldo. When the business went sour, it appears as if Leon did not want Ona to see the boy anymore and Mah did not defend or stick up for Ona.

Chapter 10. Leila describes what it was like going down to the police station and facing her parents for the first time after finding out that Ona had killed herself. As Leon typically runs from his problems, he tried to avoid going to Ona's funeral by booking a gambling trip to Reno, but Mason is able to intercept him.

Analysis

The theme to finish something before starting something runs throughout Chapter 9. This also correlates to the fact that Ona "finished" her life right before the Chinese New Year was about to begin. There is a Romeo and Juliet theme introduced, as if Ona and Osvaldo are star-crossed lovers, not permitted to see each other because of strife between their families.

There is some ironic symbolism in the fact that Ona jumped from the 13th floor. Superstitious Americans believe 13 is an unlucky number, but in the Chinese dialect of Leila's family, the number 13 sounds like the word meaning "to live."

There is also a struggle between the cultural generations. While Leila and Nina want to keep the festivities attributed to their sister's death small and simple, Leon wants all of the full traditional rites.



The meaning of Ona's name is also symbolic. Mah named Ona when she was born because Leon was out to sea at the time. Ona, the "on" part is part of Leon's name, but in the Chinese dialect that Leila's family speaks, 'On' also means peace.

Vocabulary

maritime, cronies, ranting, intimate, profound, supple, rites, tentative, claustrophobic, sheepish, condolences



Chapter 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11. Leila remembers and describes being in the classroom when the principal of the school comes into her classroom to tell her that her sister is dead and she has to go down to the Vallejo police station. Leila equates the stillness of time in processing all of the information to the time she and Mason snorted heroin.

Leila describes her trip down to the police station and all of the questions the police officer asks about her sister. Leila calls Mason to tell him about Ona and he meets her at Caffè Venezia, but the café is closed, so Leila waits on the curb for Mason to drive up. When Mason arrives, Leila tells him to take her to the Baby Store because she has to tell Mah and Leon.

When Leila tells Leon and Mah, Mah falls to the floor, crying. They close the Baby Store and Mason drives them all back to Salmon Alley. Leon's and Mah's reactions are the opposite of what Leila expects. She sees Leon in denial and Mah already accepting her daughter's death.

Leila calls Nina in New York to break the news of their sister's death and asks when she will be coming home. Right after Leila hangs up the phone, it rings and it is the police station asking for someone to pick up Leon, which Mason offers to do. Later, Leila goes to the airport to pick up her sister, Nina.

Chapter 12. Leila describes the time when Leon comes home from sea to find out Mah has had an affair with Tommie Hom. Leon runs away, like always, and stays at the San Fran while he is waiting to be called out to sea again. Ona, even though she is only 10, goes down to the port to meet Leon every morning while he waits in line. Ona even runs errands for the other men waiting in line so they won't lose their places. The girls finally get Mah and Leon to agree to meet and talk to each other at Salmon Alley. They reconcile, but Leon does not move back to Salmon Alley. He stops by every once in a while to fix things and Mah sends food to him at the San Fran. The next time Leon ships out to sea, Mah finds a new job as a seamstress at another factory.

This time, when Leon returns from sea, he also returns to Salmon Alley. He starts to ship out only enough to keep his card valid. This is about the time he starts picking up odd jobs here and there to make money and fill-in for the missing income from shipping out. During this time, Mah and Leon opened a grocery store, while keeping their side jobs. The store never makes a profit, so Leon sells it at a loss. He chases one money-making scheme after another, but none of them pan out.

Mah meets Rosa at her sewing job, when she is still working for Tommie Hom. Luc is Rosa's husband. The four become fast friends—Leon, Mah, Rosa and Luc. Luc and Leon create a partnership and open up the Ong and Leong laundry business outside of



Chinatown, but on the edge of the Tenderloin area of San Francisco. The laundry is where Ona and Osvaldo, Rosa and Luc's son, meet. One day, when Leon and Leila show up at the laundry, they find the business is padlocked shut. They come to find out Luc had not been paying the bills and since he had not been paying Leon either, they all had worked at the laundry for five months without making any money.

Leon goes out looking for Luc and comes home with a limp and bruises, which nobody seems to talk about in the house. Leon turns to strange behavior, such as coming and going as he pleases, and staying out all hours of the night. Leon also insists Ona is no longer allowed to see Osvaldo, telling her he will disown her as a daughter if she does.

Leila receives a letter from her natural father at this time as well. He is living in Australia, but with everything going on in her family, she does not think it's a good time to rekindle a relationship with him.

Ona ends up moving in with Osvaldo and his family. While Ona does return home on occasion, the tension peaks one night when Osvaldo comes to pick Ona up. Leon tries to pull her out of Osvaldo's car and makes a big scene in the neighborhood.

Analysis

The responsibilities of handling the funeral arrangements and everything fall on Leila because she is the eldest of the three girls. There are several symbolic allusions to things "falling" as Ona fell from the building when she committed suicide. Red, to the Chinese, is a symbol of happiness, so when Nina gets off the airplane wearing red, Leila scolds her for it.

To Leon, Osvaldo represents every failure Leon has ever had in his life.

Vocabulary

insistent, lurched, betrayed, pagoda, superiority, stoic, stamina, pensive, lilting, rivalries



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13. The chapter opens in an earlier time when the Leila and her sisters are younger to a day when they are waiting for Leon's ship to dock. Leila cleans the house, makes lunch for sisters and then takes lunch down to Mah at the sewing shop. Leila picks up some patterns to sew for her Mah since the clothing is due on a deadline and Leila wants to help. Leila returns to the apartment to sew on her pieces. When Leon arrives, Mah has cooked all of his favorite foods and they all eat as a family. The girls help Leon count the money he has earned from his recent work at sea. Later that night, Leila overhears a conversation between Mah and Leon saying the money is not enough. At this point, Leila knows Leon will have to go back to sea and the 41 days he is away will be difficult for them while he is away.

Chapter 14. Leon is due back from another sea voyage today, but this time is slightly different for Leila. One of the ports Leon stopped in was Melbourne, Australia, and Leon intended to try and find Lyman Fu, Leila's biological father while he was there. The time frame is when Leila is an adult, but she has not yet moved in with Mason. Mason is urging her to tell Mah that he is getting an apartment in the Mission, an area in San Francisco, and that she is moving in with him.

Leila remembers back to the time when Mah told her she was going to marry Leon. The ceremony was at Harrah's in Vegas. When Leila asks Leon what to call him, he tells her Leon or L. Leila also tells the story of how her real father and Mah met in the village and how they moved to San Francisco together for a better life. While Mah was pregnant with Leila, her father thought he could make a better life in Australia, but promised to send for Mah and the baby once she was born. At first, Lyman Fu sent letters and money, but over time these became fewer and further between, until he basically told Mah he wasn't coming back and he wasn't sending for her and Leila to come to Australia. Leila has never physically seen or met her father—she only knows him from pictures, letters, and stories.

After Mah finds out her marriage is ending, she runs into Tommie Hom. Tommie offers her a job and teaches her everything Mah needs to know about sewing.

Mah returns from getting her hair done for Leon's return and starts trying on the three outfits she has made anticipating his return. She and Leila talk while Mah is trying on the different outfits. Leila tells Mah Leon saw her biological father this trip and asks what she thinks of her real father. Leila also tells Mah she is moving into Mason's apartment in the Mission.

Mah, Lon, Mason and Leila go out to eat to celebrate his return from sea. Ona and Nina decide to attend an event rather than go to dinner; Leila assumes this is because the girls know she wants to talk about Leon's meeting with her real father. Leon says he met



Leila's father but does not make a big deal of the meeting and simply says he told her father a little about the situation between Leon and Mah and a little bit about Leila. At the end of the meeting, Leon and Lyman Fu wished each other luck and that was it.

Analysis

Some of the terms used in sewing correlate or symbolize to the bones in the body. Leila talks about this since Mah is a seamstress and often helps Mah with sewing projects from work to meet deadlines. Leila mentions her mother knows the pieces of a sewing project just like a doctor knows the bones in the body. For example, the folds that are all connected by sewing the folds together in a sewing project are referred to as "the big bones." The special seams sewed for a dress are referred to as "the feet."

The number 41 symbolizes several things for Leila and her family. When Leon ships out to sea, he is typically gone for 41 days. His departure starts a ritual for the family, where they slice fish into 41 slices, as if counting the days until Leon's return.

Leon symbolizes the center of Leila's family. Specifically for Ona and Mah, Leon going out to sea and returning from sea dictate almost everything the family does—and what happens to the family while Leon is gone and when is back.

Leila sees herself as the glue holding her family members together. Leila feels this is especially true about Mah—as if Leila is the one keeping Mah focused and active, especially when Leon is not around. Leila sees a lot of herself in her mother. She sees she looks like Mah and she wonders if she, Leila, will marry as Mah did.

The number three plays a significant role in the final chapter. Mah makes three outfits for Leon's return to sea. Leila taps her chopsticks on the table at the restaurant three times when trying to get information about her real father from Leon. This loops back to the beginning of the book, when the fact that Mah's having three daughters is almost seen as bad luck in the Chinese culture, especially since not one of the children is a boy.

Vocabulary

filial, loyalty, piety, sacred, endurance, languid, communal, gabardine, elaborate, consoled



Characters

Leila Fu Louie

Leila is the main character and narrator of the story. She is the oldest of three daughters in a Chinese family. In her own mind, and even in the mind and beliefs of Mah, Leila is responsible for what happens in the family. Leila works at a school and has a long-term boyfriend, Mason, whom she ends up marrying. Leila's biological father, Lyman Fu, left Mah when she was still pregnant with Leila, so she has never seen or spoken with her father in person. In reality, Leon is the only father Leila has ever known.

Ona

Ona is the middle daughter or second sister of Leila. Ona commits suicide by jumping off the 13th floor of an apartment building in Chinatown. Ona seems to be the daughter closest to Leon. Ona fell in love with Osvaldo, who was the son of one of Leon's business partners. When the business goes sour, Leon tries to forbid Ona and Osvaldo from seeing each other. A clear answer is never given in the novel as to why Ona committed suicide. It is implied, however, that it had something to do with her and Osvaldo not being together, the change in the close relationship Leon and Ona had before he forbade her to be with Osvaldo and possibly some drug activity with which Ona was involved.

Nina

Nina is the youngest daughter or sister of the family. Nina's way of getting away from what she deems a dysfunctional family dynamic is to move to New York. Nina feels she can live her own life and keep secrets from her family because she is not living in Chinatown. At one point, Nina gets pregnant and has an abortion. She tells her family and of course, is met with disapproval from Mah and Leon.

Mah

Mah is the mother of Leila, Ona and Nina. She is married to Leon, her second husband and not the biological father of her three daughters. Mah is a seamstress who works in a sewing sweatshop owned and run by Tommie Hom, who is also the landlord of the apartment the family lives in on Salmon Alley. One time, when Leon is out to sea, Mah has an affair with Tommie Hom. Mah expects a lot from Leila since she is the eldest daughter.

Leon

Leon is a seaman, so he ships out on voyages, typically 41 days at a time. He is also a big dreamer, so he is always looking for the next big business or bog deal that can make him money. One of his hobbies is to buy “junk” from the goodwill and tinker with fixing things that are broken. Leon’s way of dealing with any type of problem is to escape. Typically, when a problem arises, Leon disappears and ships out to sea, sometimes even without telling his family he is going. Mah and Leon do not get along very well, so Leon usually lives at the San Fran hotel rather than at the Salmon Alley apartment.

Mason Louie

Mason is the long-term boyfriend and now husband of Leila. The two wed in City Hall on a trip to visit Lila’s sister, Nina, in New York. Mason is a mechanic by trade.

Lyman Fu

Lyman Fu is the biological father of Leila Fu. Mah originally married him as an escape from the war, but when Lyman ran off , Mah married Leon. Leon does have one face-to-face meeting with Lyman when he docks in Melbourne, where Lyman lives. Leila never sees or speaks to her biological father in person.

The Sewing Ladies

The sewing ladies are the group of women Mah works with at the sewing shop. These ladies are Mah’s friends and come to her aid, for example, when Ona commits suicide. On the other hand, the ladies are like a gossip circle. They are the ones that spread rumors around town.

Tommie Hom

Tommie Hom is the owner of the sewing shop where Mah works. He is also the owner of Salmon Alley, where Leila’s family lives.. Tommie Hom is the one who teaches Mah everything she needs to know about sewing and turns her into one of the best seamstresses he has. One time, when Mah’s husband is away at sea, Tommie has an affair with Mah.



Objects/Places

San Fran

The San Fran is a San Francisco hotel, which is on Clay Street. When Leon moves out of Mah's apartment, he takes a room at the San Fran. Leon lived at the San Fran in the same room prior to marrying Mah when he was a fisherman. The girls' grandfather, Granpa Leong, also spent the last days of his life at the hotel, so Leila considers it a special place for the family.

Portsmouth Square

Portsmouth Square is a park where Leon and his friends, whom Leila refers to as "other old men" hang out to play games.

The Universal

The Universal is Leila's favorite café because it is similar to an old-style soda shop with booths, marble-topped tables and stools at the counter with red cushions.

Baby Store

The Baby Store is the business Mah and Leon own.

Edith Eaton School

The Edith Eaton School is where Leila works five days a week. Leila works as a community relations specialist.

Nam Ping Yuen

The Nam Ping Yuen is one of the last four housing projects that exist in Chinatown. It is also known as the Nam. Ona, Leila's middle sister, committed suicide by jumping from Floor 13 of the Nam.

Salmon Alley

Salmon Alley is where Mah's apartment is and where Leila, Nina and Ona grew up. Occasionally, Leon lives with Mah in the Salmon Alley apartment too, but he usually stays in the San Fran.



Themes

Relationships

One of the primary themes running through the novel is interpersonal relationships. The novel reveals even the individuals that make up a family have different relationships among the family members. For example, Ona and Leon are perceived to have a closer relationship than Leon has with Leila, Nina or even Mah. Ona and Nina are more connected than Leila is with either of her sisters.

There is a reference to the cliché that there is a fine line between love and hate when you evaluate the relationship between Leon and Mah. In reality, Mah originally married Leon because he asked, even though she had other potential suitors that would have probably provided better for Mah and the girls, financially. Over the years, however, Mah has grown to love Leon, and in some ways Mah's world revolves around the comings and goings of Leon.

When readers review the relationship between Leila and Mason, both differences and parallels become apparent between their relationship and the one that Mah and Leon have. For example, Leon and Mason both get easily agitated when they are under stress. The primary difference is that Leon tends to run from the problems, while Mason tends to face problems head on.

Culture

Chinese versus Chinese-American culture plays a pivotal role throughout the whole novel. The old timers, including Mah and Leon, seem to cling to the ways of their old country even though they live in America. At the same time, the old timers expect the freedom and promise of a better life since they are living in America.

The younger generation, such as Leila and her sisters seem to struggle with holding on to old ways and traditions or practicing the customs of the only country they have known.

Family

Family is the central theme throughout the entire novel. This is because the storyline is about the lives of this particular family. While every family has their trials and tribulations, Leila's family has its own family dynamics that are the same and yet are different from those of other families. In the end though, bones are bones and blood is blood, which means that no matter what is happening—good or bad—they are a family and they will get through it together, one way or the other.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrator remembers events that have taken place over her life, and how these events affected her family. The narration switches back and forth between the past and the present.

The point of view of this novel is an intimate one allowing readers to connect closely with the main character and narrator of the story. The point of view also allows the author to inject her own opinions into the narration and to expand on the events taking place to her and the members of her family without having to move out of character or interrupt the flow of the narration.

Setting

The novel is set primarily in Chinatown in San Francisco. The author never states the specific year or time period. The setting of this novel is important because it is about the culture, rituals and the story of a Chinese family now living in America. The main characters of the novel are members of a family consisting of a father, mother and three daughters. Since all of the girls were born in America to parents native to Hong Kong, the setting of the novel has a strong impact on the characters because they live in a constant clash of culture.

The setting of this novel works well with the plot. At first, the reader is not aware of all of the family secrets that exist. However, as events unfold, one secret after another is either explained or implied.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is modern, but also mixes the English language with the Chinese dialect of the words the family uses. The language is informal and appears to be set in modern times, such as the '80s or '90s. The language is educated, strong and descriptive enough so it creates a flow, leaving the reader impressed with the words as much as the plot when the novel ends

The language of the novel is appropriate to the plot because it is fitting for the characters in the novel and the intellectual level of the writer. The novel is not in love with its own words, but it is descriptive enough to the point the reader finds enjoyment in the words as well as the plot. The language is not difficult to understand, however, and everything is clear in its context.

Structure

The novel is divided into 14 chapters. Each chapter is anywhere from eight to 25 pages long. The chapters tell the story both in exposition and dialogue. The author is the narrator and main character of the book, so it seems as if she is injecting her own voice throughout the novel—as if she has become Leila. This allows the author to provide her own opinions of the events surrounding the setting of the novel, as well as the actions taking place within the plot, but from the eyes and words of Leila.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows the trials and tribulations of the family. The subplots involve how each member of the family manages the trials and tribulations the family as a whole is going through.



Quotes

In this country, paper is more precious than blood. (Chapter 1)

Great. Rain means good luck. (Chapter 2)

That's why Ona went bad. That's why Nina left. (Chapter 3)

Let it go. Ona had her own life. It was her choice. (Chapter 4)

Disappearing is Leon's way of dealing. He needs time away. On a ship, on a job, he'll be okay. (Chapter 6)

Sometimes it takes a generation, like you, but eventually somebody comes. Tomorrow, or another generation's tomorrow, it's all the same. Blood is blood. (Chapter 7)

This trip'll relax Mah, you know, and maybe... (Chapter 8)

America, this lie of a country! (Chapter 9)

Tommie Hom! For Mah, everything goes back to that. Mah thinks she's paying for Tommie Hom. That's why she's being so weird to Leon. (Chapter 10)

Ona. Ona's dead. Mo Ona, no more Ona. She jumped off the Nam Ping Yuenona tui-low. The police told me. (Chapter 11)

Everything is in the past. (Chapter 12)

Some people are lucky, having so many daughters to help out. (Chapter 13)

He'll make a suitable husband. One, he's got his papers; two, he works at sea. He'll be away a lot. It'll be just you and me. Like now. I won't have to work so hard, we can take it a little easier. (Chapter 14)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Leila? Why does she feel like she is responsible for everything bad that happens to her family? What does Leila recall about her childhood? What is Leila's biggest demon that haunts her throughout her life? Why is this important? How does it change her life?

Topic 2

Discuss the relationship between Mah and Leon. Are they really in love—really husband and wife? Is their love, guilt or a sense of obligation in their relationship? How does Mah feel about Leon? How does Leon feel about Mah? Why does Mah think Leon leaves or ships out to sea all of the time? What does she do about it?

Topic 3

How does Ona die? How does this affect the future of the family? How does each family member react emotionally to Ona's suicide? Why does Leila decide Ona killed herself? Does anyone in the family ever really determine why Ona killed herself?

Topic 4

Who is Nina? Why does she move to New York? Why does there seem to be a strain in the relationship between Leila and Nina? Why does Nina continuously hesitate to return to Chinatown and Salmon Alley, even when Ona commits suicide? How does Nina feel about her family? How does the reader know this? Does Nina blame herself for Ona's death?

Topic 5

Who is Leon? Why does he continuously enlist to ship out to sea? Why does he choose to live in a run-down room in the San Fran rather than with his wife in their apartment in Salmon Alley? What happens when Leon finds out Mah has been unfaithful to him with her boss, Tommie Hom? Why is Leon continuously searching of the "next big thing" to make money or start a new business? Why does Leon seem to fail at every attempt he makes to make his life better and the life of his family better?



Topic 6

Discuss the Chinese culture. What impact does the culture have on the characters of the novel? How does it motivate them or hold them back? Why is the culture an issue to the characters? Does the culture have anything to do with the way the family relationships develop and evolve? What impact does it have on the overall desire to expose the truth as to why Ona commits suicide?