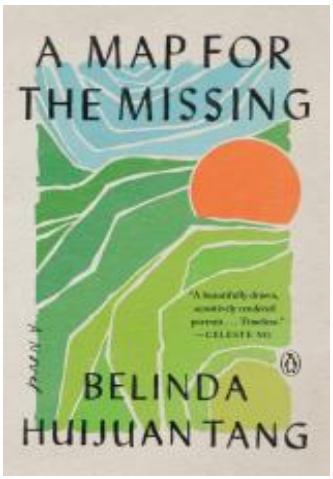
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A Map for the Missing

by Belinda Huijuan Tang



About the Book

An epic, mesmerizing debut novel set against a rapidly changing post?Cultural Revolution China, A MAP FOR THE MISSING reckons with the costs of pursuing one?s dreams and the lives we leave behind.

Tang Yitian has been living in America for almost a decade when he receives an urgent phone call from his mother: his father has disappeared from the family?s rural village in China. Though they have been estranged for years, Yitian promises to come home.

When Yitian attempts to piece together what may have happened, he struggles to navigate China?s impenetrable bureaucracy as an outsider, and his mother?s evasiveness only deepens the mystery. So he seeks out a childhood friend who may be in a position to help: Tian Hanwen, the only other person who shared Yitian?s desire to pursue a life of knowledge. As a teenager, Hanwen was ?sent down? from Shanghai to Yitian?s village as part of the country?s rustication campaign. Young and in love, they dreamed of attending university in the city together. But when their plans resulted in a terrible tragedy, their paths diverged. While Yitian ended up a professor in America, Hanwen was left behind, resigned to life as a midlevel bureaucrat?s wealthy housewife.

Reuniting for the first time as adults, Yitian and Hanwen embark on the search for Yitian?s father, all the while grappling with the past --- who Yitian?s father really was and what might have been. Spanning the late 1970s to 1990s and moving effortlessly between rural provinces and big cities, A MAP FOR THE MISSING is a deeply felt examination of family and forgiveness, and the meaning of home.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the connections along the paternal line of the Tang family --- Yitian and his brother, their father and their grandfather. What makes each of these men different from one another, and how are they similar?

2. What are the different career and general life options available to men compared to women in China during the time of the novel? How do the paths of Mali and Hanwen, as well as Yitian?s mother, compare to those of Yitian? Do any of the characters feel they have been able to fully thrive and attain happiness and success on their chosen or given path?

3. Although the bulk of the narrative is focused on the Tang family, and Yitian himself, in what ways does Hanwen shine as a main character? Whose story line were you more intrigued by as you read, and/or did it change over the course of the novel?

4. Discuss some of the logistical and bureaucratic obstacles with the police, health care and other institutions that stand in the family?s way when trying to search for their father. Do you think the story would have ended up differently if it took place in America, or any other country?

5. How do different characters --- Yitian, his professors, his extended family, Hanwen --- describe their feelings toward China? From your own experience, or what you have heard or seen among family or friends, what can color your impression of a home country after someone leaves?

6. On the gaokao exam, Yitian receives the prompt: ??Hope cannot be said to exist, nor can it be said not to exist. It is just like roads across the Earth. For actually the Earth had no roads to begin with, but when many pass one way, a road is made?? (173). How do you think he responds, and how might his answer change later on? How would you respond? Is hope something created or implicit?

7. What are some of the expectations that characters hold in the book about rural life versus city life, and in parallel physical labor versus intellectual labor? Are they accurate, per the lives these characters lead? Are these unique to China, or do you find similar divides where you live? Consider Hanwen?s thought about Shanghai: ?I miss.... It?s not a specific thing, rather --- I miss the feeling that there?s a greater life waiting for me. When you live in the city, you believe you can become something, something even more than who your parents had been. My mother told me I could become an engineer. There?s no possibility like that here. When I look at the villagers, they seem to have always been the same? (149).

8. Why do you think Yitian and Hanwen were never able to deepen their relationship? What would their marriage have been like compared to Yitian and Mali?s? Compare the different personalities and ambitions of the two women.

9. How many layers of guilt does Yitian accumulate over the course of his life? Are they all warranted, do you think? Does his success in America exonerate him from those internal judgments, and from the external expectations from within his culture?

10. How does Yitian rely on both history and math to help him make sense of the world? Do you think his life would have turned out differently if he?d been able to transfer to the history department in college?

11. Based on what we learn from Yitian?s father?s perspective at the end of the book, do you think he had a favorite son? How did that reflection, even colored by a declining cognition, shed light on how he treated the boys when they

were young, especially his mocking of Yitian?s studies?

12. After failing to save his father, Yitian realizes, ?I do not know what the difference between love and not-love is. When had I crossed that threshold, when had I relinquished?? (378). How would you describe the different kinds of love he receives from different people in his life? In which relationships does he reciprocate? How do you think his attempts to meet external expectations have occluded his ability to know what is true for him, including love?

13. Yitian?s mother says she knew that her husband wasn?t coming home as soon as he left. Do you think that Yitian also knew that he wouldn?t be able to find him, which is what motivated him to travel to China? What do you think he wanted to achieve or prove in being part of this rescue?

14. Do you think that Yitian?s father receives the forgiveness he seeks from his sons when he goes out on his journey? Why or why not? What about Yitian?s understanding of his father by the end of the story tells you whether he would want, or be able, to forgive?

15. Have you ever experienced not being able to fully express your feelings to someone before they disappear from your life, like Yitian does with his father and Hanwen? What did you do in that circumstance? Did any of Yitian?s story resonate with you for that reason?

Author Bio

Belinda Huijuan Tang is a 2021 graduate of the Iowa Writers? Workshop, where she was a Truman Capote Fellow and recipient of the Michener-Copernicus Fellowship. She holds a BA from Stanford University and was a 2019 work-study fellow at the Middlebury Bread Loaf Writers? Conference. She lived in China from 2016 to 2018 and, while there, received an MA from Peking University in Beijing. She currently lives in Los Angeles.

Critical Praise

?A beautifully drawn, sensitively rendered portrait.?

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