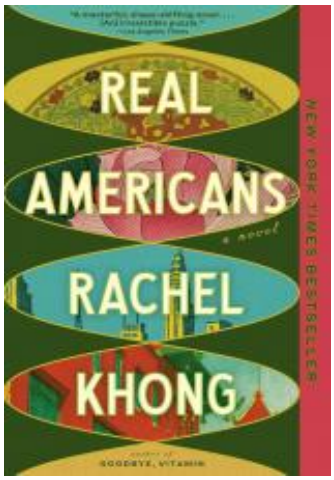
Real Americans

by Rachel Khong



About the Book

From the award-winning author of GOODBYE, VITAMIN: How far would you go to shape your own destiny? An exhilarating novel of American identity that spans three generations in one family and asks: What makes us who we are? And how inevitable are our futures?

REAL AMERICANS begins on the precipice of Y2K in New York City, when 22-year-old Lily Chen, an unpaid intern at a slick media company, meets Matthew. Matthew is everything Lily is not: easygoing and effortlessly attractive, a native East Coaster and, most notably, heir to a vast pharmaceutical empire. Lily couldn't be more different: flat-broke, raised in Tampa, the only child of scientists who fled Mao?s Cultural Revolution. Despite all this, Lily and Matthew fall in love.

In 2021, 15-year-old Nick Chen has never felt like he belonged on the isolated Washington island where he lives with his single mother, Lily. He can't shake the sense she's hiding something. When Nick sets out to find his biological father, the journey threatens to raise more questions than it provides answers.

In immersive, moving prose, Rachel Khong weaves a profound tale of class and striving, race and visibility, and family and inheritance --- a story of trust, forgiveness and finally coming home.

Exuberant and explosive, REAL AMERICANS is a social novel par excellence that asks: Are we destined, or made? And if we are made, who gets to do the making? Can our genetic past be overcome?

Discussion Guide

1. The prologue of the novel describes a brief scene with a character we later learn is May and a fabled lotus seed, which May swallows. In what ways did this action symbolically (or, perhaps, biologically) affect the course of action that

would follow in May?s life and, by extension, Lily?s and Nick?s? Do you think that if she hadn?t swallowed the seed, the succeeding events would have transpired?

2. Within the first few chapters, it?s clear that Lily was largely raised as an American without much knowledge of Chinese culture. What are some character traits that point to this? Why do you think immigrants assimilate to white American culture and mannerisms and raise their kids this way? In what ways does Lily yearn for a greater, richer understanding of her Chinese heritage?

3. When Lily visits Ping in Beijing, she realizes that she feels foreign, even though everyone around her looks like her. Page 105 reads, ?Nothing indicated that I was American until I opened my mouth, and then there was invariably disappointment --- even scorn --- that I couldn?t say what I wanted to say with my Chinese face.? Discuss this passage as it relates to the identity crisis many American-born ethnic minorities face. In what ways does this crisis mirror Nick?s perspective as a white-passing man who is half Chinese?

4. Jenny, Matthew and Lily?s maid, instantly builds rapport with May when they meet after Nick?s birth. Do you think Lily is jealous of their chemistry? If so, why?

5. Toward the end of her segment, Lily promises to give Nick what she didn?t receive growing up from her parents. Based on Nick?s characteristics, in what ways did she achieve that? What are some personality traits Nick has that point to Lily?s influence?

6. By the time he reaches college, Nick has met and developed a relationship with his father --- and goes no-contact with his mother --- but by the end of his chapter, it?s clear he breaks off this relationship and leaves the Maier family. Discuss this shift and the factors that ultimately made Nick go no-contact with his father.

7. Discuss the differences between Nick?s and Sam?s upbringings. In what ways does Sam represent the exact opposite of what Lily and Matthew wanted for Nick? Does Nick see Sam as whom he would have been if his parents had stayed together?

8. Do you think May and Otto?s attempts at manipulating parental genetics were successful with Nick? In what ways did their attempts to prioritize Matthew?s DNA succeed? What do you think Rachel Khong is trying to communicate here about how a person grows and develops traits, whether genetically or through learned behaviors?

9. The lotus flower appears as a symbol of the consistency of time. How does this connect with the three main narrators? desire to manipulate time? In what ways do you think May admires --- even envies --- the lotus flower for its inherent characteristics related to time, according to the descriptions on page 295?

10. Another theme that appears is that of luck: Lily describes growing up with four-leaf clovers in her family home, and in chapter two of May?s segment, May reacts sourly to gifts that she perceives as unlucky. How does this contradict, or even explain, May?s staunch belief in biology and the concept of manufacturing a human being to eliminate genetic diseases and, essentially, create a perfect human specimen?

11. Based on the way that May was raised and the tumultuous social and political climate she spent her formative years in, why do you think May was disappointed in Lily?s choice to quit her job at the magazine and financially rely on

Matthew in the early years of their relationship? Moreover, in what ways did growing up in the era of Maoism mobilize May to seek refuge in America, at a time when immigrants from Asia, as a whole, migrated to America in droves? What are the social and political differences between these two specific cultures that might have influenced her choices?

12. Nick recruits Matthew in a scheme to thwart Levi?s plans for the startup company. What has Nick learned from his own conception and experiences with Big Pharma that influenced this choice?

13. In the final chapter, May accepts her impending death and reflects on her obsession with time, particularly after she moved to America. Discuss the cultural ideologies related to time and productivity between Chinese and American culture. Based on the trajectory of May?s life, in what ways does life in America perpetuate a future-focused worldview and lifestyle?

14. In what ways do you think May regrets obsessing so much over maximizing her time? Explore these realizations, and imagine what kind of life May would have had without these anxieties over time.

15. A running occurrence in this book involves secrets and lies that, although well intentioned, cause fault lines between family members. Discuss with examples from the book the unfortunate irony that trying to manufacture a perfect life leads to deep rifts between parent and child.

16. Consider the structure of the novel. Why do you think Khong decided to write in the perspectives of these three characters and not others?? Did you notice any shifts in how characters are portrayed among the different segments? For example, how is May characterized from Lily?s perspective versus how May tells her story in her segment?

17. Like May, Lily and Nick each experience presuppositions and microaggressions about their identities based on how they look. For example, Lily is perceived as less American because of her Chinese looks, and Nick is perceived as 100 percent white. In what ways do these presuppositions clash with how they perceive themselves? What do you think Khong is communicating regarding ?Americanness,? i.e., the degree to which a person is American? What does a real American look like?

Author Bio

Rachel Khong is the author of the instant *New York Times* bestseller REAL AMERICANS, which was a "Read with Jenna" Book Club pick, as well as GOODBYE, VITAMIN, winner of the California Book Award for First Fiction, and named a Best Book of the Year by NPR; *O, The Oprah Magazine; Vogue;* and *Esquire*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Cut*, *The Guardian*, *The Paris Review* and *Tin House.* In 2018, she founded The Ruby, a work and event space for women and nonbinary writers and artists in San Francisco?s Mission District. She lives in California. Her latest book is the story collection MY DEAR YOU.

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