Severance

by Ling Ma



About the Book

Maybe it?s the end of the world, but not for Candace Chen, a millennial, first-generation American and office drone meandering her way into adulthood in Ling Ma?s offbeat, wryly funny, apocalyptic satire, SEVERANCE.

Candace Chen, a millennial drone self-sequestered in a Manhattan office tower, is devoted to routine. With the recent passing of her Chinese immigrant parents, she?s had her fill of uncertainty. She?s content just to carry on: She goes to work, troubleshoots the teen-targeted Gemstone Bible, watches movies in a Greenpoint basement with her boyfriend.

So Candace barely notices when a plague of biblical proportions sweeps New York. Then Shen Fever spreads. Families flee. Companies cease operations. The subways screech to a halt. Her bosses enlist her as part of a dwindling skeleton crew with a big end-date payoff. Soon entirely alone, still unfevered, she photographs the eerie, abandoned city as the anonymous blogger NY Ghost.

Candace won?t be able to make it on her own forever, though. Enter a group of survivors, led by the power-hungry IT tech Bob. They?re traveling to a place called the Facility, where, Bob promises, they will have everything they need to start society anew. But Candace is carrying a secret she knows Bob will exploit. Should she escape from her rescuers?

A send-up and takedown of the rituals, routines and missed opportunities of contemporary life, Ling Ma?s SEVERANCE is a moving family story, a quirky coming-of-adulthood tale, and a hilarious, deadpan satire. Most important, it?s a heartfelt tribute to the connections that drive us to do more than survive.

Discussion Guide

1. Explore the novel?s title. In addition to severance from a normal world of work, what else is severed in Candace?s life? What new connections does she form as a result of being severed?

2. As you read about Spectra?s Bible production process, from the deadly health hazards experienced by the workers to the VIP treatment Candace receives during her business travel, how was your perception of ?sacred texts? affected? Are bejeweled religious objects at odds with Christian doctrine? What conflicts arise in the book between religion, morality and the requirements of contemporary life?

3. As Candace navigates the business world and her family history, how does her understanding of her own identity shift? How do her parents reconcile the Cultural Revolution of their upbringing with the world of supermarkets and the Chinese Christian Community Church? How does Mandarin serve as both a bridge and a barrier for their daughter?

4. Candace chooses to inhabit L?Occitane in the Facility. If you had to be imprisoned in a mall, which store would you choose for your cell?

5. What does Candace?s mother, Ruifang, teach her about being a woman? How are Candace?s relationships with men affected by Candace observing her father, Zhigang, and his beliefs about love and marriage?

6. What is unique about the way Ling Ma weaves a darkly humorous thread through the story line? When did you find yourself laughing out loud? When did you find yourself worrying that a fungal apocalypse could actually happen?

7. What is the effect of the novel?s time line? How does Ling Ma?s use of flashbacks stay true to the way memories reflect and illuminate each other?

8. As Candace learns how to shoot a gun and scavenge for necessities, she proves how determined she is to survive. What is the purpose of survival in the absence of quality of life? How do you personally define ?quality of life??

9. SEVERANCE is packed with references to beauty products, clothing stores and other brands that have defined American consumerism. After the pandemic, what replaces these labels in the survivors? quest for comfort and camaraderie? When money becomes useless, what new forms of currency emerge?

10. If you had been in Candace?s situation, would you have left town with Jonathan? What accounts for the huge distinction between his approach to work and Candace?s? Would you have accepted Spectra?s final contract --- and how committed would you be to making sure to fulfill it?

11. SEVERANCE shines a spotlight on soul-crushing mind-sets that flourish both before and after the pandemic. What are they? Will profit-driven cultural forces diminish in your lifetime, or will they gain momentum?

12. How is the novel shaped by the presence of the undead who, instead of being predators like traditional zombies, are stuck in a mindless, harmless act? If you succumbed to Shen Fever, what repetitive act would your body perform?

13. How does Bob derive power? Which of his followers did you trust the most, and which the least? How does their bureaucracy compare to Spectra?s?

14. From Candace?s NY Ghost blog to the nostalgia-laden stalkings, the survivors crave a connection to what they?ve lost. Under similar circumstances, which memories and images would you want to stockpile?

15. How did you react to the closing scene? What do you imagine will happen next?

Author Bio

Ling Ma is a writer hailing from Fujian, Utah and Kansas. She is the author of the short story collection BLISS MONTAGE and the novel SEVERANCE, which received the Kirkus Prize, a Whiting Award, the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award, and the New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award. She lives in Chicago with her family.

Critical Praise

?A satirical spin on the end times --- kind of like 'The Office' meets 'The Leftovers.'"

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