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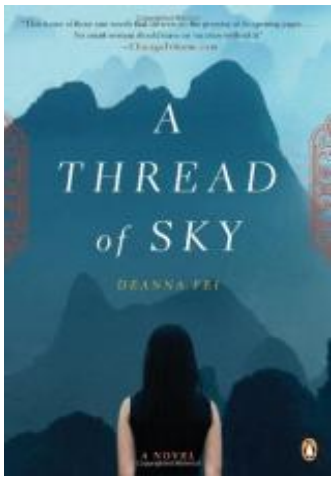
A Thread of Sky

by Deanna Fei



About the Book

When her husband of thirty years is killed, Irene Shen and her three daughters are set adrift. In a desperate attempt to heal her fractured family, Irene plans a tour of mainland China, reuniting three generations of women --- her fiercely independent daughters, her distant poet sister, and her formidable 80-year-old mother. But each woman bears secrets big and small, and just as they begin to reconnect, the most carefully guarded secret of all threatens to tear them apart forever. Depicting a China at once timeless and ever changing, **A Thread of Sky** is a beautifully written story of love and sacrifice, history and memory, sisterhood and motherhood, and the connections that endure.

Discussion Guide

1. One of Irene's motivations for planning this tour of China is to recapture a more traditional definition of family: "Jia --- family, house, home. In Chinese, it was all one word" (p. 12). Does she come close to succeeding? Is it possible to adapt this concept to modern life? How do you define family? What cultural traditions influence your definition?

2. In **A Thread of Sky**, this family reunion during a tour of China exposes long-simmering tensions and old, painful secrets. How does it compare with memorable family reunions of your own? How have those occasions changed your understanding of your loved ones?

3. Lin Yulan is fixated on the importance of leaving a legacy, an expectation she has passed onto her daughters and granddaughters. Do you agree with her? Was it an appropriate choice for Irene to give up her career? What if you knew that she was on the brink of a major breakthrough, one that would have saved millions of lives, when she got pregnant with Sophie? Would that change your opinion?

4. For Kay, at least in the beginning of the novel, China is all about suffering. She chooses the less comfortable dormitory. She thrives on immersing herself in social problems. Are her efforts misguided? In what ways is her work

similar or different to Lin Yulan's work earlier in her life? Is it appropriate for visitors to try and get involved in what they believe to be a cultural wrong even if the "victims" don't want help? Have you ever engaged in similar types of activism? What challenges did you face?

5. The women in this family have felt considerable pressure to define themselves as strong, independent, ambitious women. What toll has this taken on their personal lives? How do you define a strong woman? Do you think it's possible to take that identity too far?

6. All six characters in **A Thread of Sky** set out on this journey with a multitude of hopes and expectations: to reconnect with one another, to remember family history, to leave heartbreak behind, to be transported by China's famous sights, to find a moment to "simply be." What do you think will stay with them? What do you seek when you travel? What do you try to carry back home?

Author Bio

Deanna Fei was born in Flushing, New York, and has lived in Beijing and Shanghai. A graduate of Amherst College and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she has received a Fulbright grant and a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship. She currently lives in Brooklyn and blogs at the Huffington Post.

Critical Praise

"**A Thread of Sky** is a remarkable debut by a gifted young novelist. Deanna Fei is an accomplished writer with keen insight into cross-cultural Chinese-American rootlessness and the ties that bind women of several generations. A wonderful book!"

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