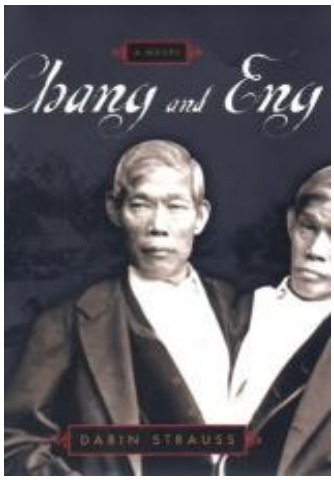
Chang and Eng

by Darin Strauss



About the Book

This much is known: Conjoined twins attached at the chest, Chang and Eng Bunker were born in poverty in Siam, were taken abroad and displayed as a human curiosity by an unscrupulous promoter, and with the help of P.T. Barnum, gained control of their professional lives as entertainers. In their early thirties, the two moved to North Carolina, married sister Adelaide and Sarah Yates, and between them, fathered 21 children. On January 17, 1874, first Chang, then Eng Bunker passed away.

From this fertile base of reality, first-time novelist Darin Strauss imagines the lives of Chang and Eng otherwise lost to history and myth. The product of three years of intensive research, Darin Straus has limned **Chang and Eng** as the story of the two told by Eng on his deathbed as he remembers his life, his conjoined twin lifeless beside him. A story of union in the face of adversity, it follows the extraordinary lives of the twins from poverty to wealth, from hopeless solitude to boundless love, from the court of the King of Siam to the crowded bedroom of their North Carolina home. Grand in scope, vivid in detail, and sublimely moving, **Chang and Eng** is a story that reveals the longing and humanity of two very different men who exited this world as they entered it?bonded together by common flesh.

Discussion Guide

1. Chang and Eng were given no say in the decision that resulted in two of them leaving Siam. How would their lives have been different had Abel Coffin never removed them from their homeland?

2. The story of this novel is told in the voice of Eng. How would it have been different if told in the voice of Chang?

3. As children, Chang and Eng saw their mother shaping the action of their lives and their father responding to her direction. Is this reflected in their adult lives with their own marriages and families?

4. Why does the King of Siam act in the manner he does to the twins? In what ways are their circumstances similar?

5. Essentially beginning their lives as slaves or at the very least, prisoners, how incongruous is it that Chang and Eng became slaveholders?

6. In the context of the novel, discuss the actions of P.T. Barnum towards Chang and Eng. What were his motives?

7. In the novel, much is made by some "Americans" regarding the "savage" nature of the Siamese. Given the experiences of the twins, both in their homeland and in America, where, if anywhere, does the "savagery" lie?

8. Ostensibly, Chang and Eng were baptized and became Christians. Did faith, Christian, Buddhist, or otherwise shape the lives of either Chang or Eng?

9. As the Civil War/War Between the States looms, what parallels are drawn between the fractious union of the nation and of Chang and Eng?

10. If Doctor Cottard had been summoned in time, do you suppose he could have saved the life of Eng after the death of Chang, or was Eng?s subsequent passing inevitable?

Author Bio

Darin Strauss is the bestselling author of several books. The recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction writing and numerous other awards, Strauss has seen his work translated into 14 languages and published in more than 20 countries. He is a clinical associate professor of writing at New York University, and he lives with his wife and children in Brooklyn.

Critical Praise

"What a remarkable first novel! Darin Strauss immerses us in the turbulent lives of the historic Siamese twins Chang and Eng with consummate skill, intelligence, and sympathy. Along with Barbara Gowdy?s **The White Bone**, this is one of the most riskily imagined and successfully realized novels I?ve read in years."

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