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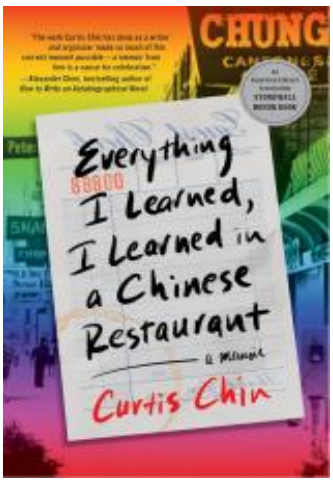
Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant: A Memoir

by Curtis Chin



About the Book

This ?vivid, moving, funny, and heartfelt? memoir tells the story of Curtis Chin?s time growing up as a gay Chinese American kid in 1980s Detroit (Lisa Ko, author of THE LEAVERS).

1980s Detroit was a volatile place to live, but above the fray stood a safe haven: Chung?s Cantonese Cuisine, where anyone --- from the city?s first Black mayor to the local drag queens, from a big-time Hollywood star to elderly Jewish couples --- could sit down for a warm, home-cooked meal. Here was where, beneath a bright-red awning and surrounded by his multigenerational family, filmmaker and activist Curtis Chin came of age; where he learned to embrace his identity as a gay ABC, or American-born Chinese; where he navigated the divided city?s spiraling misfortunes; and where --- between helpings of almond boneless chicken, sweet-and-sour pork, and some of his own, less savory culinary concoctions --- he realized just how much he had to offer to the world, to his beloved family and to himself.

Served up by the cofounder of the Asian American Writers? Workshop and structured around the very menu that graced the tables of Chung?s, EVERYTHING I LEARNED, I LEARNED IN A CHINESE RESTAURANT is both a memoir and an invitation: to step inside one boy?s childhood oasis, scoot into a vinyl booth and grow up with him --- and perhaps even share something off the secret menu.

Discussion Guide

1. Detroit is a character itself, in this memoir as well as throughout Curtis? life. What is Curtis? relationship with the city he grew up in? How does the last section of this book, ?The Fortune Cookie,? encapsulate this?

2. In this memoir of growing up in a Chinese restaurant, the connection between food and community takes center stage. Can you describe this relationship? Why was Chung?s so influential in Curtis? life? How did the restaurant fit in with

the larger community?

3. In the introduction, Curtis says, ?For here or to go? As I got older, it was a question I asked myself.? Why does this question feel significant to Curtis? How does it relate to his identity as an ABC, or an American-born Chinese?

4. During his childhood, Curtis has a pivotal relationship with a fry cook named Mr. Mah. What was his ultimate influence on Curtis? life? What do you feel is a pivotal moment or relationship in your life?

5. As Curtis grows older, he begins to think more about his sexuality, at first resisting his attraction to men, but ultimately embracing his identity. What were some of the obstacles he encountered along the way? How did this intersect with his identity as a Chinese American?

6. While at Chung?s, Curtis has an interaction with a drag queen and her partner that leaves him stunned. What was the significance of this moment? What does it say about the complexity of identity and community?

7. At the start of high school, Curtis takes an interest in politics, eventually becoming involved in the Republican Party. What drove his embrace of conservatism? How did this change as he grew older?

8. A significant moment in Curtis? life comes in Ann Arbor, when he comes out to his friend, Mimi. What is the impact of the conversation that follows? What kind of community does Curtis find during his college years?

9. Curtis has a complicated relationship with his grandmother, the fiery Ngin-Ngin, who helped raise him. Towards the end of the book, as Ngin-Ngin struggles with old age, Curtis decides to begin taking care of her, saying, ?For once, I believed in karma, both the good and the bad.? What do you think he means by this?

10. Curtis? relationship with his family evolved greatly over the years. What do you think changed the most as they grew older? What has stayed the same?

Author Bio

A cofounder of the Asian American Writers? Workshop in New York City, Curtis Chin served as the nonprofit?s first executive director. He went on to write for network television before transitioning to social-justice documentaries. Chin has screened his films at over 600 venues in 16 countries. He has written for *CNN*, *Bon Appétit* and the *Boston Globe*?s *Emancipator*. A graduate of the University of Michigan and a former visiting scholar at New York University, Chin has received awards from ABC/Disney Television, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and more.

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