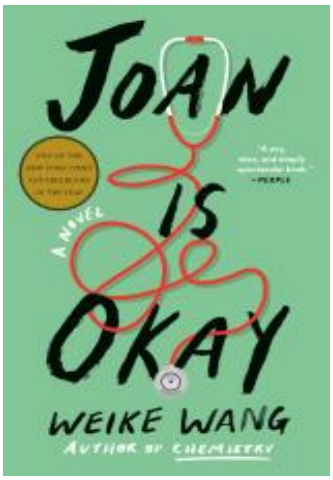
Joan Is Okay

by Weike Wang



About the Book

A witty, moving, piercingly insightful new novel about a marvelously complicated woman who can?t be anyone but herself, from the award-winning author of CHEMISTRY.

Joan is a thirtysomething ICU doctor at a busy New York City hospital. The daughter of Chinese parents who came to the United States to secure the American dream for their children, Joan is intensely devoted to her work, happily solitary, successful. She does look up sometimes and wonder where her true roots lie: at the hospital, where her white coat makes her feel needed, or with her family, who try to shape her life by their own cultural and social expectations.

Once Joan and her brother, Fang, were established in their careers, her parents moved back to China, hoping to spend the rest of their lives in their homeland. But when Joan?s father suddenly dies and her mother returns to America to reconnect with her children, a series of events sends Joan spiraling out of her comfort zone just as her hospital, her city and the world are forced to reckon with a health crisis more devastating than anyone could have imagined.

Deceptively spare yet quietly powerful, laced with sharp humor, JOAN IS OKAY touches on matters that feel deeply resonant: being Chinese-American right now; working in medicine at a high-stakes time; finding one?s voice within a dominant culture; being a woman in a male-dominated workplace; and staying independent within a tight-knit family. But above all, it?s a portrait of one remarkable woman so surprising that you can?t get her out of your head.

Discussion Guide

1. Joan is a successful ICU doctor, a first-generation Chinese American, a daughter and sister, a workaholic, and a happily single woman in her 30s. How are these different parts of her identity in harmony with each other? How are they dissonant?

2. JOAN IS OKAY takes place in 2019, in the months leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. How does this timing influence the events of this novel? How would the book be different if set well before, during or after COVID-19?

3. As Joan recalls memories from her childhood and her relationship with her parents, she notes that ?Berating is love, and here I was at 36, still being loved.? Discuss the family dynamics at the core of this novel. How do Joan, Fang and their mother show each other love? What do they withhold or hide from one another? How does this dynamic change after Joan?s father dies, and by the time they are all in Greenwich together?

4. Joan thinks a lot about being Chinese-American outside of China. At one point she says she doesn?t consider herself too Chinese, and rarely goes to China to visit. In another instance, Joan reflexively apologizes to a nurse for speaking Chinese. Yet she also doesn?t feel that the phrase ?Proud to be an American? really applies to her. Discuss how Joan grapples with her Chinese heritage and identity. What is important for readers to see within her internalized struggle?

5. JOAN IS OKAY is filled with sharp, satirical humor. What scenes or moments made you laugh? What does humor add to the overall effect of the story?

6. Joan is a woman in a male-dominated workplace. How does that manifest through her relationship with Reese? How does she navigate this? How is she treated differently from her male peers? What did you think of the portrayal of Human Resources and corporate ?wellness? initiatives?

7. ?History repeats itself,? Wang writes. ?Asians are often pitted against other Asians, and even citizenship can?t always save you.? How did this novel make you reflect on the treatment of Asian Americans in the United States, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus? How does this tie into Joan?s memory of the father and daughter buying the lottery ticket at the end of the novel?

8. Wang writes, ?The price of success is steep and I?ve never been able to distinguish it from the feeling of sacrifice.? Why do you think Joan equates success and sacrifice? Do you feel similarly? Why or why not? What does success look like for the different characters in this novel?

9. JOAN IS OKAY depicts two different perspectives on the immigrant experience: Joan?s and her brother?s. Discuss how Joan and Fang each feel about being immigrants. Why do you think they react differently? How do they feel about each other?s paths? How does being an immigrant impact their life choices?

10. At the end of the book, Wang writes, ?Home could be many things. It could be both a comfort and a pain. It could exile you for a little while but then demand that you return.? Where does home truly lie for Joan? What does home mean to you?

11. Though Joan?s father is a passive character in the book, he is still very much a significant player. Discuss the influence Joan?s father has on her character. To what extent is Joan changed (or not changed) by the grief she feels after her father dies?

12. How does JOAN IS OKAY compare to the ?classic? immigrant novel? Explain the role class plays in the story. What themes and expectations does this novel affirm and/or upset?

13. Discuss the characters. Joan, our protagonist, is very unique and striking, but so are many of the secondary and tertiary figures. How is Joan?s relationship to her father different from her relationship with her mother? How do Joan and her brother Fang compare?

14. What did you think about Joan?s relationship with her neighbors, particularly Mark? At first, he seems to be a foil for Joan, but he?s also one of the many forces in her life insisting her lifestyle is unsatisfactory. Why does Joan let him force his way into her life? What does it mean to have your sensibilities questioned in your own home?

15. Reading is often about finding empathy for others. Discuss the empathy you had (or didn?t have) for the characters in JOAN IS OKAY. What did you take away from reading this novel?

Author Bio

Weike Wang is the author of CHEMISTRY, JOAN IS OKAY and RENTAL HOUSE. She is the recipient of a Pen Hemingway, a Whiting Award and a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper?s Magazine* and *Best American Short Stories*, and she has won an O. Henry Prize. She earned her MFA from Boston University and her other degrees from Harvard. She currently lives in New York City and teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, Barnard College and Boston University.

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