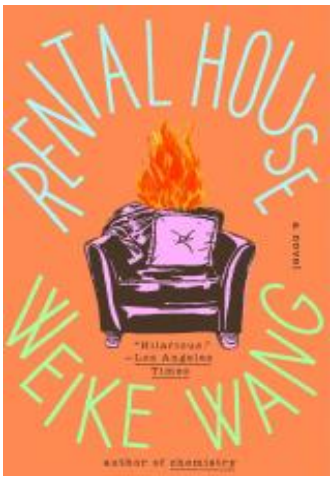
Rental House

by Weike Wang



About the Book

From the award-winning author of CHEMISTRY, a sharp-witted, insightful novel about a marriage as seen through the lens of two family vacations.

Keru and Nate are college sweethearts who marry despite their family differences: Keru?s strict, Chinese, immigrant parents demand perfection (?To use a dishwasher is to admit defeat,? says her father), while Nate?s rural, white, working-class family distrusts his intellectual ambitions and his ?foreign? wife.

Some years into their marriage, the couple invites their families on vacation. At a Cape Cod beach house, and later at a luxury Catskills bungalow, Keru, Nate and their giant sheepdog navigate visits from in-laws and unexpected guests, all while wondering if they have what it takes to answer the big questions: How do you cope when your spouse and your family of origin clash? How many people (and dogs) make a family? And when the pack starts to disintegrate, what can you do to shepherd everyone back together?

With her ?wry, wise and simply spectacular? style (*People*) and ?hilarious deadpan that recalls Gish Jen and Nora Ephron? (*O, The Oprah Magazine*), Weike Wang offers a portrait of family that is equally witty, incisive and tender.

Discussion Guide

1. RENTAL HOUSE tells the story of Keru and Nate, college sweethearts who have made a life for themselves despite vast differences in their upbringings. Some years into their marriage, the couple invites their respective families of origin on vacation. What do these vacations represent for Keru and Nate? What trials do they present for the relationship and for themselves?

2. In some ways, both Keru and Nate feel like misfits in their own families. How does this shared sensibility impact their

bond? In what ways is their marriage a refuge from these feelings?

3. Consider Keru?s relationship to her Chinese heritage, and to the expectations of her parents. How do Keru?s parents shape her actions and self-perception? Discuss the generational and cultural conflicts that arise.

4. Consider Nate?s relationship with his own family and culture. What pressures do his parents put on him, and how to do they compare to those that Keru?s parents place on her? In what ways has Nate made a life that accords with his parents? wishes for him, and in what ways has he rebelled?

5. Weike Wang employs her wry, sharp humor in different ways throughout the book. How does her humorous voice influence your reading experience? What are some of the different ways the author employs humor, and how does it serve the novel as a whole? Consider not just the author?s language and comic timing, but the way that humor plays a role in the characters? interactions and coping mechanisms throughout the novel (starting from Nate and Keru?s very first conversation about the joke behind his Halloween costume).

6. How do Keru and Nate handle the clashes that occur between their spouse and their family of origin? What strategies do they employ, and are they effective?

7. At the midway point of the novel, the following is said: ?There is a tendency to take two halves of something and assign them equal weight. Marriage is fifty-fifty, but who said that? Who believes this to be true?? (107). What do you think about this statement? Is it reflected in the characters and their actions?

8. Discuss Mircea and Elena, whom Keru and Nate meet while they?re vacationing in the Catskills. How do Nate and Keru compare themselves to this couple? What does the proximity to this second couple teach them about themselves?

9. Keru and Nate seem to agree about not wanting children, but both sets of their parents disagree with their decision. How do they navigate these pressures?

10. Nate?s brother, Ethan, shows up for a visit unexpectedly with his girlfriend, Morgan. How do Keru and Nate respond to this intrusion? What does it reveal to them about their own relationship?

11. Consider Mantou the giant sheepdog and her presence in their lives. What does she symbolize for Keru and Nate? In what ways is she a character in her own right?

12. Discuss the ending of RENTAL HOUSE. What does it demonstrate about Keru and Nate?s relationship? How has their dynamic changed? How does the novel challenge or reinforce different notions of family?

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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