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The Last Story of Mina Lee

by Nancy Jooyoun Kim



About the Book

A profoundly moving and unconventional mother-daughter saga, THE LAST STORY OF MINA LEE illustrates the devastating realities of being an immigrant in America.

Margot Lee's mother, Mina, isn't returning her calls. It's a mystery to 26-year-old Margot, until she visits her childhood apartment in Koreatown, LA, and finds that her mother has suspiciously died. The discovery sends Margot digging through the past, unraveling the tenuous invisible strings that held together her single mother's life as a Korean War orphan and an undocumented immigrant, only to realize how little she truly knew about her mother.

Interwoven with Margot's present-day search is Mina's story of her first year in Los Angeles as she navigates the promises and perils of the American myth of reinvention. While she's barely earning a living by stocking shelves at a Korean grocery store, the last thing Mina ever expects is to fall in love. But that love story sets in motion a series of events that have consequences for years to come, leading up to the truth of what happened the night of her death.

Told through the intimate lens of a mother and daughter who have struggled all their lives to understand each other, THE LAST STORY OF MINA LEE is a powerful and exquisitely woven debut novel that explores identity, family, secrets and what it truly means to belong.

Discussion Guide

1. Margot has spent most of her life trying to be different from her mother, a perpetual foreigner --- both in the United States and in Margot?s life. Yet they both feel like outsiders, searching for what it means to truly belong. Discuss the similarities and differences between Margot and Mina. How would Mina and Margot each define *home*? What does *home* mean to you?

2. THE LAST STORY OF MINA LEE explores issues such as immigration, the true meaning of the American Dream, and the limitations of women?s role in society. Did the novel affect your opinions about these topics? How so?

3. The perspective shifts between Margot and Mina, alternating between the present and the past. Why do you think the author chose to structure the novel this way? How did this affect your understanding of Margot and Mina?s relationship and their difficulty communicating with one another? How does Mina?s past inform the kind of mother she is for Margot? What do you wish you could ask your parents in order to better understand them?

4. Mina and Margot can only partially speak to each other because they have limited knowledge of each other?s respective languages, Korean and English. Do you have similar gaps in language within your families as well? How can we understand other people regardless of language?

5. Discuss Mina and Mr. Kim?s relationship. They were both separated from members of their family during the Korean War and came to the US to create better lives for themselves. How did the traumas of their pasts shape their trajectory as immigrants in America? Do you think their relationship would have worked out if Mr. Kim had decided to stay in LA instead of fleeing from Mr. Park? What did you think about Mina?s decision to not tell Mr. Kim about Margot?

6. ?[Margot] hated to draw her own face --- a face she couldn?t quite recognize in her mother or anywhere else on TV or in the movies --- the face of a stranger, a foreigner, anonymous and plain.? Art plays an important yet inaccessible role in Margot?s life. What does this say about the role of art in society? What did you learn about Margot through the art that she yearned to create?

7. In THE LAST STORY OF MINA LEE, unpunished cruelties are inflicted upon the most vulnerable characters by privileged people abusing their power, such as Mr. Park. What did you think of the ultimate reveal of what happened to Mina on the night that she died? How does the book question traditional notions of justice? Do you think right versus wrong is always black and white, or are there areas of gray? Why?

8. The grocery store, the restaurant and the kitchen are important locations in the book. What is the role of food and eating in this novel for Margot, Mina and Mrs. Baek? What role has food played in your family?s story?

9. How did you feel about Mina, Margot and Mrs. Baek by the end of the book? Did your opinions about them change over the course of the story? Were you satisfied by the ending?

10. What do you think the meaning is behind the title THE LAST STORY OF MINA LEE?

Author Bio

Nancy Jooyoun Kim is the *New York Times* bestselling author of WHAT WE KEPT TO OURSELVES and THE LAST STORY OF MINA LEE, a Reese?s Book Club pick. Born and raised in Los Angeles, she now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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