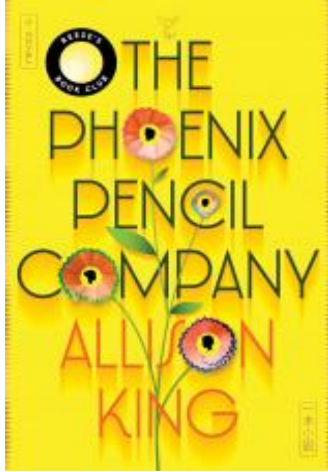


# The Phoenix Pencil Company

by Allison King

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## About the Book

**In this dazzling debut novel, a hidden and nearly forgotten magic --- of Reforging pencils, bringing the memories they contain back to life --- holds the power to transform a young woman's relationship with her grandmother and to mend long-lost connections across time and space.**

Monica Tsai spends most days on her computer, journaling the details of her ordinary life and coding for a program that seeks to connect strangers online. A self-proclaimed recluse, she's always struggled to make friends and, as a college freshman, finds herself escaping into a digital world, counting the days until she can return home to her beloved grandparents. They are now in their 90s, and Monica worries about them constantly --- especially her grandmother, Yun, who survived two wars in China before coming to the States and whose memory has begun to fade.

Though Yun rarely speaks of her past, Monica is determined to find the long-lost cousin she was separated from years ago. One day, the very program Monica is helping to build connects her to a young woman, whose gift of a single pencil holds a surprising clue. Monica's discovery of a hidden family history is exquisitely braided with Yun's own memories as she writes of her years in Shanghai, working at the Phoenix Pencil Company. As WWII rages outside their door, Yun and her cousin, Meng, learn of a special power the women in their family possess: the ability to Reforge a pencil's words. But when the government uncovers their secret, they are forced into a life of espionage, betraying other people's stories to survive.

Combining the cross-generational family saga and epistolary form of *A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING* with the uplifting, emotional magic of *THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY*, Allison King's stunning debut novel asks: Who owns and inherits our stories? The answers and secrets that surface on the page may have the unerasable power to reconnect a family and restore a legacy.

## Discussion Guide

1. What influence does Monica's decision to stay home and care for her grandparents have on her values and aspirations? How does this choice shape her growth?
2. Discuss the purpose of Monica's EMBRS project. Would you consider using this technology? If so, how would you?
3. How does Monica's relationship with her grandmother, Yun, evolve throughout the story?
4. What does the phoenix in the title, *THE PHOENIX PENCIL COMPANY*, symbolize in the novel? Does that symbol resonate with any of these characters? If so, who?
5. The magic in this novel allows Monica and Yun to Reforge memories from the past. What memories would you preserve? And how does this magic relate to the act of keeping a journal or diary? How else do we preserve cherished memories from our past?
6. What sacrifices have Monica and Yun made for each other? Would you say that sacrifice is always an act of love?
7. This novel says a great deal about the influence our families can have on us, across generations. How did Yun and Meng's upbringings shape them and their choices?
8. Discuss Louise's actions throughout the book. Does she play a role in shaping Monica and Yun's relationship? If so, how?
9. Why do you think Allison King decided to braid the structure of the novel with Yun's memories working at the Phoenix Pencil Company? What impact does this structure have on the storytelling?
10. As the novel progresses, Yun's memory begins to fade. What impact does this have on the narrative? How do the twin acts of remembering and forgetting relate to the story?

## Author Bio

Allison King is an Asian American writer and software engineer based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In technology, her work has ranged from semiconductors to platforms for community conversations to data privacy. Her short stories have appeared in *Fantasy Magazine*, *Diabolical Plots* and *LeVar Burton Reads*, among others. She is a 2023 Reese's Book Club LitUp fellow. *THE PHOENIX PENCIL COMPANY* is her first novel.

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