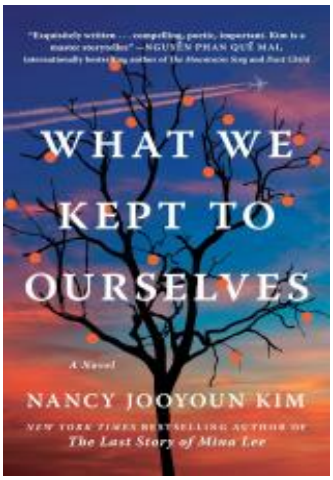
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What We Kept to Ourselves

by Nancy Jooyoun Kim



About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of the Reese?s Book Club pick THE LAST STORY OF MINA LEE returns with a timely and surprising new novel about a family?s search for answers following the disappearance of their mother.

1999: The Kim family is struggling to move on after their mother, Sunny, vanished a year ago. Sixty-one-year-old John Kim feels more isolated from his grown children, Anastasia and Ronald, than ever before. But one evening, their fragile lives are further upended when John finds the body of a stranger in the backyard, carrying a letter to Sunny, leaving the family with more questions than ever about the stranger?s history and possible connections to their mother.

1977: Sunny is pregnant and has just moved to Los Angeles from Korea with her aloof and often-absent husband. America is not turning out the way she had dreamed it to be, and the loneliness and isolation are broken only by a fateful encounter at a bus stop. The unexpected connection spans the decades and echoes into the family?s lives in the present as they uncover devastating secrets that put not only everything they thought they knew about their mother but their very lives at risk.

Both a riveting page-turner and a moving family story, WHAT WE KEPT TO OURSELVES masterfully explores the consequences of secrets between parents and children, hus-bands and wives. It is the story of one unforgettable family?s search for home when all seems lost, and a powerful meditation on identity, migration and what it means to dream in America.

Discussion Guide

1. WHAT WE KEPT TO OURSELVES is told in alternating timelines, one set in 1977 and the other in 1999. Sunhee (later Sunny) and John change significantly between these two periods of their lives. What were your first impressions of

them in 1977 in comparison to them in 1999? Did these impressions change throughout the novel?

2. John and Sunny are both Korean refugees, but they did not experience the war and its effects the same way. How were they different? How do you think their pasts dictate the people they become and ultimately the choices they make in the novel?

3. The Kim family is broken into two generations: the parents, Sunny and John, and their children, Ana and Ronald. How do the two generations and their experiences in the United States contrast? Discuss how these differences impact their behavior and how they each respond to the tragedies and struggles throughout the novel.

4. Sunny and RJ develop a strong friendship throughout the novel. Discuss their relationship and its significance to each of them. What were they each looking for when they befriended each other? Did this change throughout the years as their personal lives evolved?

5. Ronald and Ana are able to learn about RJ?s past as a helicopter mechanic in Vietnam before he became unhoused in Los Angeles. Discuss the factors that led to such a drastic change in circumstances. Do you believe the ?system? or society failed him? Did it fail any other characters?

6. Art becomes an outlet of freedom for Sunny, returning her to a part of her past that she had given up. Do any of the other characters have the sense of freedom that she craves?

7. Sunny?s relationship with Professor Cho evolves throughout the novel. What does Professor Cho symbolize to Sunny at the different points in their relationship?

8. Sunny?s experiences in the US have a cumulative impact on her worldview and happiness. Discuss the most significant of those experiences. What pushed her to a breaking point and led to her departure?

9. Sunny and John both develop friendships outside of their marriage, Sunny with RJ and John with Priscilla. Compare and contrast these friendships and what they meant to Sunny and John.

10. Throughout the novel, what city a character lives in has a significant impact on their experience. Discuss how both Los Angeles and Seoul affect each character and how each character?s experience of both cities evolves throughout the story.

11. Each character brings something different to the novel. Which character did you connect with the most, and why?

12. The novel culminates in two surprising events. How did the conclusion make you feel? Were you satisfied with each family member?s narrative arc and the lessons they each understood throughout the novel?

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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Publication Date: July 2, 2024
Genres: Domestic Thriller, Fiction, Mystery, Suspense, Thriller
Paperback: 416 pages
Publisher: Atria Books
ISBN-10: 1668004836
ISBN-13: 9781668004838