

Everything I Never Told You

Celeste Ng. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014. 297 Pages

Heather A. Willoughby
Ewha Womans University, Korea

When I first began roaming the back roads of Korean villages in the mid-1980s, there were virtually no other foreigners to be seen. Standing half a foot taller than most Korean adults of that era, I was well aware that my height, my fair complexion, and my light brown hair made it easy for locals to see and identify me as “different,” as the “Other.” Things have changed considerably in the intervening thirty years; there is not a day that goes by that I do not encounter visibly non-Korean denizens of Seoul. We still stand out, but our prevalence makes us more likely to be invisible, to merely be one of the unseen masses. Yet even now, I sometimes pass by a glass-encased building and, catching a glimpse of myself, am astounded that I am clearly an anomaly among the native inhabitants of this land.

Thus, after living in Korea intermittently for a total fifteen years, I know something of what it is like to be an outsider. Nevertheless, perhaps because my first encounters with otherness occurred when I was already a self-assured adult, or because I thought, at the time, Korea would only be a temporary home, my early experiences never affected me as deeply as the characters in *Everything I Never Told You*. There are a number of poignant threads woven throughout the story line of this lovely novel by Celeste Ng, but the notion of “difference” is certainly a prominent theme.

Early in the novel, when James Lee, a Chinese-American graduate student/first term professor at Harvard, and Marilyn, an undergraduate physics major at Radcliff attending the former’s course first meet, she sees in him a kindred spirit. She thinks, “*He understands. What it’s like to be different?*” (p. 30, emphasis in original). Thus, the first stitch of the question of difference is carefully enmeshed into the fabric of this novel. Marilyn’s difference is self-made; a personal agenda to flourish as a scientist and become a doctor, in the age of female nurses—“[...] more than anything, [she] had wanted to stand out” (p. 25). Whereas James, having grown up all too visibly dif-

ferent as the only Asian attending a small boarding school in Iowa where his parents worked in menial jobs, had wanted nothing more than to be unnoticed. And that is what drew him to Marilyn; she seemed to blend in perfectly, and thus, in her presence, in her arms, he felt at home for the first time in his life.

The eventual union of these two characters leads to more circumstances of fitting in, standing out, and living in-between for their three children, Nath, Lydia, and Hannah. Ng brilliantly fleshes out and makes whole the life, thoughts, and struggles of each character, moving seamlessly in time back and forth from the late-1950s to the mid-1970s, with some chapters devoted almost entirely to one individual. Nevertheless, the story unfolds and continually circles back to Lydia, who, as we learn in the very first sentence of the book, is dead. Because of Lydia's disappearance and subsequent death, whether by suicide, murder, or other unfathomable cause, some have called this a mystery novel. And, while it is true that we do eventually come to understand Lydia's demise, this novel is about far more than revealing her final moments.

In addition to negotiating through the warp and weft of difference, Ng presents a engaging narrative that explores a time of significant change in America—from references to women's rights and strivings for equality of opportunity to confrontation with the changing face of the populace, such as in a news headline that reads, "Children of Mixed Backgrounds Often Struggle to Find Their Place." And despite each of the Lee family member's best efforts to find her/his place, in society as a whole and within their own family, each is lost, rent from the fibers that should bind them.

Beyond the social commentary that is interlaced throughout the novel, we witness equally delightful and devastating family dynamics; Lydia's death, while profound in and of itself, starts as a snag in the family fabric, but eventually leads to its near total unraveling. James hopes only that his middle daughter will be popular among her all-white cohorts, and refuses to recognize the façade Lydia has erected to placate him. Marilyn, on the other hand, tries to mold her daughter into the science-loving, medical school bound student she herself wanted to be, all the while ignoring the signs that Lydia has no passion for the subject, but only devote filial piety for a mother she is trying to assure never leaves (again). Nath and Hannah orbit around the shining sun of Lydia, although ghosts within their own domains. Everyone has secrets. Everyone is unknown.

To comprehend the depth of each character's hopes and fears, to understand the breadth of everything never told, one simply must read this intriguing novel!

Although the novel is beautifully composed in nearly all regards, there is one final observation to be made. As unfortunately often seems to be the case with many contemporary novels, there are errors in the calculation of time/dates as well as other details that the author and editors should have corrected. For example, Marilyn enters Radcliff in 1955 and is concerned that her advising professor will discourage her from studying physics. Although he does not outright thwart her ambitions, he does belittle her by suggesting she first start with an apparently easier chemistry course to see how she fares before continuing on in her chosen course of study. However, Radcliff was established in 1879 (then named the Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women) with physics among the first courses offered. Therefore, it seems very unlikely that 75 years later, a professor would be surprised that a woman would want to study science. Additionally, we are told that Marilyn is the only woman among 15 other male students in her chemistry class. Yet, Radcliff is a women's college; men were not able to enroll until the year 2000. And while it is true that Marilyn could have been participating in a class at Harvard, there would have been no need, because, as just mentioned, Radcliff had its own physics program since its inception.

While details such as this should not dissuade one from reading this fine novel, they do serve as a distraction. Celeste Ng herself studied at Harvard and lives in Cambridge; there is no excuse for including such obvious inaccuracies.

Biographical Note: **Heather A. Willoughby** received her Ph.D. from Columbia University in Ethnomusicology, with an emphasis on Korean folk music. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of International Studies at Ewha Womans University where she teaches cultural anthropology, gender studies, musicology, and development courses. Email: willoughby@ewha.ac.kr