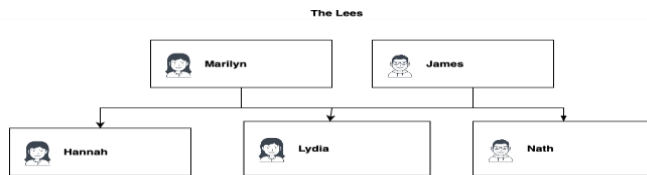


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# AN ANALYSIS OF EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU BY CELESTE NG

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<b>TITLE</b>	Everything I Never Told You
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Celeste Ng
<b>PUBLISHER</b>	Penguin Random House
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<b>NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	304



“Lydia is dead but they don't know this yet”

That's how this book begins. It is almost as if the author was stating upfront the intentions of the book- almost like a disclaimer - “Don't expect a whodunit, this is not a traditional mystery, this is a venture into wilder woods- the why's and the how's”. Furthermore, in her quest to explore the reasons behind the death of the prodigal daughter, she calls out the flaws in the world that we live in and in the people that make up that world; in ourselves. She explores the highly political concept of marginalization- racist, sexist, homophobic- and the prejudices that saturate the average person's mind. The effect the past prejudice has, the expectations, and the threat of further prejudices - you behave a certain way and your whole community risks being labeled that way- is demonstrated and analyzed with particular attention to ignorant micro-aggressions and their effect (which is portrayed to be not catastrophic kind but of the

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thousand cuts variety) . In short, she explores our deep resentment towards the misrepresentations that prevent us from being seen as we are, that put us in neat little boxes and suffocate us by closed lids (read closed minds).

“Everything I never told you”, as can be gathered from its title, also explores secrets and miscommunications, and how these hinder us from sharing how we really feel with those closest to us. Secrets and assumptions in this biracial family (notably the only family of color in their neighborhood) serve to exacerbate the alienation already brought about by existing perspective differences of race, gender and intergenerational conflict resulting in unfair expectations and mutual destruction with the final implosion as Lydia dies.

What makes this novel stand out is the thoroughness and the complexity of the characters’ portrayal; at no point does the author confine herself to a myopic view of any character or incidence, digging into their history relentlessly in a manner such that one comes to sympathies with the very characters one might have otherwise despised (had our view been confined only to their actions) because of the understanding - not just knowledge but understanding- of the reasons behind those actions. Lydia, though caught in the crossfire, wasn’t the only victim but each of the family members in their own way, was both the villain and the victim - of themselves and of the rest of the world. Marilyn with her unconventional ambitions, James desperately wanting to blend in as a reaction to always being left out, Lydia with her perfect child complex and Nath and Hannah with being overshadowed, each character has their own struggles and ambitions often conflicting with those of other characters.

The interfamilial relationships have been explored as well. The intergenerational conflict between the parents and the children; Lydia’s parents’ conflicting expectations of her (with her mother wanting her to stand out and her father wanting her to blend in) stemming from their own ambitions, Lydia’s fear of abandonment and getting pulled apart because she wanted to accommodate her parent’s expectations, Nath and Hannah always living in Lydia’s shadow, and between the grandparents and the parents; James wanting to escape his parents so he could blend in and Marilyn’s ambitions conflicting with her mother’s hopes for her. The sibling relationships have been depicted in all their complexity; Nath and Lydia’s relationship - filled with resentment, familiarity and an unspoken understanding but more so Lydia’s need for that understanding which she got only from Nath and her fear of losing it, Lydia and Hannah’s relationship- Hannah’s unclouded understanding of Lydia’s struggles and Lydia’s defiant determination that Hannah would not have to carry the weight of the expectations that Lydia carries

“How had it begun? Like everything: with mothers and fathers. Because of Lydia’s mother and father, because of her mothers and father’s mothers and fathers”

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-page 20, “Everything I never told you”

“You don’t want that,” Lydia said, the gentleness in her voice surprising Hannah, surprising Lydia herself. “Listen to me. You think you do. You don’t.” She bunched the necklace in her fist. “Promise me you’ll never put this on again. Ever.”

Hannah shook her head, eyes wide. Lydia touched her sister’s throat, her thumb smoothing the tiny thread of blood where the chain had sliced into the skin.

“Don’t ever smile if you don’t want to,” she said, and Hannah, half-blinded by the spotlight of Lydia’s whole attention, nodded. “Remember that.”

- page 156, “Everything I never told you”

The method the author has used to bring this book to life is omniscient third person narration using two timelines past and present.

A huge theme in this book is the deep impact that prejudice has on individuals. Every small act of injustice level its mark on the individual, their thoughts, the way they experience the world and hence their actions. To demonstrate this, the author had to connect the past to the present in a seamless manner using two different timelines keeping them remarkably clear and coherent. This helps her answer the why’s and the how’s- the questions asked with the very first sentence of the book.

The other theme of this book is the secrets- sometimes deliberate but more often unintentional miscommunications stemming from different perspectives and assumptions. To allow us to sense this , the author has adopted a third person narrative. Using an omniscient third person narrative further amplifies the impact of those miscommunications till it comes to a point where every argument, every dialogue between the characters feels like a train wreck waiting to happen. In fact at one point of time I, as a reader, had to wonder how, with all their misguided assumptions and contrasting perspectives, they ever managed to get their point across at all. It was bleak but realistic.

Being a woman of color, the author has faced prejudice and discrimination (mostly in the form of micro-aggression, less often in the form of extreme incidences), constantly being made to feel like she doesn’t belong, like an outlier, perceived in a certain way just because she looks the way she looks- not being seen for who she is, and she draws upon these experiences, both hers and those of other she knows, to write this story over a period of six years. As Celeste Ng has stated, while the characters are not modeled after any particular individual, their experiences and their traits are an amalgamation of the experiences

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and quirks of her or the people she knows. Notably, she has stated in interviews that, with the exception of one, every incident of covert or overt racism and sexism in the book has been drawn from real experiences that either she or those she knows has gone through. This is despite the fact that she grew up in the more accepting neighbourhoods.

She goes on to demonstrate how racism stems, in majority of the cases, from ignorance rather than hatred. Often people who do not have such “disabilities” fail to grasp the magnitude of their own privilege. They only see racism and sexism and homophobia on a surface level without realising the way it permeates the air, the depth of the alienation that marginalisation can bring about. This book, in my opinion, aims to help alleviate that ignorance, to allow the reader to live the life of a biracial family, think their thoughts; experience that marginalisation, if only, for the 304 pages of this book. It strives to spark empathy in the reader- as is the purpose of good fiction.

Further potential:

It struck me that every James and Marilyn’s ambitions were always, without fail, conflicted with each other. They met- James married a white woman and thought he could blend in finally while Marilyn lost her dream of becoming a doctor. The opportunity with Tom Lawson- Marilyn had to

let go of the opportunity because James wanted to maintain a certain image. When Marilyn went to Radcliffe to pursue her ambitions- James couldn’t just lay low and blend in. When Marilyn had to return from Radcliffe- James Maine back his “blending in” and Marilyn lost her ambitions again. And finally, again in their daughter Lydia- James wanting her to blend in, be like the rest of the people, while Marilyn wanting her to be the best, to stand out.

This dynamic was strikingly adverbial over a long period of time and could have been explored further.

In conclusion “Everything I never told you” by Celeste Ng is a masterpiece of subtle explorations into the problematic themes of marginalisation, secrets and intergenerational conflicts.

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