

*The Last
Story of
Mina Lee*

A Novel

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Discussion Guide

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



- 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. Were you surprised by the reveal of who killed Mina? Would you consider Mrs. Baek a hero or a villain? 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*?

Discussion Guide

BEHIND THE BOOK



After learning the premise of my book, several people have asked only somewhat jokingly, “Did you write this because you wish your mother was dead?”

The exact opposite is true. I tell them that I would want my mother to live forever. The idea of living life without her is intolerable to me, and I think this fear is worth pursuing intellectually on some level. In what ways do I rely on her? How can I grow into a person who can live without my mother?

There’s sometimes an assumption that, in fiction, we write about our dreams, the things that we secretly want to see or happen, and that somehow through this prolonged act or sleight of hand we are manifesting these hidden desires. This is probably true. But fiction is equally about fears and nightmares, too. What if you wrote something because you were following the thread of what terrifies you most? Maybe you won’t sleep easier at night, but in the process, you’ll grow in a way that might be necessary to your survival.

The emotional germ of this novel began in 2004 when I was in my early twenties and my estranged father died in a car accident right before I moved from my hometown of Los Angeles to Seattle, about 1,100 miles from my mother, for graduate school. After the shock of my father’s death, I began to vividly fear that one day my mother would not pick up the phone, and that I wouldn’t be able to reach her in time to save her.

I have always felt responsible for my mother’s life—because she was a single mother, who didn’t speak much English, and lived in a country still foreign to her and far away from the rest of her family. She had seemingly sacrificed everything for me, who had more resources—American-born, fluent in English and educated here. So when I moved to Seattle, I began to fear for her life—as if I was the one who assembled her each day, animating her into life—which was a form of vanity or youthful self-centeredness perhaps. (In reality, women like my mother could run the world.)

Back in 2008, I wrote a short story with Margot, who would become the main character of my novel, as its protagonist—an administrative assistant at a nonprofit for people with disabilities. The focus had been on the doldrums of her job and her romance with a much older coworker named Jonathan. There was a sense that this character was hiding behind the man and her relationship. But what was she really afraid of?

In the course of writing this story, I imagined her mother calling. I described the tension that existed between them, as it is between myself and my mother, who speak different languages and have now been geographically separated by choice and circumstance. The distance between them only heightened the sense of frustration Margot always felt trying to get her mother to understand her—literally and emotionally. But what if one day her mother stopped picking up the phone? What if one day the phone rang and rang and nothing happened?

Her nightmare and mine had become one.

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BEHIND THE BOOK



But *The Last Story of Mina Lee*'s sense of place and characters go back even further than that. This novel is the product of the reality that, as a child, I survived a perpetual sense of outsider-ness, both within my family and society, by being quiet. I was bookish and shy. The benefit of this is that I read a lot and I became a listener of stories that circulated around me where I grew up near Koreatown and in Latinx communities where my mother worked. And those stories became the foundation of who I am and how and why I write.

It is also of no coincidence that the bulk of this book was written during the years of 2014 to 2019, a period of increased media coverage of state-sanctioned violence against black and brown communities, separations of migrant children from their families, and a planet on fire. In addition, despite the progress in conversations about sexual violence both at home and in the workplace, we witnessed the appointment of a Supreme Court Justice after Christine Blasey Ford testified against him as a perpetrator of sexual assault. The villains kept winning.

For much of these years, I felt like I was both the abuser and the abused. I had certain privileges as an American-born citizen, and I watched people who had fled from violence like my family—internally displaced people during the Korean War—be stripped of their basic humanity. I was living inside of the abuser.

So although *The Last Story of Mina Lee* is not autobiographical—none of the events actually happened in my life—it is deeply personal and unique to my circumstances and sensitivities, the time period and place in which we live. This book is a reflection of the fear and shame and the sense of both foreignness and debt that I have felt in every community and household that has ever graciously included me. This book is both an expression of my gratitude to those families and a way of gathering the complexity of someone who has never quite belonged under one roof. It is also born out of a sense of outrage that I am sure I am not alone in right now.

Stories can be many things. They sprout from and vine through our personal and collective subconscious like dreams and nightmares, too. They can also be a kind of love letter—to a certain person or time and place. Or an act of revenge. What I do believe is that books and the spaces that books create—libraries, bookstores, conversations and exchange—help people feel less lonely and more alive to the beauty of the unexpected. This in and of itself is valuable. Reading widely and making a sincere effort to feel less alone by understanding each other and ourselves a little more is a revolutionary act—one that has been forbidden throughout history in many places around the world.

I hope you love *The Last Story of Mina Lee* and its characters as much as I do. I hope this book helps us each question the limitations we create for ourselves—physically and emotionally—and question whom these divisions benefit the most. What would the world look like if we reached out a little more?

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RECIPES: MAK KIMCHI



“Are you going to stay in Seattle?” her mother had asked. The tidy bob, greying at the temples, had been tucked behind her pink ears, revealing the two gold hoops that glinted like metal lures. Her eyes remained downcast as she bit the mak kimchi, tart and scarlet, that she always made at home.

This is the easiest kimchi, or the most basic kimchi, and a staple of my household growing up.

This will keep in your fridge for a while but is best eaten within one to two weeks. I prefer mine fresh, but when it ripens and begins to sour, you can use it to make kimchi jjigae, bindaetteok, fried rice, etc.

You'll need a very large mixing bowl, a large jar or a few medium jars/glass containers, and disposable plastic gloves for mixing with your hands. Measurements below can be adjusted to taste.

- 2 large (about 3 lbs) napa cabbages
- 1 cup kosher salt
- 1½ cups of gochugaru (Korean chili pepper flakes), adjust for spice level
- 2-3 inches of ginger, peeled and minced
- ¼ cup minced garlic
- 2-3 tablespoons salted shrimp (optional)
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- 1 small/medium yellow onion, diced (optional)
- 2 bunches scallions

- Tear the cabbage leaves off the head, rinse them in the sink several times, and slice them roughly into 2-inch pieces.
- In the mixing bowl, thoroughly mix and rub the kosher salt into the cabbage, ensuring that it is evenly coated. Let the cabbage rest for about 3 hours.
- Rinse salt off the cabbage well and drain.
- Now with your hands, mix and rub the rest of the ingredients in the mixing bowl, massaging the ingredients into the pieces of cabbage. Taste and adjust any of the seasoning.
- Place the kimchi in your jar, using your gloved hands to press down firmly into the leaves to eliminate any air. Leave a little air space at the top of the jar. Close it and store the jar at room temperature overnight.
- Refrigerate it the next day. It's ready to eat immediately. You might see little air bubbles coming up from the bottom of your kimchi. That's okay. It's alive and healthy. ☺

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RECIPES: DOENJANG JJIGAE

4 servings



Mina blew on the soup before tasting what was the most tremendous thing on earth. The brininess of the doenjang on her tongue replenished her body while springtime bloomed like purple wildflowers in her head. It reminded her of the feeling of that first bite of food after losing her parents, when she had been found on the side of a dirt road by an older man, a villager, who had taken her to his house and fed her a single meal of doenjang jjigae before he had to let her go on her own.

Doenjang jjigae is a simple and nutritious stew made with fermented bean paste (doenjang), a briny and comforting base for many Korean soups. Doenjang jjigae can be both a one-pot meal and an accompaniment or side to a main dish.

4–5 cups water

¼ cup of doenjang

5–7 dried anchovies, heads and guts removed

(It's preferred to tie these up in a cheesecloth or a tea ball so that you can remove them easily once the broth has been cooked, but you can also fish them out individually. Some people, like my mother, actually prefer to leave and eat them.)

1 potato, cut into ½-inch cubes

1 container of tofu, cut into 1-inch cubes

1 zucchini, sliced in half lengthwise and then into half-moons about ½-inch thick

½ to 1 yellow or white onion, diced

1 green Korean chili, thinly sliced at a diagonal

2–3 garlic cloves, minced

1 bunch scallions, greens sliced into 1-inch pieces at a diagonal

¼ cup minced garlic

2–3 tablespoons salted shrimp (optional)

1 tablespoon fish sauce

1 small/medium yellow onion, diced (optional)

2 bunches scallions

- In a saucepan, heat about 4 cups of water over medium heat. Add the doenjang. (If it's too salty, you can adjust by adding more water.)
- Add the anchovies and potatoes and let simmer for 10 mins.
- Add tofu, zucchini and onion and let simmer for 5–7 mins.
- Add chili and garlic and let simmer again for 5–7 mins.
- Remove anchovies.
- Taste the soup and adjust with salt if needed. If it's too salty, add water.
- Top with scallion greens and serve.

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RECIPES: BINDAETTEOK

4–6 servings



Mina loved the hot crispy pajeon or bindaetteok fried in the open-air markets back home. The anonymous bustle and then the comfort of a seat on a tiny plastic stool waiting to be fed. The women who cooked in each stall always seemed harried and gruff, yet their mannerisms were also distinctly soothing—as if their no-nonsense approach was only proportional to the tenderness that they were each charged with protecting and providing for in this world. They were women of great power and importance, and they knew it.

Bindaetteok is especially great when it's crispy and right-out-of-the-pan hot. It takes a little bit more effort to prepare but it's dense with vegetables and meat and can be a meal in and of itself. The following is a version of Maangchi's recipe in her wonderful book *Real Korean Cooking*. I use most of her measurements.

For pancakes

1 cup dried peeled mung beans
¼ cup glutinous rice
6 ounces mung bean sprouts
¾ cup water
2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
2 teaspoons kosher salt
Ground black pepper to taste
4 ounces ground pork
¾ cup well-fermented, sour napa kimchi,
chopped and squeezed and drained of its liquid

1 large egg
4 ounces fresh or soaked and boiled dried
fernbreak (gosari), or fern fiddleheads, if available
4 scallions, greens sliced into 1-inch pieces at a
diagonal
2 garlic cloves, minced
Vegetable oil for cooking

For dipping sauce

2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 tablespoon vinegar (white distilled,
or rice vinegar is fine)

- Let the dried mung beans and glutinous rice soak together overnight in a large bowl of water.
- The next day, combine the soaked mung beans, rice and ¾ cup water in a food processor for a couple minutes until it's creamy. Then transfer the batter to a large bowl.
- Blanch the fresh mung bean sprouts in a boiling pot of water. Rinse under cold water and squeeze out as much liquid as you can. Toss the blanched sprouts together with a bit of sesame oil and salt. Season with pepper to taste.
- Add all of the remaining ingredients (pork, kimchi, egg, fiddleheads/fernbreak, sprouts, etc.) for the pancakes into the large bowl with the batter and mix well.
- Heat a skillet on medium-high with enough vegetable oil to coat the bottom of the pan. Once it's hot, add about a cup of the batter to make a 6-inch round pancake. After a couple minutes, turn the pancake over once it's golden brown. Repeat twice until golden brown and crispy on both sides. Add more vegetable oil when needed. There will be about 6 pancakes total when you're done.
- Make the dipping sauce by combining the soy sauce and vinegar in a little bowl.
- Serve ASAP with dipping sauce on the side.