

EVERYTHING HERE IS BEAUTIFUL / Reading Group Guide

Introduction:

Everything Here Is Beautiful is a tale of two sisters—as different as night and day, but tethered by an unshakable bond, even when they are half a world apart. Miranda, the older, is straitlaced and serious, responsible because she has never had another choice. Lucia, the younger, is headstrong and impulsive, prone to living life on a grand scale. Their connection, and the ways in which it is tested, is at the heart of this story.

Miranda has been her sister’s protector for as long as she can remember—ever since she and her pregnant mother emigrated from Shanghai to America. Years later, after their mother’s death, Lucia’s impetuous nature leads her to marry an older, charismatic Israeli shopkeeper, only to leave him abruptly to have a baby with a young Latino immigrant. While Lucia is busy rushing into life-changing decisions, at times with cataclysmic results, Miranda tries to escape her caretaker role, marrying a Swiss doctor and seeking new allegiances. But when Lucia’s lucidity begins to falter and she starts hearing voices, Miranda must find a way to save her sister without losing herself in the process.

Told in alternating points of view, *Everything Here Is Beautiful* spans years and continents, following Miranda and Lucia from East Coast cities to a tiny village in Ecuador to the mountains of Switzerland. The push-and-pull between the sisters, as they struggle to do the right thing for themselves and for each other, yields an intimate and powerful family drama. Lee tenderly captures Lucia’s struggle, and its ripple effects on those around her, in this stirring and beautifully written tale of the ties that bind us across oceans, over time, and through chaos and heartbreak.

Discussion questions:

Lee has described her characters as “flawed and imperfect, but all trying really hard to do the right thing.” Which character did you empathize with most? Least? Why? Do you have a favorite?

Many of the characters in the novel struggle to find balance between self-fulfillment and obligation to others. Miranda has always been the family caretaker, but as an adult, what role should she play in her sister’s life? Did you find her actions caring or meddling? What does she owe to Lucia, and what does she owe to herself?

Much of the story focuses on Lucia’s quest to be more than just her illness, to create a full life. But Lucia’s decisions also impact others—Yonah, Manny, Miranda, Stefan, Essy—forcing them to adapt their lives in turn. Did you find Lucia’s actions selfish or selfless? Why? And what would you have done if you were in Lucia’s situation in the campo? Have you ever had to choose between what you want for yourself and what’s best for someone you love (e.g., a child)?

Manny has to live with the brunt of Lucia’s illness. At one point he reflects: “This was love, or this was duty, he could no longer tell the difference.” What is the difference? When does love turn into duty and

when does duty become love? Do you consider Manny loyal, or is he simply passive? How much did his infidelities bother you? Do Manny and Lucia love each other?

In the book, Lee writes, “immigrants are the strongest. . . . Everywhere we go, we rebuild.” All the characters in the novel are immigrants, rebuilding their lives in some way. But who is running away from something, and who is running toward something? How do their immigrant experiences differ?

How does ethnicity/culture play into this novel? Would you consider this an ethnic novel? Why or why not? Could the same story have been told if the characters were white?

Lucia points out that in our society, cancer survivors are viewed much differently from people who live with mental illness. Do you agree? Do you know someone who has a mental illness? How does stigma affect our views of mental illness?

Anosognosia, or “lack of insight,” is a frequent symptom of psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and makes these illnesses especially difficult to treat. How do you help someone who doesn’t realize they are ill? How did you feel about Manny putting pills in Lucia’s tea?

“He tried so hard to love her—yet how best to love her still eluded him.” The men in the book struggle with how best to love the women in their lives. Should Yonah have let Lucia walk out of their marriage so easily? Should Stefan have supported Miranda’s efforts to help her sister at the expense of her own well-being? Are there right or wrong ways to love someone?

Who is most to blame for Lucia’s end? Herself? Yonah? Miranda? Manny? Could someone have done something differently to alter the outcome? What do you think happened to Lucia?

Q&A with Mira T. Lee:

- 1. You have called *Everything Here Is Beautiful* “a messy family drama”—one that examines our responsibilities to our loved ones, and what happens when personal fulfillment is at odds with familial obligation. Can you expand on that a little, and why you wanted to dig into this theme?**

The quick answer would be, families *are* messy, and this makes for rich storytelling. I imagine just about every family harbors its own secrets, dysfunction, stubborn patterns and hidden resentments borne in childhood that you can’t ever quite escape. We don’t get to choose our families, yet we’re bound to them by this odd combination of love and obligation. Add to that the pressures of illness or immigration or marital strife, and you get something pretty fraught. A mentor of mine once said, “Never guess at the interior lives of others.” But the writer in me wanted to do just that—explore the interior lives of my characters as they bumped up against one another. I’ve always been drawn to “gray areas,” those difficult situations with no right or wrong

answers, where good people find themselves in conflict and nobody can win without hurting someone they love. I like complexity, and family dynamics are really, really complicated.

- 2. Much of the book deals with what it is like to struggle with mental illness, or to love someone who does—yet you have said you did not want this to be a book “about” mental illness. What do you mean by that? Why did you choose to tackle this topic, and what story did you want to tell about mental illness?**

Mental illness, and particularly, schizophrenia, is a subject matter very close to my heart. I’ve seen my own family members struggle with it, and it is, in a word, devastating. But I didn’t want to write a book about an illness, I wanted to write a story about *lives*—specifically, four very different lives, and how each one’s trajectory was impacted by Lucia’s. These illnesses are unpredictable and pervasive, they screw up marriages, derail careers, jeopardize lifelong relationships with family and friends. Crises happen just as a parent gets sick, or a baby is born, or as Immigration shows up to deport an undocumented family member. And our mental healthcare system is riddled with intractable problems. Embedding Lucia’s illness within such storylines allowed for a much broader scope and more compelling plot, which hopefully keeps readers turning pages. I like a story with lots of nuance, and the ripple effects of mental illness certainly provide for that. But it also has to move, entertain, engage.

- 3. The novel switches between perspectives, allowing the reader to access both Miranda and Lucia’s points of view, as well as those of Manny and Yonah, the men in Lucia’s life. What motivated this narrative choice, and did you find it challenging to get into the heads of the different characters?**

I wanted to explore all the different sides of these predicaments I’d put my characters in, and having them speak from their own vantage points, each with their own stake in Lucia’s wellbeing, made for richer characterizations. It also felt natural in terms of the way the plot moved. The tricky part was finding the right voice for each section. It was interesting though, because you’d think the men might be harder to write, since on the surface they appear less similar to me. But their voices were clear, and I could wiggle into their heads through our commonalities—like Manny’s experience as the terrified parent of a newborn, or Stefan’s concern over his spouse’s decisions. Lucia’s voice was by far the most difficult. I always envisioned her as being much more brilliant and perceptive than I am, which posed a real challenge. It’s humbling to realize that a character can only be as brilliant as her creator, but I kept feeling like I was holding her back!

- 4. The book also jumps around geographically, from New York to the Swiss Alps, to a tiny village in Ecuador. What compelled you about these distinct and diverse settings? How did you go about making them come alive on the page?**

I think the men came before the settings. That is, the story originated in New York, but veered geographically out of necessity, because the sisters became involved with men from these other countries. Switzerland and Ecuador definitely fit with the sisters’ personalities, but honestly, when I started writing, I had no idea so much of the book would take place overseas! “Going there” felt quite daunting. But I’d spent time in those places, and I researched further by reading

travel blogs by expats and backpackers, as well as local news sites. I also collected photographs that I'd describe—a dirt road, or a crowded bus, for example. Having visual references was really helpful; it's the smallest details that make a place come to life.

5. Narratives of mental illness are often white and middle-class, yet mental illness does not discriminate—it devastates regardless of race, gender, and ethnicity. Was it important for you to challenge that narrative, and to have a wide cast of characters from different backgrounds?

It wasn't my intention to challenge the predominantly white, middle-class narrative of mental illness we most often see these days; I wrote the book with characters from all different backgrounds simply because such people have been the norm in my own life. At some point I did wonder, should I make my characters white? Cross-cultural stories in America still seem rare in fiction, but it's true, mental illnesses do not discriminate. I decided to keep my characters the way they were, and now I'm really glad I did. I think it's important to see these illnesses portrayed in communities of color, where stigma can be especially strong. And I'd argue that it's also important to see stories starring people of color that don't necessarily fit into the expected frameworks, for example, of an "Asian-American story" or a "cultural novel." I like surprises. And I don't want to have to write only what's expected of me.

6. At one point in the novel, Miranda and Lucia's mother says, "Immigrants are the strongest... Everywhere we go, we rebuild." Can you talk about the role that immigration, and cultural displacement, plays in the novel?

In my twenties and early thirties, it seemed like everyone I knew came from another country: first generation immigrants, international students, visiting scientists, musicians, programmers, small business owners, legal, illegal, you name it. And all matter of romantic entanglements were going on! So my characters, too, all go through periods of cultural displacement. I liked the off-kilter feeling it provided, how no one ever felt quite grounded, and even if one character was "home," their spouse/partner wasn't, which set up lots of natural conflicts. I also liked exploring the reasons people choose to leave their home countries, how sometimes they're moving towards something (opportunity, promises, family); but sometimes they're also running away (from their pasts, their secrets, their families, expectations).

7. *Everything Here Is Beautiful* is an intimate book about love, loss, and family. But it also revolves around larger societal and institutional concerns like mental illness, immigration, and healthcare. How did you balance the scope of the narrative, and tackle those big issues, while still keeping it a personal and emotionally poignant story?

I always thought of it as a small, organic story. I think if I'd thought about it as tackling "big issues," I might've felt like I was supposed to Say Something Important, which probably would've just come off as contrived or pedantic, or turned my characters into archetypes. So it was always about the narrative, family relationships. At points, I do try to educate the reader about some of the issues involved with psychotic illnesses—anosognosia ("lack of insight"), for example, or medications, or how the mental health care system works (or doesn't)—because the reader needs an understanding of these issues in order to relate to Miranda's frustrations. To me,

great fiction happens when we find the humanity in each of our characters, no matter who they are or what their situations may be. Even when we're unfamiliar with a particular experience, we can relate at an emotional level. I think that's what empathy is all about.

8. What do you hope readers will take away from *Everything Here Is Beautiful*?

I do hope readers will gain a sense of the issues surrounding schizophrenia, which is perhaps still the most severe and stigmatized of all the mental illnesses, but one deserving of just as much compassion. I also hope people see that these illnesses are only one component of a person's life, and can relate to the humanity at the core of each of these characters—as sisters, mothers, husbands, lovers, as modern women, as deeply flawed human beings who yearn for love and belonging. But I also hope readers will disagree over what these characters should or shouldn't have done. The world is gray, full of contradictions, and if I've managed to illuminate some aspect of that, then I think I've done this story justice.