



Real Americans

by Rachel Khong

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Discussion Questions

1. What does the book title, *Real Americans*, mean in relation to the entire story?
2. The story starts with a mini prologue when May, Lily's mother and Nick's grandmother, consumes an ancient lotus seed, which has rippling effects for the entire family. Why was important to include this scene in the novel? What does it say about May's character when she decided to consume the seed instead of study it?
3. What were your initial impressions of Lily during the section dedicated to her romance with Matthew? Why were her and Matthew drawn to each other?
4. Lily's mother did not hide her unhappiness about the marriage between Lily and Matthew. When did it become apparent there was more to the story there?
5. We eventually learn that Otto, Matthew's father, and May experimented on their own children with the idea of changing their futures for the better. Why did May and Otto feel compelled to embark on this? And how did it change both of their families for good?
6. Lily is horrified when she finds out the truth and leaves behind her mother for good. How would you have reacted if you were Lily? Why didn't Matthew join Lily and Nick?
7. We then jump to Nick's timeline where's he's a somewhat lost 15-year-old. Lily lied to him about several key facts about his family. Let's talk about the impact of Lily's lies on Nick.
8. Eventually Nick does reconnect with Matthew and is rather taken in with Matthew's world. What did you think about the dynamic between Matthew and Nick?
9. Nick looks almost like a carbon copy of Matthew. But regarding his personality and outlook on life, do you feel he was more similar with Lily or Matthew?
10. Matthew has another son and he is an addict and trying everything to get his father's attention. Eventually he overdoses and dies right in front of Nick. How did this traumatic experience change his perception of Matthew and that side of the family?
11. The third section is dedicated to May, who tracks down Nick in her 80s and eventually tells him the truth about everything. What were your thoughts as you read all the reveals by May? Did it make her more sympathetic as a character? Why or why not?
12. We learn Nick is involved with a start up that is also focused on changing one's future and life expectancy. Why is this family so focused on changing genetics? What are they trying to avoid and also change?

13. What did you think about the ending and Lily finally reuniting with May?

14. What happens next for Nick, Lily and Matthew going forward?

Author Interview

PW TALKS WITH RACHEL KHONG: Love Languages

by Sara Davis

In *Real Americans*, Khong explores the varied experiences of Chinese immigrants and their descendants.

Publishers Weekly: This novel has a wider scope than your debut, *Goodbye, Vitamin*. Could you talk about what went into it?

Rachel Khong: My first book had one narrator, a young Asian American woman, and people love to conflate authors with their narrators. So with this book I was excited to write from different perspectives. Lily is an Asian American woman but she's coming of age a little before I did. Nick is a teenage boy, and May is a much older Asian woman. I feel a lot in common with that teenage boy and with that elderly woman, but people often just see the demographic and make assumptions.

PW: Or assume that Lily would be the easiest character for you to write.

RK: Yes, but I actually did research for all three, because Lily started college in 1999, a few years before I did, and then I did research into May's section in China during the Cultural Revolution, and then I talked to a high school guidance counselor for Nick.

PW: One way Lily must differ from you is her lack of direction. She's not sure what she wants to do and she doesn't have the drive that being a writer requires. Did you feel aimless at an earlier time in your life?

RK: No, but I don't like that I am driven, either.

PW: Really?

RK: This novel is very much about various types of American propaganda—the belief in achievement and exceptionalism, the idea that it's so important to have a career and be ambitious. I was raised with that, and it's something I question as an adult because it feels so in service of capitalism.

PW: What were you reading while writing this book?

RK: I started working on *Real Americans* right after the 2016 election and I think I was in shock. I wanted to write something immersive and escapist, and I was sucked in by Ferrante's Neapolitan series.

PW: At one point May says about her daughter, Lily, "The way I loved her was different from the way she wanted to be loved." What does that line mean to you?

RK: I've thought versions of that sentence for a long time. I came to the U.S. when I was two; my parents are Chinese but from Malaysia, and there is a disconnect in how we communicate with one another. My parents speak pretty good English, but they come from a totally different culture. So often in my life they have expressed love that wasn't the specific love that I wanted. Or I wanted them to say something, and they didn't say it the right way. I think I just want to hear more positive reinforcement and they just want me to exist in the same room as them.

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Author Biography

I'm a writer living in Los Angeles. My debut novel, *Goodbye, Vitamin*, won the 2017 California Book Award for First Fiction, and was a Los Angeles Times Book Prize Finalist for First Fiction. From 2011 to 2016, I was the managing editor then executive editor of *Lucky Peach* magazine. With *Lucky Peach*, I also edited a cookbook about eggs, called *All About Eggs*. In 2018, I founded *The Ruby*, a work and event space for women and nonbinary writers and artists in San Francisco's Mission district; I retired at the end of 2021. My second novel, *Real Americans*, was published by Knopf in April 2024, and was an instant New York Times bestseller. My story collection, *My Dear You*, is forthcoming from Knopf in April 2026. I write the monthly newsletter, *Short Story Short*.

<https://www.rachelkhong.com/about>

Reviews

A Gripping Family Saga Asks, What Makes for ‘Real Americans’?

Rachel Khong’s new novel follows three generations of Chinese Americans as they all fight for self-determination in their own way.

by Wilson Wong

Wilson Wong is an editing resident at the Book Review.

As the story goes, after the death of China’s first emperor in 210 B.C., Chen Sheng, a military captain, organized a motley band of soldiers in a revolt against the Qin dynasty and its harsh penal laws. Sheng was defeated, but he became known for his belief that one’s status is not intrinsic — that one can change, grow, transcend. “Are kings, generals and ministers merely born into their kind?” he asked, a rhetorical question that became a rallying cry about identity and self-determination.

That is the same kind of query that propels Rachel Khong’s new novel, “Real Americans,” which begins with a scene involving an enchanted lotus seed supposedly “carried to the first emperor of united China in the mouth of a dragon.” Part historical fiction and part family saga, the book homes in on this inquiry: Can we change who we fundamentally are, or who we were meant to be? Or, are we inevitable? What do we make, then, of those who come after us?

“Real Americans,” which comes after Khong’s 2017 debut, “Goodbye, Vitamin,” is a sprawling novel, divided into three sections, each told from a different generation of a Chinese American family. It opens in New York in 1999, with Lily, a poor, unpaid media intern, falling in love with Matthew, a “distractingly hot” WASP-y aristocrat (read: blue-eyed, blond, white and rich). After a complicated courtship that is buoyed by passion but unsettled by their class differences, they get married and have a son; then Lily learns that her family and Matthew’s family are secretly more intertwined than she thought.

Before we see how this discovery plays out, we jump to 2021. Matthew and Lily’s child, Nick, is now a teenager, plagued by the usual jitters that accompany adolescence: puberty, first love, college applications. He and Lily now live in Washington, but curiously absent from their life is Matthew, whom Nick does not know. An auspicious match on a DNA test brings him to clandestine encounters with his father, meetings that threaten to unravel Nick’s world because they prompt him to question what role, if any, Matthew should play in his life and force him to reckon with his mother’s shrouded past.

Then the story leaps forward again, now to 2030 from the perspective of Lily's mother and Nick's grandmother, a geneticist named May. She recounts the turbulent conditions she endured under Mao Zedong's China, the difficult circumstances she overcame to escape to and survive in the United States and how one scientific discovery caroms through her posterity.

The story is full of family secrets and discoveries that could easily veer into melodrama, but Khong is a deft writer who grounds even the most sweeping themes and scenes. Her eye is especially attuned to the fickle markers of race and the illusion of the American dream. "Real Americans" — which covers more than 80 years, and touches on everything from the Cultural Revolution to Sept. 11 to the fight against affirmative action — is as much about being Asian in America as it is about the working class, the politically disenfranchised and the universal quest to understand the self.

As the novel unfolds, the story drops delicious mysteries that guide the reader: Why and how did Lily and Matthew's fairy-tale relationship come to an end? How is Nick, who is mixed race, somehow a clone of Matthew who bears no resemblance to his Chinese American mother, Lily? And how and why is May familiar, perhaps too familiar, with Matthew's father, a pharmaceutical executive? Khong has a gift for building suspense, crafting a story so compulsively bingeable that the pages essentially turn themselves.

That tension, however, is sometimes lost for banal sentences ("This was an artist's task, he explained, to observe"). And Khong hammers the novel's theme of who or what constitutes an American so bluntly and so repetitively — "I was as American as they came"; "We may look Chinese, but we have no loyalty to China. We want to be American" — that the writing can feel didactic.

Still, the novel's ambition is admirable, and it's easy to get lost in the unspoken truths between Lily, Nick and May as they try to knit themselves into a coherent whole. It appears to matter less, Khong suggests, what our environment or nationality is than the people, both chosen and biological, that we elect to surround ourselves with. "Aren't we lucky?" she writes. "Our DNA encodes innumerable people, and yet it's you and I who are here." Indeed how lucky we readers are to be acquainted with these Americans, imagined and alive.