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Everything I Never Told You review – Amazon’s best book of the year by Celeste Ng

An acute portrait of family psychopathology - this debut crime thriller is a surprise choice as Amazon’s book of the year

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Although no literary prize can claim scientific objectivity for its judgments, one might be suspicious of a trophy given by Amazon. In their list of the 100 best books of the year, announced last week, the editors expressed hope that awarding the top slot to Celeste Ng’s debut novel will help it become “the blockbuster it deserves to be”, hints that saleability and marketing may be at least as important as literary quality.

And, at first, such cynicism seems justified. *Everything I Never Told You* starts, as now seems to be statutory for almost all crime stories on page and screen, with a sudden disappearance: in this case, teenager Lydia Lee, who is soon found dead in a lake, drowned by either suicide or murder. The repeated word “gone” tolls through the prose like a funeral bell and you begin to congratulate the publisher for its impressive self-control in not simply retitling the book *Girl, Gone* in order to

maximise its appeal. By the third of the 12 chapters, though, it is apparent that there is much here that might impress Pulitzer and Man Booker judges as well as the panellists of an online bookseller.

The book opens in 1977, with chapters taking place in that year alternating with sections set in the mid 60s, when a previous crisis – also involving a missing person – struck the Lee family, which comprises James, a Chinese-American history professor at an Ohio college, his wife Marilyn, a Yankee-American medical school dropout, and their three children.

The choice of a 70s setting is an indicator of the damage that modern technology and ideological progress have done to the plotting options of crime writers. Ng's narrative depends on Lydia having left little trace and misleading her parents about key friendships – feats nearly impossible since the advent of mobile phones and Facebook. The story-driving decisions made by the characters, meanwhile, are almost all driven by overt racism of the sort that mixed-race families would have faced then rather than the covert and coded bigotry that is more common now. “Children of Mixed Backgrounds Often Struggle to Find Their Place” is a now-shocking headline in the newspaper coverage of Lydia's funeral.

It becomes progressively clear that *Everything I Never Told You* refers as much to James and Marilyn's relationship as to the information Lydia has withheld from them. As the loss of their daughter puts pressure on their marriage, racial and cultural fissures appear. When Marilyn uses the Anglicised Chinese word “kowtow” during an argument, it has the explosively redefining effect that the term “spook” causes in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. It is a measure of the book's linguistic subtlety that, apart from that thoughtless allusion to stereotypical Oriental subservience, the only other significant Chinese term is *char siu bau*, a type of pork bun cooked for James by a woman in whom he dangerously confides because she has an aspect that his wife can never match.

Ng brilliantly depicts the destruction that parents can inflict on their children and on each other. For reasons of their own, Marilyn is desperate for Lydia to become a doctor, while James's fondest hope is for his daughter to become an American and be friends with all the gleaming-toothed, white-faced high-school girls. Crucially, James's academic speciality is the history of the cowboy, which he selected as the subject of study most specific to the US. But Lydia, as we learn in scenes from the past, cannot see herself becoming the all-American physician of her folks' dreams. It is the pressure to do so that effectively kills her.

Each of her family suffers some kind of identity crisis: her brother Nathan is off to Harvard, where his reception will not be uniformly warm. And does Nathan's conviction that their neighbour Jack knows how his sister died result from a belief that the boy is a murderer, or that he is a racist?

Some crime devotees may find the novel short on twists and deaths; Ng is most impressive in the less generic novelistic skill of the piercing detail – a single stray novelty sock on the floor of a teenager's room, a toe smudge on a wall where a young couple made love decades before in a bedroom they had just painted.

Everything I Never Told You ranks with acute novels of family psycho-pathology such as Jane Hamilton's *A Map of the World* and Laura Lippman's *What the Dead Know*. This offering from Amazon, it turns out, should not be discounted.