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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng

Summary

Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet.

So begins this exquisite novel about a Chinese American family living in 1970s small-town Ohio. Lydia is the favorite child of Marilyn and James Lee, and her parents are determined that she will fulfill the dreams they were unable to pursue. But when Lydia's body is found in the local lake, the delicate balancing act that has been keeping the Lee family together is destroyed, tumbling them into chaos.

A profoundly moving story of family, secrets, and longing, *Everything I Never Told You* is both a gripping page-turner and a sensitive family portrait, uncovering the ways in which mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives struggle, all their lives, to understand one another.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the relationships between Nath, Lydia, and Hannah. How do the siblings both understand and mystify one another?
2. Why do you think Lydia is the favorite child of James and Marilyn? How does this pressure affect Lydia, and what kind of impact do you think it has on Nath and Hannah? Do you think it is more difficult for Lydia to be the favorite, or for Nath and Hannah, who are often overlooked by their parents?
3. How did you react to the "Marco Polo" pool scene with James and Nath? What do you think of James's decision?
 - *"So part of him wanted to tell Nath that he knew: what it was like to be teased, what it was like to never fit in. The other part of him wanted to shake his son, to slap him. To shape him into something different.... When Marilyn asked what happened, James said merely, with a wave of the hand, 'Some kids teased him at the pool yesterday. He needs to learn to take a joke.'"*
4. Discuss a situation in which you've felt like an outsider. How do the members of the Lee family deal with being measured against stereotypes and others' perceptions?

5. What is the meaning of the novel's title? To whom do the "I" and "you" refer?
6. What would have happened if Lydia had reached the dock? Do you think she would have been able to change her parents' views and expectations of her?
7. This novel says a great deal about the influence our parents can have on us. Do you think the same issues will affect the next generation of Lees? How did your parents influence your childhood?
8. Discuss the relationship Marilyn and her mother have to cooking and their roles as stay-at-home mothers. Do you think one is happier or more satisfied?
 - *"It struck her then, as if someone had said it aloud: her mother was dead, and the only thing worth remembering about her, in the end, was that she cooked. Marilyn thought uneasily of her own life, of hours spent making breakfasts, serving dinners, packing lunches into neat paper bags."*
9. The footprint on the ceiling brings Nath and Lydia closer when they are young, and later, Hannah and James discover it together and laugh. What other objects bring the characters closer together or drive them further apart?
10. There's so much that the characters keep to themselves. What do you wish they had shared with one another? Do you think an ability to better express themselves would have changed the outcome of the book?