



Bone

Fae Myenne Ng

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A profoundly moving journey into San Francisco's Chinatown that is "brutal and poignant, dreamy and gritty, specific to its place and resonant in its implication about what it means to be an American."-- "Seattle Times/Post Intelligencer"

Bone Details

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Hayley says

Fae Myenne Ng's 'Bone' explores two generations of a family. There is Mah, the matriarch, simultaneously tied to Salmon Alley (their pocket of San Francisco's Chinatown) and to her Chinese origins. The patriarch is Leon, who cannot seem to get ahead in the American capitalistic system. Leon takes odd jobs on ships, consistently changing his geographic location. Ona, moving from her mother's home, appears to have lost all sense of identity before eventually dying by suicide. Resentful Nina escapes Chinatown and Leila is put between the middle of her mother's world and her own reality. The three daughters react against their parents in different ways, while the narrator Leila is the most complacent.

Most inspiring about Bone, to me, is the way Ng uses location (both physical and "social location") to tell the story. Each character's relation to their childhood home, whether far removed or still living in it subtly tells the reader about what that character's life is like.

Ona commits suicide by jumping off the Nam, a housing project "just before...the shadow [leads] out of Chinatown." This physical location identifies her social location at the time: she stands on the precipice between her home and the frightening outside world. Leon warned his young daughters that as long as they are "inside Chinatown, it's safe...outside, it's different".

Social location in response to physical location is something I would like to consider as a writer.

Tova Krakauer says

Bone lays out every important event in the first chapter and then moves backwards in time from there. The book feels as intimate and strongly personal as a memoir, possibly because of the unadorned writing, the characters boldly but subtly drawn. The backpedaling time frame is deeply moving but maybe also the cause of the book's lack of momentum; there's no intrigue or suspense or even, strictly speaking, character development. Lovely, lovely book but not very interesting.

Ellyn Lem says

It was funny to re-read "Bone" for an ethnic literature class that I am teaching, while simultaneously reading Foer's "Here I am," which also could be included in this class. While Foer's novel was bloated with excess, Ng's work is minimalism as its finest in recounting the story of a second-generation family of girls, living in San Francisco's Chinatown. While students are sometimes put off by the non-linear narrative. . .going back and forth in time with no apparent ordering of events, Ng has said that it is her tribute to water, central to the old-time immigrants' experience, as waves move water forward and, then, also recede. Perhaps what I appreciate most about this book is Ng's bittersweet reflection of her native Chinatown, both its claustrophobic intensity but also the communal devotion and camaraderie among the residents, who work incredibly hard to stay afloat. The spareness of prose almost has a Haiku feel to it at times, but the story is contemporary in every way--people who are living in two different worlds trying to figure out how to honor the past and forge an independent life from previous generations. A loving tribute to her own family, who she has said cannot read the novel due to their limited English, but she knows they are proud nonetheless.

dianne says

This is a story written by the eldest daughter of an immigrant Chinese family in San Francisco. She attempts to please and keep pieces together; imagining - as often oldest children do, that they are responsible for the emotional care and upkeep - of the family - especially in times of crisis. This family sustains the worst kind - the suicide of the middle daughter by jumping off a familiar building.

The tenth day of the Chinese New Year.

"The Day of Thieves. Someone stole Ona. Ona hadn't wanted to go."

We can't believe they wanted to go. Gone before they'd had a chance to ask. To save her. Imagining a fireman's net, a save in free fall. The truth of these images i know. I was a medical intern, 3000 miles away when a sibling chose suicide, i too spent years dreaming of how i could surgically bring him back, sew his pieces back to life, magically catch his free fall - like this sister loving, flailing and completely without answers, dreams of reconstructing her immeasurable loss.

This book offers sincerity, a look into the struggles of being the first fresh generation closely tied to an intact and powerful Chinatown (or one of several in SF). But what some found "clear" "undecorated" prose i found plodding and arid.

There was also a confusing timeline, well, actually no timeline; so we never quite know where the characters stand with each other. Maybe that's the point - that those relationships never change, those bonds, that hierarchy, those responsibilities. Maybe. I was hoping for more.

Sylvia Tedesco says

We read this as a book group selection this September ('09). Our group had mixed feelings but I thought it well worth reading. The story is so personal and immediate. It seems as if it is a memoir. The action takes place in San Francisco, the family is stuck between first and immigrant generations. I felt the honesty and confusion of these people and the author. The problems of making a living, keeping ties to the family are strongly portrayed. The author has some lovely language, but mostly it is a day to day portrayal of people struggling mightily with understanding each other, why one daughter jumped off a building to her death, why the father, Leong, could not find a secure place in the economic order. The mother, father, three sisters and the "sewing ladies" draw us into the daily life of a San Francisco life.

Mary says

Excellent novel of a Chinese American family from the view of the second generation first born daughter. Ng provides a sense of place (San Francisco), time and experiences of being a Chinese immigrant (through Mah and Leon) and the responsibilities/obligations of being the first daughter. The struggles of learning a new language, translating for parents limited English, finding jobs as immigrants and cultural practices all swirl around a tragic incident with the second daughter Ona. The story is told in an extremely non-linear fashion that some readers will not care for.

Julie Ehlers says

Maybe I should change the 3 stars I gave *Bone* to 4 stars, because I'm still thinking about this book several weeks later. Set in San Francisco, *Bone* is a tale of strained relations between Chinese immigrant parents and their Chinese-American offspring (three sisters, one of whom, Leila, is our narrator). This theme might put some of readers in mind of the wildly popular *The Joy Luck Club*, but I think Amy Tan's book was a bit more idealized than this one. *Bone*, to me, is grittier and more vivid, and the characters more real, in both good ways and bad.

I see some reviews here on Goodreads have been hidden for spoilers, although I'm not sure why, because everything is revealed on the first few pages: One of Leila's sisters committed suicide a while back by jumping off a building. Meanwhile, in the present day, Leila has eloped with her boyfriend to New York City, and is just now breaking the news to her parents. From there the book proceeds backward in time, until eventually we're at the day when the suicide happens. This is a pretty bold move on Ng's part—to give us all this information up front, before we really care about anyone or know the import of Leila's elopement. It seemed gimmicky to me at first, and I had my doubts that the gamble would pay off, but for me it did. I'd say Ng worked some kind of magic trick, but really it's just plain old-fashioned good writing. I think this book would reward a second reading, particularly since I just realized I have no idea why it's called *Bone*.

Ying says

If you (dare!) read and frame this as an identity piece, you will not only be disappointed, but will be enacting violence on bodily marked history and memory.

"He went into his variation on three or four themes: Going back to China, only a bowl of bitterness to show for his life as a coolie. No one grateful. No one compassionate."

Oof! I know that in pain, pleasure still exists in the interstices. But there is too much in this, and too little at the same time.

Eli says

Ng's writing is stylistically beautiful, vivid and evocative. I wanted to like this book. But nothing happens. And while I favor character-driven fiction over plot-driven, the characters do have to drive something. A book where nothing happens isn't worth the time. Ng blows her hand by telling us everything in the first few pages; then, when the entire 2nd half of the book is flashback, there's nothing new to learn. She sets up the mystery of why Ona jumped and then gives us nothing to go on. And the hopeful ending isn't all that hopeful when we already know what happens after it. At least, I think we do. The book operates in 3 different timeframes, and knowing which one we're in when is devilishly difficult. A frustrating book made moreso by the promise that seems to be wasted.

Aishe says

Ng's first novel really captures the lives of an intergenerational Chinese American family. Her writing reframes the American dream, complicates it, and reflects more reality than the usual depictions.

Zoe says

[(her half-sister Ona kills herself) (hide spoiler)]

Ijeoma says

Let me start off by saying Bone by Fae Myenne Ng is a good novel. The storyline is interesting, the characters are real, and the choice of words Ng uses to convey ideas to the reader are clean and beautiful. I gave the book 3.5 stars out of 5, though on GoodReads, it will show up as 3 for obvious reasons.

This is the story of two generations in a Chinese family in America. The story is told from the point of view of the eldest child, Leila, who recounts the problems/ issues that plague the family. At the start of the story, we are told that the middle child, Ona, committed suicide. That is not a spoiler- that fact literally hits you in the face on the first page, in the first sentence. But Ona is not the only one with issues in this family. Every single one of them has them, and Leila looks back over the years with her family to understand where it all began.

A theme I initially found was the strong desire for the characters to maintain their family. There was the desire to want to impress and feel like family. However, as members took on other members issues, the burdens with time, took their toll and caused each member to “drift apart”. Leila, the eldest, internalized her step- father and mother’s issues. Ona internalized her father’s issues, and Nina, the last -born, felt the burdens and later decided, that her parents’ issues should be their OWN issues, not hers. So there is some character development that is observed later in the novel.

Ng’s style of writing is expressive, yet not cluttered with words. Her succinct descriptions of characters, events and locations paint a picture for readers, but at the same time, allow for readers to draw on their own personal experiences to help them understand what is taking place. One thing I found unique was how Ng allowed readers into some of the personal issues of the characters, and others she left to be private.

Some reviewers noted they were turned off by the narration moving forward and then moving back in history with no warning. I did not have an issue with this and rather saw the transition as a reflection on the current situation. I did not find it distracting, but to each, his own.

Joel Einfeldt says

Hard book for me to read at the beginning, but once I realized it was written, like Leon says about the ships moving 8 miles back to go 1 mile forward, with flash backs as the narrative moved forward, it began to make

more sense. I think this book, read in a deconstructionist lens, makes a lot of sense when deconstructing what "bones" are, as they signify the unending discovery of centers in our own lives. Leila, in her hopes of discovering the "bones"/centers of the problems that happen in her family, she discovers that the bones are innumerable. Not only are they innumerable, but the bones in our lives tend not to matter in the end.

Catherine says

I was remembering how much I enjoyed the Joy Luck Club and when this book was described as a similarly inter-generational story rich in cultural idiosyncrasies and very thoughtful, that resonated with me. I really enjoyed it; the sense of place and presence was very strong, and the storytelling was wonderful.

Michelle says

If you read the Asian section of Ronald Takaki's [A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America](#), this would be the perfect book to read. Understanding the history of an Asian's life in the United States during the early 1800s to the late 1900s, you would see why this book's family is portrayed the way it was. This historical fiction book is in a confusing order but it is mainly about the family dealing with the death of Ona, who jumped off the thirteenth floor while on drugs. The sorrows and sufferings of the Leong family can be reasoned with the historical facts of how Asians were treated and viewed in San Francisco, California in the time period written above.

I really liked this book because it really connected to my history assignment and one of the books I also recently read. RECOMMENDED to all those who read Ronald Takaki's book above.
