One Great Book: Volume III, Episode 5
Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng

[Show Notes](#)

One Great Book Volume III, Book 5: *Everything I Never Told You*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

"If you care about pleasing a man, bake a pie. But make sure it's a perfect pie." You'll find these words, and plenty more like them, in the 1970s Betty Crocker Cookbook relied on by housewives across America. That cookbook was a crucial ingredient in the cognitive brew that was to become the bestselling novel *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng's stunning debut.

Ng's writing process begins with images, and for this novel, she pictured a young girl in deep water. Ng wanted to know who she was, and how she got there. To build on this image, Ng thought of what she knew, her own experiences that might inform the story—her childhood in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, her interracial marriage, that Betty Crocker cookbook. Her mom had a copy when she was a kid; it was much-used, with food spatters and a big crease in the spine from being opened repeatedly to the cookie section. When Celeste Ng thumbed through that old cookbook, she began wondering what it was like to be a woman back then. And not just any woman, but one with ambitions that didn't involve baking a perfect pie.

[01:35]

Celeste Ng is the lone novelist in a family of scientists, but she says there's more overlap between science and writing than you might expect. The way she approaches her novels is similar to the way a scientist takes on an experiment. A scientist investigates how elements behave under certain conditions, and as a writer, Ng does the same, but with people. For both, the key question is "what if?" For *Everything I Never Told You,* Ng's experiment looked like this: what happens if you start with a strong setting, Shaker Heights. Add richly drawn characters, loosely based on Ng's own family. What if you add in 1970s ideas on interracial marriage, sexist messages from a Betty Crocker Cookbook, a family that keeps secrets, a teenager drowned in a lake. I'll tell you what happens: what you get? Is One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

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Readers, I hope you know about the One Great Book bonus episodes available on Patreon. One of my favorite library hacks is requesting new titles BEFORE their release date. And that's why these bonus episodes are dedicated exclusively to books that haven't been released yet–so you can get a jump on the holds list.

But that's just one of the fun perks of being a supporter on Patreon. We also share exclusive peeks behind the scenes, bonus content from my one-hour podcast, What Should I Read Next, and special online events like the Fall Book Preview, where I shared the most anticipated books coming out this fall–35 of them. PLUS there's an entire community of readers in fun, bookish conversation together. Like the essay-of-sorts Brenna shared about how we title our episodes, our September Patron Reading Club where we asked everyone to share all the books they read in September, and bonus audio, like the interview I did with Celeste Ng for a community event here in town.

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"Lydia is dead, but they don't know this yet." That's not a spoiler, that's the opening line of *Everything I Never Told You*. Lydia, the firstborn and favorite daughter to James and Marilyn Lee, is nowhere to be found. Ng drops the reader straight into the middle of the story, the middle of the *family*. She goes on: "1977, May 3, six thirty in the morning, no one knows anything but this innocuous fact: Lydia is late for breakfast."

Oh, but reader. Thanks to Ng's brilliant use of the omniscient narrator, *you* know more than the family does. Not a lot more, at this point, but enough. Ng thought of this point of view as "God with a megaphone, directing the characters," and she uses it to reveal what's happening in her characters' hearts and minds, and to allow readers to grasp the truth, even if the family never does.

When this unexpected loss is discovered, the already-fragile family begins to disintegrate, as do its individual members. From her God-like perspective, Ng swivels the camera around, as it were, so we can see how each member of the family reacts differently to the same events. Ng takes us back in time to show us how the family got to this moment in time—the campus love story of Lydia's parents, James and Marilyn, their struggles, their 1958 interracial marriage, at a time when some states still held such a union to be illegal, Marilyn's desperate wish to make a career for herself despite flimsy support from her family and society, and everyone's constant struggles to fit in as individuals and as a family unit in the predominantly white suburbs where they live. Each family member sees things differently, with one glaring exception: as they struggle to understand why the tragedy happened, they realize they never knew Lydia at all.

[MUSIC]

As we see them grapple with loss, it's clear that this is a family whose members don't know how to talk to each other; despite their best intentions, they've struggled, and failed, to connect. They keep secrets, of course, but more subtly, they keep their very selves hidden away. They're afraid, they're ashamed, they're unsure of how they'll be perceived—and so the important things go unsaid. The things that go unsaid are the things that later haunt them, and, in these pages,

we see how much *we* have to tell each other, and how deeply we feel the loss when we stay silent.

[05:58]
I say "we" because, while *Everything I Never Told You* is an intimate portrait of a very specific family, it's powerfully universal in its themes. Ng's hope is that readers will close the book "thinking about the things in their own lives they've been afraid to articulate—to people they love, or even to themselves."

These characters may be fictional, but these are the concerns of real life, which is why this story continues to resonate with readers from all walks of life.

And the book does indeed seem to be resonating, to the tune of 1.5 million copies sold and counting. It's currently in development as a feature film, with Julia Roberts attached to play Marilyn. Will readers later say the book was better? Well probably. But that doesn't mean we're not excited to see our favorite novels get the Hollywood treatment.

In short, if you're looking for a powerful, carefully crafted literary thriller that is so absorbing I once witnessed a woman on my Manhattan crosstown bus finish a chapter and look up to see she'd missed her stop, *Everything I Never Told You* may be the next great book you're looking for.

[MUSIC]

Readers, visit modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook to learn more about *Everything I Never Told You* and all of the great books from this podcast including *This Must Be the Place*. Writing this episode I was reminded of this line from Maggie O'Farrell, "marriages end not because of something you *did* say but because of something you *didn't.*" Now would be a great time to go back and listen to that earlier episode of One Great Book, again or for the first time.

[07:28]
If one book a week isn't enough, you can get a bonus episode by becoming a patron of the show. We want our patrons to be in the know about promising upcoming releases so they can plan their reading, put in those preorders, or be the first on their library holds list.
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I'd love to hear what you think about *Everything I Never Told You* on Twitter or Instagram. You can find me there @AnneBogel that's Anne with an E, B as in books, O-G-E-L. You can also find me on Instagram @WhatShouldIReadNext.

That's the title of my long form book podcast, where each week a reader tells me three books they love, one book they don't, and what they're reading now, and I recommend three titles they should read next.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on *One Great Book*.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.