

Book Club Kit

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What did you learn about Korean culture from this novel? What surprised you? How did the setting impact the story?
- 2. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from multiple points of view? How did this impact your reading experience and connection to the characters?
- 3. Which character did you like the most and why?
- 4. Kyuri says, "Even as a girl, I knew the only chance I had was to change my face." What does she mean? What role does beauty play in this story? In what ways are beauty standards in Cha's portrayal of Korea different or similar to those in the US?
- 5. Discuss how social class exists in the novel. How does it impact the relationships between characters? What do you think the author is trying to say about class mobility in Korea?
- 6. Why do you think Miho is so enthralled by Ruby? What types of cultural currency does Ruby have that the other women don't, and how does this impact the trajectory of her life?
- 7. How does parenthood, particularly motherhood, factor into the story? How does the author push back at traditional notions of family?
- 8. When Miho finds out that Hanbin is cheating on her, she decides to use the relationship to benefit financially and enhance her reputation. What do you make of this? Do you think her choice is justified?
- 9. How does Cha explore Korean gender stereotypes, and how do they compare to those in the US?
- 10. Looking at a photo of Wonna's baby toward the end of the book, Kyuri says "I understand what it would be like to think only about tomorrow, instead of just today." Where do you think each character ends up after the novel ends? What would your hopes for them be?

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Years ago, when I was still living in Seoul, a guy friend of mine asked me to come help him unravel a problem he had with his girlfriend.

He texted me an address and the name of what I thought was a bar. I entered a nondescript doorway that led downstairs to a dark hallway. It was only when I entered the room that he was in with his friends that I first felt that something was a bit . . . strange. Every woman sitting at the table was not only extraordinarily beautiful, but dressed as if she were attending a cocktail party for a beauty pageant. Silence fell over the room as I greeted my friend in English (my friend and I had both gone to boarding school and later college in the States).

I had found myself in a "10 percent" room salon, an underground hostess bar where men pay thousands of dollars a night to have beautiful women pour them liquor and entertain them. My friend had been drunk when he called me over—women from the outside are never invited, which creates a glass ceiling for business deals that are conducted in these salons—and his friends grew angry when they realized he had broken the code.

As a woman and a writer, I was electrified.

Years later, while working at CNN in Seoul, I badgered another guy friend into taking me to the most expensive room salon in Gangnam. He told me he was taking an A-list actor there for his birthday. I promised I would leave after a few minutes, but once I was inside, I stayed as long as I could—withstanding the glares

of my friend—hungrily soaking it all in: the easy and familiar interactions between the actor and a room salon girl, the discomfort the women felt in my presence, the dynamic of the men in the room. There was so much to absorb.

That was the moment when the character of Kyuri was born for me. I could see her—this "ace" of a "10 percent" salon—her ambition, her weaknesses, her quest for beauty, her addiction to plastic surgery, her cynical personality and deep loyalty to her friends. My research started immediately.

When I began this novel, I loved writing about the friendship between these young women who were born in the provinces of Korea and moved to Seoul for the anonymity and glitter of the city. The futuristic backdrop, with all of its unique social issues, is a gift to a writer wanting to be a novelist. I grew up in Korea—I was the girl walking through fields of wildflowers on my way home from my rural school—and now I am immersed in the politics, the music, the films, the art, the fashion, and the beauty. I hope some of that love, as well as some deep concerns, can be shared with you through the book.

Thank you ever so much for reading and discussing *If I Had Your Face*.

Warmly, Frances Cha

BEST KOREAN FRIED CHICKEN (DAKGANGJEONG 닭강정)

Serves: 3

Ingredients:

• 2 lb. chicken wings or drummettes

Seasoning

- ½ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. black pepper
- 1 tbs. rice wine
- ¼ tsp. garlic powder
- ¼ tsp. onion powder
- 1/8 tsp. ginger powder

Sweet Garlic Soy Glaze

- 3 tbs. jin ganjang (Korean dark soy sauce) or gluten-free Kikomman soy sauce
- 2 tbs. sugar
- 1 tbs. water
- 2 tbs. rice wine or white wine
- 1 tsp. sesame oil
- 1 tsp. vegetable oil
- 1 tsp. chopped ginger
- 1 tsp. red pepper seeds or red pepper flakes
- 4 cloves of garlic, sliced thin
- 3 dried red chilis (japones chile, Asian-style chili peppers)
- Sesame seeds (optional)
- 1 ½ cup corn starch
- Vegetable or caanola oil for frying

Directions:

- 1. Remove any excess fat. If using whole wings, cut at the joint so that you have 2 pieces. Also cut off the wing tips and discard.
- 2. Place in a bowl and season with salt, pepper, rice wine, ginger, garlic, and onion powder. Massage the wings and leave for few minutes.
- 3. Heat 2-inches of vegetable or canola oil in a fryer pot or any heavy bottom pot on high heat for about 8 minutes or until it reaches 325°F (160°C). If you don't have a thermometer, check the temperature by dropping in a couple of sea or kosher salt crystals: they'll make a loud popping when the oil is ready.
- 4. While heating the oil, make the glaze. Heat a small sauce pot or pan over medium-high heat. Add 1 tsp. of sesame oil and 1 tsp. of vegetable oil and sauté dried red japones, chiles, and garlic slivers until slightly brown and fragrant (about 30 seconds). Set aside.
- 5. Dredge the wings in corn starch. To avoid mess, use a paper or plastic bag: place 5-6 wings inside with the starch and shake vigorously.
- 6. When the oil is hot enough, add the wings.
- 7. Don't add too many—just enough to make one layer; too many will lower the cooking temperature.
- 8. Fry for 6–8 minutes or until light golden brown.
- 9. Remove from the oil and drain using a basket or by letting them cool for few minutes on a paper towel. Repeat Step 8 for the remaining wings and let them cool for few minutes. IMPORTANT: Before frying a second time, have a bowl or frying pan ready next to the fryer so that you can toss the glazed wings in as soon as they're done.
- 10. Re-fry wings at 325°F (160°C)—for about 2-3 minutes until golden brown.



11. After draining the oil from wings, immediately transfer them into a bowl or pan, add glaze, and toss. Use about 1 tbs. soy glaze per 5 wings—they should absorb most of the sauce.

Source: kimchimari.com/korean-fried-chicken

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Kyuri: An "electrically beautiful" woman with a hard-won job as a "room girl" at an exclusive bar where she entertains businessmen while they drink. She prides herself on her cold, cleareyed approach to life.

Miho: Kyuri's roommate and a talented artist, who grew up in an orphanage but won a scholarship to study art in New York. Returning to Korea after college, she finds herself in a precarious relationship with the super-wealthy heir to one of Korea's biggest companies.

Ara: A neighbor to Kyrui and Miho and a hair stylist. She is obsessed with a boy-band pop star.

Wonna: The women's neighbor, a newlywed trying to get pregnant, even though she and her husband have no idea how they will afford to raise and educate a child in the cutthroat economy.

Sujin: Ara's roommate and best friend since school. An orphan, she is preoccupied with her looks and getting expensive cosmetic surgery—and keen to become a "room girl" like Kyuri.

Bruce: A wealthy businessman and client of the salon where Kyuri works.

Taein: A celebrity and member of a K-Pop boy band—and the object of Ara's affection.

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

- Treat yourself and your book club to a face mask (see recipe on next page).
- 2. Provide authentic Korean snacks like Honey Butter Chips, Gosomi Sweet Cookie Crackers, or Milkis milk soda.
 - 3. Listen to the author's K-Pop playlist. https://spoti.fi/33WLpff



D-I-Y FACE MASK

Ingredients:

- 2 mini cucumbers
- 3 oz. plain yogurt (about half a FAGE container)
- 1 tsp. aloe vera gel

Puree ingredients in a blender and smooth on face. Leave on for 15 minutes, then rinse off.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Suicides by K-Pop Stars Prompt Soul-Searching in South Korea nytimes.com/2019/11/25/world/asia/goo-hara-kpop-suicide.html

"Smile With Your Eyes": How to Beat South Korea's AI Hiring Bots and Land a Job

reuters. com/article/us-southkorea-artificial-intelligence-jo/smile-with-your-eyes-how-to-beat-south-koreas-ai-hiring-bots-and-land-a-job-idUSKBN1ZC022

South Korea Set to Break Own Record On World's Lowest Birth Rate

bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-27/south-korea-set-to-break-own-record-on-world-s-lowest-birth-rate

South Korea's Darkest Clubs Are Being Dragged into the Light

for eignpolicy. com/2019/05/03/burning sun-kpop-rape-abuse-kidnap-south-koreas-darkest-clubs-are-being-dragged-into-the-light/super-being-dragged-into-the-light-super-being-dragged-into-the-light-super-being-dragged-into-the-light-super-being-dragged-into-the-light-super-being-dragged-into-the-light-super-being

South Korea's Plastic Surgery Boom: A Quest To Be "Above Normal"

huffpost.com/entry/korea-plastic-surgery_l_5d72afb0e4b07521022c00e1

Parasite Has a Hidden Backstory of Middle-Class Failure and Chicken Joints

foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/21/korea-bong-oscars-parasite-hidden-backstory-middle-class-chicken-bong-joon-ho/