

CENTRAL PLACES * DELIA CAI

BOOK CLUB KIT



LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

DEAR READER,

Growing up in central Illinois, I always felt like there was this thick casing that separated me from the rest of the world. For most of my childhood, I blamed this disconnect on my Chinese identity, which was alienating in all of the ways you'd expect when you're one of the few Asians living in a place where Bring Your Tractor To School Day remained a favorite tradition and Friday night football games steered the entire community's social calendar. For my parents, who immigrated to the United States in the nineties, settling in the midwest was a dream: they got the house in the good public school district, reliable jobs as engineers at the manufacturing corporation headquartered in Peoria, and the all-American thrill of driving by undulating amber waves of grain each day. It was everything they could ask for! I couldn't wait to get out.

After I finished college and moved to New York, I quickly found out that what made me an outlier amongst my friends and colleagues here wasn't so much my Asian-ness as it was my *midwestern*-ness. It was kind of a trip: all of a sudden, I had to figure out how to navigate my Chinese identity in a world where my white coworkers earnestly argued over which Chinatown restaurants had the most "authentic" soup dumplings, but now I also had to explain why I kept saying "ope" when squeezing behind someone at a bar, or why I liked to drink a whole glass of milk with dinner. I started befriending Asian-Americans with markedly different experiences growing up in SoCal or the East Coast, who introduced me to K-pop and boba tea and Asian-American politics. We'd spend hours dissecting the ways our regional backgrounds shaped our perspectives, and it made me realize how specific and unusual—or at least, underrepresented—the midwestern Chinese-American experience is on the vast spectrum of not only Asian-American identity, but also our culture at large.

So that's what *Central Places* is—a novel that attempts to capture the mixed feelings, allegiances, and memories that arise whenever I'm asked that eternally loaded question: where are you from? Writing this book has helped me figure out how to answer that for myself, with a critical assist from Audrey Zhou, who I invented as an embodiment of the most defensive and avoidant impulses that flicker inside anyone who's spent their life questioning the idea of home. I'm so excited for you to join her journey.

Thank you for choosing *Central Places* for your book club. I'm so honored to share this story with you.

DELIA

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Central Places is written from a first-person point of view. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from Audrey's POV? How might the book be different if written from a different perspective?
2. The author weaves a number of themes throughout Central Places, including race, family, home, and figuring out who you are versus who others want you to be. What other themes did you see in the novel? Which resonated the most deeply with you?
3. What did you think about Hickory Grove? How did the setting come through in the writing, and how did it affect the read?
4. Discuss the novel's title, *Central Places*. Did your understanding of it shift throughout the book? If you were titling the book, what alternative would you suggest?
5. Race is one of the primary themes of Central Places: Audrey is Chinese-American, was raised in a predominantly white region, and is in an interracial relationship with her white fiancé. Discuss how Audrey grapples with her Chinese heritage and identity, particularly in the context of the various settings of the novel, and the way in which Cai's narration highlights subtle prejudices, stereotypes, and microaggressions Audrey experiences.
6. The idea of "home" plays a large role in the novel. What does home mean for Audrey? What does it mean to you?
7. Audrey Zhou is a complicated, flawed character. How do you characterize her? What would you say her biggest faults are? How has she changed and grown by the end of the novel? What moments do you think sparked the biggest changes in her character throughout the narrative?
8. At novel's start, Audrey wants nothing more than to get through the visit to Hickory Grove and remain firmly entrenched in the NYC life she has built with Ben. How and why do we see her priorities shift as time goes on?
9. What roles do Kristen and Kyle play in Audrey's evolution? How does returning to Hickory Grove and learning the nuanced reality of what's happened in the years since she's been gone impact Audrey?
10. Discuss Audrey's relationship with her parents. How did it reach the state of disconnect we see at the beginning? What moments between them felt most pivotal to you? Do you think the Zhous would continue to reconnect after the events of the novel?
11. What did you think of the book's ending? How do you picture Audrey's life after the story closes?
12. Will Central Places and the Zhous stay with you after finishing the book? Why or why not? How did the book impact you?
13. In *Central Places*, Audrey struggles to navigate the distance between who she was raised as, who she thinks she wants to be, and who she might actually be. Have you experienced anything similar? How did you decide what path forward felt right for you?

RECIPE: GRANDMA CONNIE'S JIAOZI



As a kid, I was always far more obsessed with pizza and McDonald's happy meals than I was with Chinese food. The one exception? Dumplings! My laolao—that is, my mother's mother—has passed this recipe down to our family, and my parents quickly enlisted me as a gyoza-wrapping apprentice from a very early age, as you can see in this photo. Making dumplings was a big Sunday tradition for the Cai household, especially during the summer, when my mother would grow Chinese chives in our backyard vegetable garden.

After I moved out on my own, I began defaulting to this recipe whenever I needed a good potluck party trick, but also when I just wanted a taste of home. Pro tip: if you don't have access to the Cai family garden—or a decent Asian grocer—you can sub in one bunch of chopped scallions for the chives. As with all family traditions, I've learned, there's always room to add your own little touch.

RECIPE: GRANDMA CONNIE'S JIAOZI

INGREDIENTS

- 1 package of gyoza wrappers (if you buy them frozen, let them thaw out in the fridge overnight)
 - 1 pound ground pork
 - 1 healthy handful of Chinese chives (or 1 bunch of scallions)
 - 1/2 cup water
 - 1 tablespoon ginger powder
 - 1 teaspoon salt
 - 2 eggs
 - 1 tablespoon soy sauce
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DIRECTIONS

1. Mix the ground pork, 1/4 cup water, ginger powder, salt, soy sauce, and eggs together in a large bowl.
2. Chop the chives/scallions up as finely as possible, then add to the meat mixture. Stir well.
3. In a shallow bowl, pour in the other 1/4 cup of water. Dip your finger into the water and use it to wet the edges around a gyoza wrapper (as if you're tracing a circle around the outermost rim of the wrapper). This is the "glue" that will hold the wrapper together.
4. Put a teaspoon of filling in the center of the wrapper.
5. Fold the edges of the wrapper together. This is the hardest part! You can absolutely try to get a few fancy ruffles in there, but here's another pro tip from childhood: you are totally allowed to fold the wrapper in half—like a half-moon. Just make sure that filling is sealed inside. It's going to taste great no matter what.
6. Repeat with all the wrappers until you're either out, or you've used up all the filling.
7. Drizzle a few tablespoons of vegetable oil in a pan and fry the dumplings until they're golden-brown on the bottom and puffy, and everything is cooked through, about 6–8 minutes.
8. Enjoy with more soy sauce on the side!

PLAYLIST

This playlist can also be accessed on Spotify under the name “Central Places” by Delia Cai—linked [here](#)

Strawberry Blond
MITSKI

Drivers license
OLIVIA RODRIGO

Night Shift
LUCY DACUS

Days of The Old
EVERY AVENUE

You And I
ANARBOR

Stay
MAYDAY PARADE

My Beautiful Rescue
THIS PROVIDENCE

Let's Get Lost
CARLY RAE JEPSEN

Safe To Say
VALENCIA

Butterflies
KACEY MUSGRAVES

The Way It Was
THE KILLERS

Driving Away
HOLIDAY PARADE

Thunder
BOYS LIKE GIRLS

Funeral
PHOEBE BRIDGERS

Hope ur ok
OLIVIA RODRIGO

You Belong with Me
(Taylor's Version)
TAYLOR SWIFT

Six Feet
Under the Stars
ALL TIME LOW

Your Best
American Girl
MITSKI

Break Up in
a Small Town
SAM HUNT

Christmas in
the Country
THOMAS RHETT

Ketchum, ID
JULIEN BAKER, PHOEBE
BRIDGERS, LUCY DACUS