

Discussion Questions

What We Kept to Ourselves by Nancy Jooyoun Kim

1. *What We Kept to Ourselves* is told in alternating timelines, one set in 1977 and the other in 1999. Sunhee (later Sunny) and John change significantly between these two periods of their lives. What were your first impressions of them in 1977 in comparison to them in 1999? Did these impressions change throughout the novel?
2. John and Sunny are both Korean refugees, but they did not experience the war and its effects the same way. How were they different? How do you think their pasts dictate the people they become and ultimately the choices they make in the novel?
3. The Kim family is broken into two generations: the parents, Sunny and John, and their children, Ana and Ronald. How do the two generations and their experiences in the United States contrast? Discuss how these differences impact their behavior and how they each respond to the tragedies and struggles throughout the novel.
4. Sunny and RJ develop a strong friendship throughout the novel. Discuss their relationship and its significance to each of them. What were they each looking for when they befriended each other? Did this change throughout the years as their personal lives evolved?
5. Ronald and Ana are able to learn about RJ's past as a helicopter mechanic in Vietnam before he became unhoused in Los Angeles. Discuss the factors that led to such a drastic change in circumstances? Do you believe the "system" or society failed him? Did it fail any other characters?
6. Art becomes an outlet of freedom for Sunny, returning her to a part of her past that she had given up. Do any of the other characters have the sense of freedom that she craves?
7. Sunny's relationship with Professor Cho evolves throughout the novel. What does Professor Cho symbolize to Sunny at the different points in their relationship?
8. Sunny's experiences in the US have a cumulative impact on her worldview and happiness. Discuss the most significant of those experiences. What pushed her to a breaking point and led to her departure?
9. Sunny and John both develop friendships outside of their marriage, Sunny with RJ and John with Priscilla. Compare and contrast these friendships and what they meant to Sunny and John.

10. Throughout the novel, what city a character lives in has a significant impact on their experience. Discuss how both Los Angeles and Seoul affect each character and how each character's experience of both cities evolves throughout the story.
11. Each character brings something different to the novel. Which character did you connect with the most and why?
12. The novel culminates in two surprising events. How did the conclusion make you feel? Were you satisfied with each family member's narrative arc and the lessons they each understood throughout the novel?

Source: Simon & Schuster Reading Group Guide