Backwaters
EMMA LING SIDNAM

About the book

Laura is tired of being asked where she's *really* from. Her family has lived in Aotearoa New Zealand for four generations, and she's ambivalent at best about her Chinese heritage. But when she's asked to write about the Chinese New Zealander experience for a work project, Laura finds herself drawn to the diary of her great-great-grandfather Ken, a market gardener in the early years of the British colony.

With the help of her beloved grandpa, Laura begins to write a version of Ken's story. She imagines his youth in Guangzhou and his journey to a new land—unaware that soon, spurred on by a family secret that comes to light, she will go on her own journey of self-discovery, sexuality and reckoning with the past.

A tender, nuanced novel about the bittersweet search for belonging, *Backwaters* marks the arrival of a brilliant new talent.

About the author

Emma Ling Sidnam is a Wellington-based writer and lawyer. As a fourth-generation Asian New Zealander, she is passionate about representation and ensuring that all voices are heard. She is an award-winning slam poet and her work has been published in the *Spinoff, Capital, Newsroom* and the anthologies *A Clear Dawn* and *Middle Distance*. In 2022, she was awarded the prestigious Michael Gifkins Prize for *Backwaters*.

Discussion questions

1. *Backwaters* is dedicated to 'anyone who's ever been asked "But where are you *really* from?"' What is the novel's response to this question?

2. At the beginning of the novel Laura writes that her Chinese roots are 'still there, even if there are answers I'll never find' (p1). Does she find her answers?

3. She worries about fictionalising Ken's story and getting it wrong. But what is the truth of someone else's life? Do you agree with her Grandpa that 'it doesn't matter, because it's a story, after all […] It doesn't have to be a hundred percent accurate' (p2)? What other freedoms and challenges might fiction present a writer?

4. How do the two threads of the narrative speak to each other? Are Ken and Laura on parallel pathways? Are they similar? What does Laura learn about herself through learning about Ken?

5. What was the best conversation Laura ever had with her grandma? What made it so distinct from their other conversations?

6. Laura's early friendship with Joseph (p 74), teaches her that her identity is something to be defined by other people. Discuss the other instances in the novel where this is true and consider whether she is ever able to determine her identity for herself. What changes that allows her to do so?
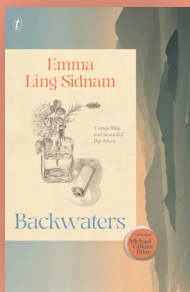
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7. After Qiu and Kaineng have been together for some months, it becomes clear to Qiu 'what she represented in Kaineng's life' (p94). What does she represent? This scene comes shortly after Laura and Henry get together for the first time. Consider the inferences the writer is making in placing these two scenes in close proximity.

8. How does the revelation that Jessica is adopted change the whole family's relationship with Grandpa? Should he have told her? How does Laura navigate her own relationship with her Grandpa after she learns the truth?

9. Discuss the inclusion of the Chinese fable that Laura recalls from childhood (p111). What makes her remember it when she does? What meaning does it hold for her? How does it work to reveal the truth of the wider narrative to the reader?

10. Compare the versions of the story Laura imagines for her mother. What do they mean? What do they reveal about the way Laura sees herself?

11. What would you say defines each of the parts of the novel?

12. How is Laura's understanding of her own identity changed by the end of the novel? What path do you imagine she'll choose next?

13. Consider the last line of the novel—what does it mean? Who do you think the story is for?