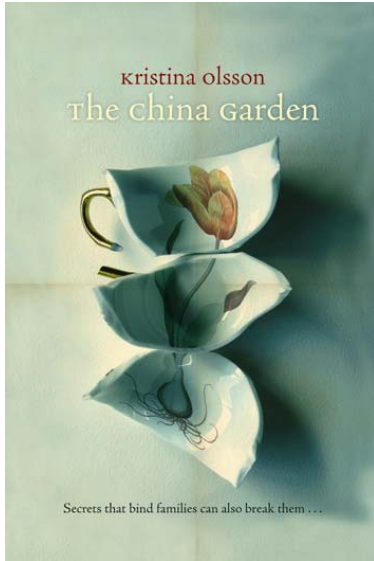


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BOOK CLUB NOTES
THE CHINA GARDEN
KRISTINA OLSSON



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When her mother dies, Laura returns to her coastal hometown. At the reading of the will, Laura discovers that her mother had a child that she adopted out. She also bequeathed a painting to someone who is a stranger to Laura. These revelations completely shift Laura's understanding of her mother. Her life becomes entangled with the lives of Cress, an older and respected member of the community, Kieran, Cress' intellectually disabled grandson, and Abby, a teenaged girl who has become friends with Kieran. Their stories intersect and parallel each other as their individual secrets emerge and these very different people are forced to find trust and comfort in each other.

1. It is said that there are seven stages of grieving: denial, guilt, anger, depression, relief, reconstruction, acceptance.

How does Laura express her grief in the novel? Is there a moving through stages?

2. 'In the layers of paint, in the sweeping, almost careless tracks and paths it made, she could see the tentative traces of joy. It was a word she had never before attached to painting and rarely to her mother.' (Pg 56)

Laura sees her mother's painting and responds to something in it that she didn't expect to find in anything belonging to her mother.

How do parents hide their true selves from their children? Is it possible to find out things about your parents only after they are dead?

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3. Kieran keeps secrets from his grandmother, Cress keeps secrets from Kieran, and Angela keeps secrets from Laura. Abby keeps secrets from almost everyone.

What are these secrets, and what do these secrets tell us about the characters?

4. Cress steals things. She is very specific about what she takes.

Why do you think Cress, a usually rule-driven and upright citizen, has this compulsion to steal?

5. The reading of a will can completely traumatise a family.

How does the reading of Angela's will affect Laura's relationship to her mother?

6. There are parallels between the experiences of the single mothers in the story.

How have attitudes changed towards single mothers since 1952 and are there still circumstances where the general public frowns on single-motherhood?

7. The friendship between Kieran and Angela is an unusual one.

What do you think the older woman and the young man gained by their closeness?

8. 'single mothers ... were offered a redemption for their "sin" by either accepting a "shot-gun marriage" or by giving the child up for adoption.' (Pg 14 Releasing the Past Adoption Practices 1950-1998)

Angela never reconnected with her adopted child. The attitude of the 50s is different to the attitude of more modern times.

Why do you think Angela didn't contact her child even with the shift in societal norms?

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9. What is Cress' relationship to Angela? By the end of the book has she made peace with the role she has played in Angela's story?
10. Angela bequeaths a painting to Kieran. The title of the painting is 'I Go Looking for Signs of Contentment'. What is the significance of this gift, for Angela, Kieran, Laura and Cress?
11. *'I suppose everyone's a friend of yours, Iris said.'* (Pg 251)

Kieran is the person who connects the isolated characters in the story.

What effect does Kieran have on the other characters? What is it about him that can bring all of these people together?

12. *'I think, she said, squinting, that this was one of the first things my parents owned. Their first dinner table.*

It was narrow, and barely a metre long, discoloured with age and clumsy attempts to polish it. The top was pitted with scratches and gouges and the marks of hot dishes. *They're probably your first attempts to eat right handed, Fergus said, indicating two deep ridges at one end. But Laura was seeing the table for what it was, for the first time. She traced her fingers over the marks. It's an artefact, she smiled.'* (Pg 242)

Much of this story unfolds as Laura packs up her mother's things. Packing away her mother's things unearths memories.

What 'artefacts' does Angela leave behind that have an emotional impact on her daughter?

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13. 'But after my mother died I realised I felt no comfort from above. I couldn't feel her, she was just gone. You don't realise how much of your life is held up, scaffolded by your faith.' (Pg 248)

It seems that the people who are missing from this story have the most influence on it, Angela's first baby, Angela, Abby's father and mother, Kieran's mother. Discuss.

14. 'The soil gave easily, brown-black and perfect, she thought, for grafting. She pressed the first piece of china into its place.'

What is the significance of the china garden? Why has the author chosen to use this as the final scene and as the title of the book?

FURTHER READING:

Releasing the Past Adoption Practices 1950-1998

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/56E4E53DFA16A023CA256CFD002A63BC>

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