

## Little Gods

Custom House

By Meng Jin

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### Introduction

Combining the emotional resonance of *Home Fire* with the ambition and innovation of *Asymmetry*, a lyrical and thought-provoking debut novel that explores the complex web of grief, memory, time, physics, history, and selfhood in the immigrant experience, and the complicated bond between daughters and mothers.

On the night of June Fourth, a woman gives birth in a Beijing hospital alone. Thus begins the unraveling of Su Lan, a brilliant physicist who until this moment has successfully erased her past, fighting what she calls the mind's arrow of time.

When Su Lan dies unexpectedly seventeen years later, it is her daughter Liya who inherits the silences and contradictions of her life. Liya, who grew up in America, takes her mother's ashes to China—to her, an unknown country. In a territory inhabited by the ghosts of the living and the dead, Liya's memories are joined by those of two others: Zhu Wen, the woman last to know Su Lan before she left China, and Yongzong, the father Liya has never known. In this way a portrait of Su Lan emerges: an ambitious scientist, an ambivalent mother, and a woman whose relationship to her own past shapes and ultimately unmakes Liya's own sense of displacement.

A story of migrations literal and emotional, spanning time, space and class, *Little Gods* is a sharp yet expansive exploration of the aftermath of unfulfilled dreams, an immigrant story in negative that grapples with our tenuous connections to memory, history, and self.



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## Questions for Discussion

1. The epigraph of *Little Gods* features a quote from John Berger, author of *Ways of Seeing*: “The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized for exactly what it is. The past is not for living in....” Why do you think Jin selected this quote?
2. The very first question we see Su Lan ask is, “Do you believe in time?” How does each generation of Su Lan’s family view time?
3. How does the concept of death work in *Little Gods*? Is Su Lan truly dead, in the eyes of the characters? What about Yongzong?
4. This is a book told in negative: Su Lan is at the center of the story, but she never has a narrative voice. Do you think Liya discovers the “true” Su Lan in her search? How does each character’s memory of Su Lan keep her or him from understanding who she really was?
5. The phrase, “How to remember the future and forget the past” appears twice in the novel. But what about the present? How do the characters interact with it?
6. Liya experiences a few visions in the novel, such as when she sees Yongzong in person, where she imagines meeting different versions of herself. What is it about being her circumstances that creates this sense of dissonance and possibility?
7. Su Lan spends her whole life running from her parents’ home, only for Liya to end up back there. What does the place symbolize for each woman? Why is it the final place Liya visits before returning to America?
8. How does what Liya learns about herself during her journey, like her date of birth, transform her understanding of herself? Do these facts bring her comfort?
9. Su Lan conceives of human memory as *the mind’s arrow of time*, and imagines a version in which time runs backwards, towards order rather than disorder or entropy. She also explores the idea that time is not linear at all. How do these concepts relate to the structure of the novel and its parts?
10. How do Su Lan and Liya reinvent themselves and their stories? How do their methods compare and contrast? How does this relate to their lives as immigrants?
11. Su Lan’s letter about physics sticks with Zhang Bo for years, as does her last conversation with Zhu Wen before she travels to America. Why do you think that is?
12. What did Liya want from her trip to China? What did she ultimately get from it?