

## BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions are from the publisher's reading guide:

1. The prologue is set in a beautiful and ancient Chinese graveyard in which Hattie Kong's relatives—descendants of Confucius—are buried, a provocative opening for a book about small-town America. What does this suggest about America today? The section ends with Hattie Kong—Chinese and American, Christian and Confucian—lamenting the passing of an older, simpler order and wondering what she has to replace it. To what degree are her questions uniquely her own?
2. Hattie is the center of this novel, the person through whom all the others connect, but she has her own story as well. Why does she move to Riverlake? What do Lee and Joe represent to her? Why does Sophy mean so much to her? When Neddy Needham, in the first Town Hall scene, asks "Whose town is this?" she wonders, on the side, if it is hers. It is by the end, but how has this change come about?
3. There is a lot of doubling in this book. Chhung feels himself to have been reborn into his brother's life; Carter Hatch seems scripted to become his father; Hattie is able to leave China thanks to her serendipitous resemblance to a girl who died. Do you see other doublings of characters or situations? What does this suggest about the nature of the self and reality?
4. Vision is a major theme in the book. Hattie's mother has always told her, "We must see that we don't see," and Carter spent most of his career working on the process by which information from the outside world is filtered and made coherent. Vision, as Carter's father says, goes with blindness, even depends on it. Do you find in the book other forms of seeing that involve blindness? And if what we see might be thought of as a "world," does this shed light on the title of the book?
5. Hattie, by the end of the book, has embraced a new life, but she has also rejected several modes of being. Though displaced, like her fellow teacher Ginny, and betrayed, she has chosen a different road for herself. Do other characters offer reflections of what Hattie might have become, had she chosen differently? In her youth, Hattie rejects superstition and embraces science; by the end, she has modified her view somewhat. Why?

—over

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6. One of the ways in which people in this book try on new selves is by changing their hair. What are some of the things people do to their hair?
7. This book has a main narrative in three parts, with two related narratives inserted into it. What does this suggest about the nature of the main narrative and storytelling generally? Is it definitive? How might it be related to the themes of “world”-making and blindness?

The following questions are from Suzanne:

1. Why does Hattie refuse her relatives’ pleas to send her parents’ bones to China?
2. What are the various religious and spiritual practices some of the characters follow?
3. How does Hattie react to Sophy’s interest in the church?
4. What is Hattie’s reaction when Carter Hatch reappears in her life? What does she want? Do her feelings for him change when she finds out he betrayed her?
5. Which characters in the novel personify the theme of change? Which ones survive changes in their lives, and which ones are incapable of adjusting?

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