

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THEMES

- 1) There are several different mother figures in this story. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each one and the effect they had on their children. How did each character show a different facet of motherhood? (Hint: Look for a few characters who have mother attributes even if they aren't actual mothers.)
- 2) In what ways were each of the four main characters (Meg, Lewis, Wen Ming, and Eva) abandoned by his or her parents? How did this affect them personally? How do you think this contributed to their struggles in becoming a family? Were there other instances of abandonment in the story? How did these events affect the characters?
- 3) Each section of the story is prefaced by a quote from Mother Teresa, who dedicated her life to serving orphans in India. Discuss the first two quotes: How do these pertain to that part of the story? How did the characters typify the idea in each quote? What do these quotes mean to you? How do you see the truth of each quote played out in real life?
- 4) Discuss the final quote: "I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love." Do you think this is true? If so, how do you think this can be possible? How did Meg and other characters in the story discover or exemplify this idea?
- 5) Journeys are a recurring theme in the story. What different references to journeys did you notice in the story? What kinds of journeys were the characters on? Do you think they reached their destinations? What unexpected turns did they take on the way?

SYMBOLS

- 6) The color red signifies luck and happiness in Chinese culture. What role does the color red play in the story? What objects are red? What effect do these objects have on the story? What other images in the story represented luck? Wen Ming placed a great deal of value on the idea of luck. Do you think she was lucky? What symbols of luck and happiness do we have in our culture?
- 7) What do you think was the meaning of the two crane feathers? What role did they play for the characters? What was the significance of Zhen An (Eva) finding the feather and giving it to Wen Ming? Was there a connection between the two feathers?
- 8) In your opinion, who was the chain-smoking Chinese woman with the mole? In Chinese culture, it's considered unfeminine for women to smoke, and moles are considered serious flaws. In what other ways was the woman flawed? What were her strengths? When Wen Ming says, "You don't even know me," the woman responds, "Not as I wish I did. But still, I love you." What do you think she meant? Do you think she will show up again in the lives of the Lindsay family?
- 9) How was food and food-related imagery used in the book? What was the significance of food for Wen Ming? For Meg? What was each of them truly hungry for? Do you think they found it?
- 10) What was some other Chinese-related imagery in the story? What did these images mean to you? Several of them are based on Chinese folklore. If you have time, it might be fun to find more information about some of them and discuss how that information helps you understand the story further. You can also compare the modified versions of the symbols that were used in the story with the original folklore images.

STORY

- 11) Meg draws a distinction between having a child and becoming a mother. Do you agree with her on this distinction? Describe the steps she went through to finally feel like she was truly a mother. Is becoming a mother a process or an event? Why?
- 12) Discuss Meg and Lewis's relationship. What were its strengths? Its weaknesses? What do you think the effects were of the differences in their religious beliefs? What did each of them do to work around that for the sake of their marriage? What do you think of their compromise about taking Eva to church? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- 13) Describe Lewis's conflicted feelings about his mother. How could he be so angry at her and yet desire her approval so strongly? How will he feel about physics now that he knows it is impossible to earn her approval? What do you think will happen to him now that he has moved to China?
- 14) Some readers have said that Meg's parents weren't all that bad, and that Meg didn't have reason to be upset with them. What do you think? How did Meg and her parents each contribute to the conflict between them? What do you think her relationship with them would be like if the story were continued?
- 15) Discuss Wen Ming's relationship with Zhen An (Eva). In what ways was it positive and healing? In what ways was it detrimental to both of them? Do you think it was good for Eva to get rid of Wen Ming's feather? Was she right to blame Wen Ming for encouraging her to run away? Why or why not? What do you think their relationship will be like going forward?
- 16) Did Wen Ming really hate America and adoption? Why or why not?

- 17) How did Zhen An/Eva change throughout the story? Do you think being adopted was overall a positive thing for her or did it hurt more than help? What effect do you think Meg's motives and expectations for adoption had on Eva's adjustment to the family? Why do you think Eva's nightmares and other problems were lessened when she visited China?
- 18) How were Meg's expectations about adoption different from what she actually experienced? If you are a parent, how did your expectations about becoming a parent differ from the reality of it? What did you think about her motivation for having a child—good, bad, neutral? What do you think are good reasons to have children—whether by birth or by adoption?
- 19) What were the positives about Zhen An being adopted? What were some of the negatives? How important do you think one's culture and heritage is? Eva lost her Chinese culture to a large extent—do you think having a permanent family was a worthwhile trade-off?
- 20) How did the story change your view of Chinese orphanages or of the situations surrounding abandoned children in that country? What new understanding did you form about China? What new understanding did you form about international adoption?
- 21) What's your opinion on the “magical” elements of the story—were they really happening or were they just some sort of vision? Why do you think so? What did they represent in the story? Do you think Meg and Wen Ming will continue experiencing these sort of things in the future? What about Lewis? Will he come around? We only had one scene from Eva's point of view, so we don't know if she experiences the same sort of supernatural things. What do you think—does she? What are the differences between what happens to Meg and what Wen Ming experiences? What do you think is the significance of these differences?

22) Discuss Meg's experience by the hotel pool at the climax of the story. Who was the mother she saw? Who were the children? Were they just random strangers or did they represent something more? What happened to Meg in the water? How did she "grow up" in the way she viewed her parents and others who had hurt her? How did her way of loving them change, and how did that help her overcome the pain?