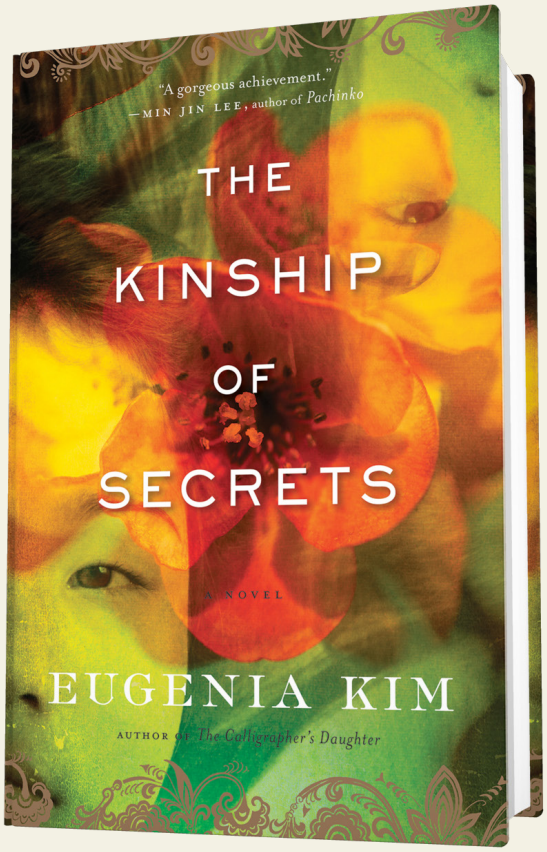
# THE KINSHIP OF SECRETS

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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### ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1948 Najin and Calvin Cho, with their young daughter Miran, travel from South Korea to the United States in search of new opportunities. Wary of the challenges they know will face them, Najin and Calvin make the difficult decision to leave their infant daughter, Inja, behind with their extended family; soon, they hope, they will return to her.

But then war breaks out in Korea, and there is no end in sight to the separation. Miran grows up in prosperous American suburbia, under the shadow of the daughter left behind, as Inja grapples in her war-torn land with ties to a family she doesn't remember. Najin and Calvin desperately seek a reunion with Inja, but are the bonds of love strong enough to reconnect their family over distance, time, and war? And as deep family secrets are revealed, will everything they long for be upended?

Told through the alternating perspectives of the distanced sisters, and inspired by a true story, *The Kinship of Secrets* explores the cruelty of war, the power of hope, and what it means to be a sister.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

EUGENIA KIM's debut novel, *The Calligrapher's Daughter,* won the 2009 Borders Original Voices Award, was shortlisted for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and was a critics' pick by *The Washington Post*. Her stories have appeared in *Asia Literary Review, Washington City Paper, Eclectic Grace: Fiction by Washington Area Women,* and elsewhere. Kim teaches Fairfield University's MFA Creative Writing Program and lives in Washington, D.C.

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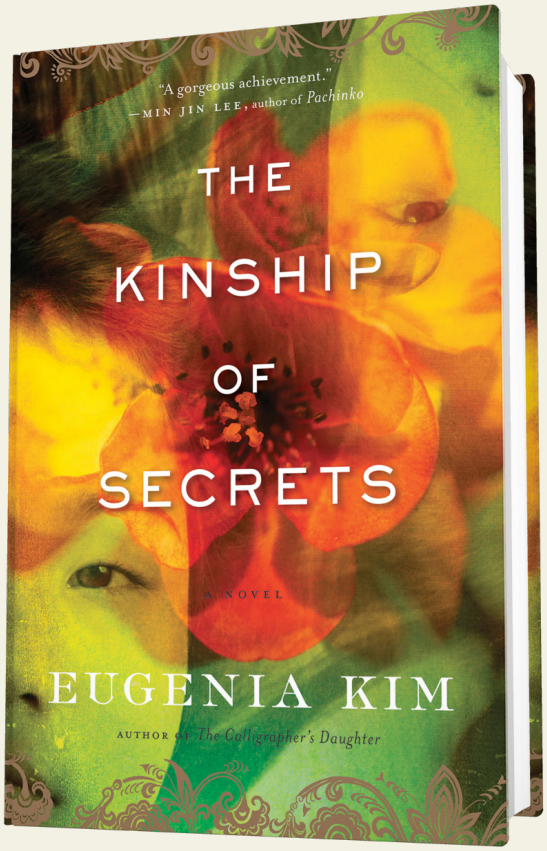
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Please note: Some of these questions contain spoilers.)

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1. In the opening chapter, Inja refers to her family in America as "shadow people" and as "ghost people to whom she was bound" (4). Discuss what she means by this. In what ways are they alive to her, and in what ways are they not?

2. On page 27, Najin writes a letter to her mother in which she states "I know I have failed two daughters and I have failed my husband. What use is it to regret leaving a baby? What use is it for this evil mother?" What do you think Najin means when she asks, "what use is it to regret leaving a baby"? And why do you think she sees herself as "an evil mother"? In what different ways do Najin and Calvin grapple with the separation of their family?

3. The structure in the beginning of the book—which alternates between the family in the U.S. and the family in Korea—allows us to see the two girls grow up side by side. What did you make of this? On page 59, Najin says, "I mustn't forget that each child is a mirror of another in some way." How do Inja and Miran make sense of and respond to their separation? How are their responses similar? And how are they different?

4. Discuss the leather-bound diaries that Najin keeps and in which Miran, at her mother's request, keeps detailed inventory of each package sent to Korea. Why do you think Najin wants these records? What might they offer?

5. On pages 80-81, Uncle explains to Inja why her mother chose to bring Miran to the U.S. Learning this secret makes Inja feel special because she knows that she is loved deeply. Discuss the significance of this revelation.

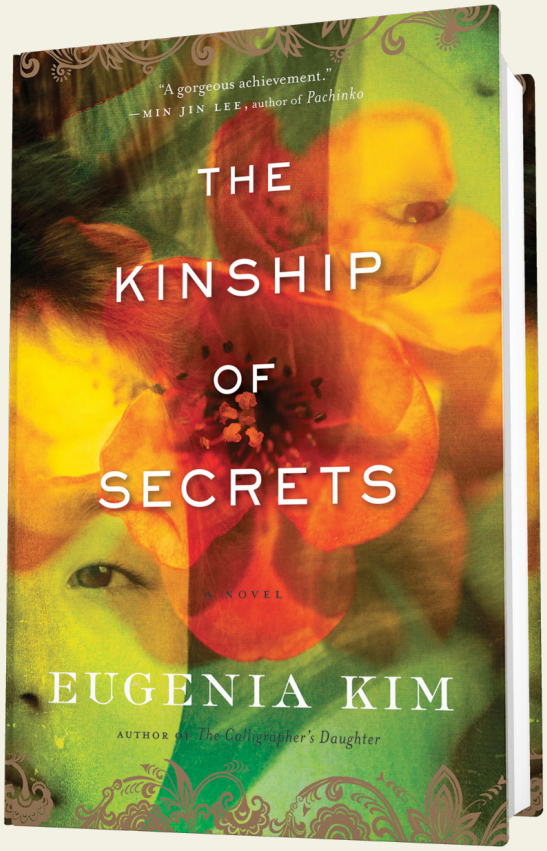
6. On page 115, when Miran learns that she and her family will become American citizens so that Inja can join them in the U.S., it begins to really sink in that they will be reunited. Miran wonders, "Would she even like her? Something about that thought felt wrong, as if having a sister meant they'd automatically like—even love—each other. But what if they didn't?" Discuss Miran's uncertainty. What does it mean to be a sister? And what, if anything, do sisters owe to one another?

7. "Inja did not yet know the purpose of her life, and she felt that her quest was stunted by the looming possibility of going to America, always a concept that lay before her" (137). Discuss the ways in which Inja's dreams for her life shift and develop over the course of the novel. Why do you think the possibility of going to America made her feel stunted in her quest? How did this looming idea shape the way she engaged with her surroundings?

8. At long last, the family is reunited at the airport (186-187). Discuss this scene—Calvin hurdling over the barrier, Najin searching Inja's face, Miran and Inja embracing for the first time. Is this the reunion everyone was expecting? If so, how? If not, in what ways is it different?

9. On pages 231-232, Inja tells Miran a slanted truth about why their parents took Miran with them to the U.S., and afterward "Miran felt the intimacy of kinship in a secret shared." The passage continues, "Until this night, she hadn't consciously known how vital it was to recognize love . . . So striking was this knowledge that many years would pass before she was able to articulate the certainty gained this night that she was loved, that she herself could love because of it, and that she did love this Korean sister." Discuss this intimate moment between sisters. What are they learning about each other, about themselves, and about their capacities for love? How can shared secrets bond?

10. "Truth was not always the sole path to compassion" (284). Discuss the ways in which the secrets in the novel sustain these characters, offer them hope, and allow them to feel loved.

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11. What does it mean to belong? And what it does it mean to return home? What shapes our notions of belonging and of home?

12. The Korean War was one of the deadliest wars in history, and it is also known as "the forgotten war." Did this novel expand your understanding of the Korean War and its devastating impact? In what ways?