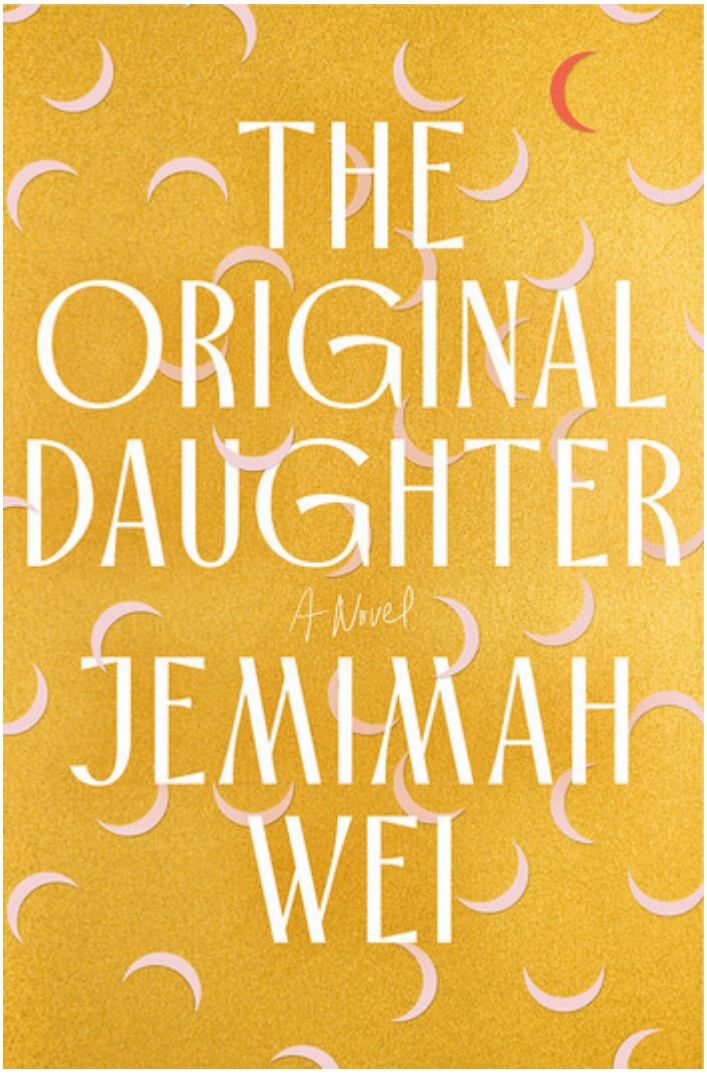
Books

Review: *The Original Daughter*

By Jemimah Wei ’22SOA (Doubleday).

By
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|
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Doubleday

In her rich, expansive, much-anticipated debut novel, *The Original Daughter,* Jemimah Wei ’22SOA examines the relationship between two sisters, asking aching questions about the bonds that tie us to our loved ones — how they form, what causes them to shatter, and how they can be repaired.

At the start of the novel, those familial bonds seem to be irreparably broken. Genevieve Yang is biding her time at a dead-end job in Singapore, where she lives with her ailing mother. When her mother is diagnosed with a terminal illness and the family can’t pay for treatment, Genevieve is asked to call her estranged sister, Arin, a world-famous movie star. It’s the ultimate test, and Genevieve falters.

To get to the root of the rift, Wei takes us back to an early betrayal that altered the Yang family forever. Until she was eight, Genevieve was an only child who believed her grandfather had died when her father was young. Then the family receives startling news: Genevieve’s grandfather has only recently passed away and has left behind a second family in Malaysia. That family, now destitute, is sending their youngest, a seven-year-old girl named Arin, to live with the Yangs as their adopted daughter.

At first, Genevieve and Arin circle each other cautiously. Arin refuses to speak, but Genevieve helps her feel at home — ironically, by hatching a plan for Arin to return to Malaysia. But when their mother foils the scheme, Genevieve starts to see value in the sister she hadn’t known she needed. “I knew I had a sister, I could not unknow it,” she says, watching Arin and her mother hug. “Who else could I confide in, who else in this stupid, sad world would understand perfectly the perverted jealousy of standing to the side, mesmerized by the sight of their embrace?”

Genevieve struggles to untangle her feelings, and Wei excels at laying bare her character’s complex, shifting emotions. Both thoughtful and petty, she is a deeply human narrator who luminously straddles the shifting tides of allegiance and jealousy between her and Arin, a dynamic that influences the course of these lives lived in tandem. As they grow together, their bond strengthens, but so do their conflicting feelings.

Until secondary school, Genevieve excels academically, sacrificing her social life. She makes it to the top of her class amid Singapore’s competitive academic culture, whose intense pressures Wei documents deftly. But inevitably, she buckles. At the same time, Arin comes into her own, especially after booking a job as a host of a

YouTube show. Almost immediately, people are taken by Arin's telegenic appeal. Genevieve looks on with fear and admiration: "I saw that Arin, who wore her childlike shyness like a lampshade, had not truly understood what it meant to voluntarily present herself to the world to be perceived until that very moment. And now it could not be contained."

Wei — who worked as an on-screen host in Singapore for eight years before moving to New York for Columbia's MFA program — uses Arin's ascent to explore what it means to live in the public eye. Meanwhile, Genevieve's life grows quieter as Arin's grows brighter, and the consequences are devastating.

An epic story that takes us from Singapore in the '90s to the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand, *The Original Daughter* also reveals the intimate cartography of a deeply complex family. Through supple prose, Wei offers a tender look at sisterhood, combined with an examination of the distortions of modern celebrity and their repercussions.

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