

Books by the Stack



Severance by Ling Ma

A survivor of an apocalyptic plague maintains a blog about a decimated Manhattan before joining a motley group of survivors to search for a place to rebuild, a goal that is complicated by an unscrupulous group leader.

Why you'll like it: *Satirical. Apocalypse fiction. Character-driven. Culturally diverse. Witty.*

About the Author: Ling Ma was born in Sanming, China, and grew up in Utah, Nebraska, and Kansas. She attended the University of Chicago and received an MFA from Cornell University. Prior to graduate school she worked as a journalist and an editor. Her writing has appeared in *Granta*, *VICE*, *Playboy*, *Chicago Reader*, *Ninth Letter*, and other publications. A chapter of *Severance* received the 2015 Graywolf SLS Prize. She lives in Chicago.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Explore the novel's title, In addition to severance from a normal world of work, what else is severed in Candace's life? What new connections does she form as a result of being severed?
2. As you read about Sepctra's Bible production process, from the deadly health hazards experienced by the workers to the VIP treatment Candace receives during her business travels, how was your perception of "sacred texts" affected? Are bejeweled religious objects at odds with Christian doctrine? What conflicts arise in the book between religion, morality, and the requirements of contemporary life?
3. As Candace navigates the business world and her family history, how does her understanding of her own identity shift? How do her parents reconcile the Cultural Revolution of their upbringing with the world of supermarkets and the Chinese Christian Community Church? How does Mandarin serve as both a bridge and a barrier for their daughter?
4. Candace chooses to inhabit L'Occitane in the Facility. If you had to be imprisoned in a mall, which store would you choose for your cell?
5. What does Candace's mother, Ruifang, teach her about being a woman? How are Candace's relationships with men affected by Candace observing her father, Zhigang, and his beliefs about love and marriage?
6. What is unique about the way Ling Ma weaves a darkly humorous thread through the story line/ When did you find yourself laughing out loud? When did you find yourself worrying that a fungal apocalypse could actually happen?
7. What is the effect of the novel's time line? How does Ling Ma's use of flashbacks stay true to the way memories reflect and illuminate each other?

- 8.** As Candace learns how to shoot a gun and scavenge for necessities, she proves how determined she is to survive. What is the purpose of survival in the absence of quality of life? How do you personally define “quality of life”?
- 9.** SEVERANCE is packed with references to beauty products, clothing stores and other brands that have defined American consumerism. After the pandemic, what replaces these labels in the survivors’ quest for comfort and camaraderie? When money becomes useless, what new forms of currency emerge?
- 10.** If you had been in Candace’s situation, would you have left town with Jonathan? What accounts for the huge distinction between his approach to work and Candace’s? Would you have accepted Spectra’s final contract – and how committed would you be to making sure to fulfill it?
- 11.** SEVERANCE shines a spotlight on soul-crushing mind-sets that flourish both before and after the pandemic. What are they? Will profit-driven cultural forces diminish in your lifetime, or will they gain momentum?
- 12.** How is the novel shaped by the presence of the undead who, instead of being predators like traditional zombies, are stuck in a mindless, harmless act? If you succumbed to Shen Fever, what repetitive act would your body perform?
- 13.** How does Bob derive power? Which of his followers did you trust the most, and which the least? How does the bureaucracy compare to Spectra’s?
- 14.** From Candace’s NY Ghost blog to the nostalgia-laden stalkings, the survivors crave a connection to what they’ve lost. Under similar circumstances, which memories and images would you want to stockpile?
- 15.** How did you react to the closing scene? What do you imagine will happen next?

(Questions provided by readinggroupguides.com)



www.grpl.org/BookClub