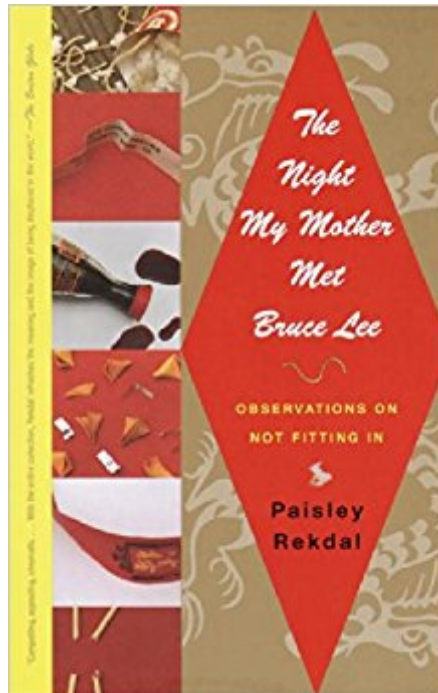


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The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee: Observations On Not Fitting In



Synopsis

When you come from a mixed race background as Paisley Rekdal does — her mother is Chinese American and her father is Norwegian — thorny issues of identity politics, and interracial desire are never far from the surface. Here in this hypnotic blend of personal essay and travelogue, Rekdal journeys throughout Asia to explore her place in a world where one's appearance is the deciding factor of one's ethnicity. In her soul-searching voyage, she teaches English in South Korea where her native colleagues call her a hermaphrodite, and is dismissed by her host family in Japan as an American despite her assertion of being half-Chinese. A visit to Taipei with her mother, who doesn't know the dialect, leads to the bitter realization that they are only tourists, which makes her further question her identity. Written with remarkable insight and clarity, Rekdal a poet whose fierce lyricism is apparent on every page, demonstrates that the shifting frames of identity can be as tricky as they are exhilarating.

Book Information

Paperback: 224 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (April 9, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375708553

ISBN-13: 978-0375708558

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.5 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,117,162 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #69 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Scandinavian #425 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Chinese #608 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Asian American Studies

Customer Reviews

The final essay in this unfocused collection recounts Rekdal's search for evidence of a Chinese community that had settled in Natchez, Miss., in the early 1900s; her great-aunt was a member. At the visitor's center in Natchez, she is told there was no such community. The attendant explains, "There's just us. Just Natchez. Everyone — blacks, white, Chinese, we're all in here together." Rekdal, the daughter of a Chinese-American mother and an American father of "Norwegian stock," is attracted to the inclusiveness implied in the Natchezian's statement, but finds it difficult to believe.

Traveling through America, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and China, she continually confronts the difficulty of negotiating her biracial identity and the hard truth that she "cannot choose one identity without losing half of [her]self." A poet (her first collection, *A Crash of Rhinos*, is forthcoming), Rekdal writes with a sure hand, though she stretches her broad subtitle to encompass travel sketches, childhood memories and meditations on sharks and BB guns. The essays are further diffused by her technique of continuously moving between past and present (her excursion to Taiwan, for example, serves almost entirely as backdrop for thoughts of her boyfriend in America). Perhaps the difficulty of Rekdal's position prevents her from seeing what could have been her focus. When trying to explain to the Japanese family she stays with that she is half-Chinese, she is sternly rebuked with "I am sorry, but you are American": what it means to be American is the insistent, unanswerable question that dogs Rekdal wherever she goes. Agent, Leigh Feldman, Darshanoff & Verrill Literary Agency. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Being biracial is a topic often left out of the Great American Dialogue on Race. Oddly, even the U.S. Census dodges the question: "biracial" was not one of the myriad racial categories on the forms this year. Rekdal, half-Chinese, half-Norwegian, hailing from Washington State, cleverly dissects what it means to be biracial in America and overseas in this artful collection of essays. The essays recall experiences from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in America and as a student and teacher in Korea, Japan, and China. Rekdal artfully narrates the peculiar situations her dual identity has often placed her in, alternately funny, sad, poignant, or ironic. She probes nearly every possible relationship: lovers, friends, mother and daughter, father and daughter. The narrative structure is inventive and draws from her sharply honed skills as a poet. Some stories are told in a weaving, dreamlike fashion. Others are sharp and blunt. Tapped by the *Village Voice* as an up-and-coming "writer on the verge," Rekdal has a lot to say. Ted Leventhal Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Rekdal, hailing from Chinese and Norwegian ancestry explores the meaning and substance of identity. She struggles with the reality of being a stranger among her own and in her own land. To her Chinese friends, she is not a "real" Chinese. To her American and European friends, she is not a "real" American. She takes a journey through Asia, hoping to solidify her personal identification, but finds that it only further complicates it. In Taipei, Taiwan, she shuns her mother from buying the trendy white cotton masks in order to fit in with the Taiwanese.

For, to do so would compromise her true self and quite literally, mask their identity. Rekdal covers her mouth around the Chinese women, too embarrassed to admit her lack of knowledge in speaking Chinese. Even with those who look the most like her, she comes to the realization that "We do not live here. We are only visitors." In her poetic and charmingly sarcastic way, she grapples with what it means to belong, with what it means to "fit in." She must find her place even though every "place" rejects her. Her words, each chapter could be a lyrical poem, capture the reader's attention and emotion. Rekdal brings them on a journey of identity crisis and, as beautifully and swaying as her form and diction, shows them the sometimes turbulent, but remarkable process in finding one's self. Her hurt, pain, joy, happiness, confusion, frustration, love, and finally recognition and acceptance bleed through the pages and into the reader's heart. Rekdal's *The Night My Mother Met Bruce Lee*, in today's political and social climate of deciding who and who doesn't belong, is a very pertinent masterpiece.

Well, you have BOTH Ha Jin AND Arthur Golden praising it on the back cover--what can you expect? (I like one and not the other). While the cover made me think that this was going to be a "wacky," irreverent account by a young, half-Chinese woman, the book is instead an extremely well-written, thought-provoking collection of essays on ethnicity and identity. Rekdal is a poet, and it shows in her evocative descriptions, in her lyrical passages, in an effortlessly beautiful line rendered for the reader's benefit. Grappling with the vexatious issue of personal identity, Rekdal comes up with great insight and meaning into the problem without being narcissistic or excessively introspective; the book succeeds brilliantly without offering any simple, pat conclusions. Though the essay's topics are somewhat disjointed--they go from America to Korea to China to childhood, etc--the disconnected structure seems to be part of the point: as the subtitle suggests, these are "observations of not fitting in." I liked her juxtaposition of the uncanny, the frustrating, the disappointing things along with the beautiful, the personal, the "mini-epiphanic" aspects. And yes, she is also very witty. The humor is very sharp. I found myself laughing hysterically at an Elvis reference and I normally don't find him amusing. Finally, as someone who also spent a year teaching high school students in a small city in Korea, I was delighted and amazed to read about experiences that I related to. I'm grateful for that alone, but it's a great book in all other aspects as well.

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There are always stereotypes to be stripped down, aren't there? Rekdal's themes (race, how Americans are perceived overseas, how Americans perceive each other) make you think, but her writing won't make you struggle. Her essays, built around episodes of her life, are sad, funny, entertaining and insightful. An excellent book. Highly recommended. I wish I could teach a course called "Race in America" just so I could get more people to read this book.

I am so happy to have stumbled upon this book. This author is so intelligent, observant, witty and creative. This book was charming and relatable. I laughed aloud as some of my own personal experiences were so similar, it was amazing. Rekdal is able to put into words feelings that I hadn't been able to describe. Even if one hasn't had cultural identity questions about him/herself this book is enjoyable and some sentences read almost like poetry. Her stories are very insightful and she captures the essence of how people think and react.

Ms. Rekdal's numerous observations are personal and touching. Many Americans have struggled with an identity crisis. I understand fully the crushing power of long and brutal silences mentioned in the text. I am so glad that Ms. Rekdal is not silent at all.

This highly original book is refreshing for its insights into a topic that has been discussed innumerable times in the news media. Ms. Rekdal reflects upon mother/daughter relationships, racial and sociological problems, all without preachiness.

Very dull and boring.

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