

MICHIGAN

ALUM

WINTER 2022-23

The Marathon Back to U-M

Corie Pauling, '93, has always been driven by inspiration and impact. Now, she's looking to inspire alums to do as she's done: come home.

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OUR MISSING HEARTS

By Celeste Ng, MFA'06, Penguin Press, 2022

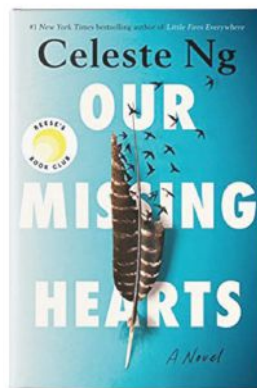
Something is so rotten in “Our Missing Hearts” that it can’t be spoken of. Bird, a boy of 12, lives in a dorm room with his dad, a language expert who has been reduced to a menial job in a university library. Mom is gone, but Bird doesn’t know why, and Dad won’t say.

America has weathered “the Crisis,” a depression so severe that out of anger, frustration and misunderstanding, something — anything — had to be blamed, and was: China, “that perilous, perpetual yellow menace.” PAOs (Persons of Asian Origin), of which Bird is one, remain under intense scrutiny, and PACT (the Preserving American Culture and Traditions Act) has redefined daily life. At school, where the American flag hangs in every classroom “like a raised axe,” assignments require Bird to “explain what PACT stands for and why it is crucial for our national security.” His friend Sadie is also separated from her parents. She seems to know more than may be good for her, and soon a spurred-on Bird sets out to find why his mother is gone.

Dystopian fiction disquiets to the degree that the bad stuff in the book is recognizable in the real world. Like the flag in the classroom, “Our Missing Hearts” is menacing — not because it’s aggressive, but because it hits home in a world where fake news, demagoguery, and

LIKE THE FLAG IN THE CLASSROOM, “OUR MISSING HEARTS” IS MENACING — NOT BECAUSE IT’S AGGRESSIVE, BUT BECAUSE IT HITS HOME IN A WORLD WHERE FAKE NEWS, DEMAGOGUERY, AND DEMONIZATION OF THE “OTHER” ARE REAL.

demonization of the “other” are real. In an author’s note, Ng says that Bird’s world “isn’t exactly our world, but it isn’t not ours, either.” She acknowledges parallels between the Crisis and the pandemic, including a rise in anti-Asian discrimination. But she also reminds us that it — just like forced separation of children from their parents — is, sadly, nothing new.



But they also delight Bird’s father and mother, a poet whose work resonated post-Crisis. And Bird’s family may find out that, when spoken loudly enough, words just might be enough to reunite families like his that have been torn asunder. — MATTHEW BENZ, '98

In prior novels like “Everything I Never Told You,” Ng took readers inside families suddenly facing extraordinary challenges. “Our Missing Hearts” is also a family story — heartbreakingly simple (a boy seeks his missing mother), but also tinged with fantasy, folklore, and mystery. What about the letter that Bird receives that’s nothing but drawings of cats? Is “the Duchess” whom he encounters friend or foe? What note did that man in the library just slip inside a book?

Ng’s book is also about the power of words. Yes, they obfuscate and oppress when in sinister government hands.

DESIGNED FOR DANCING

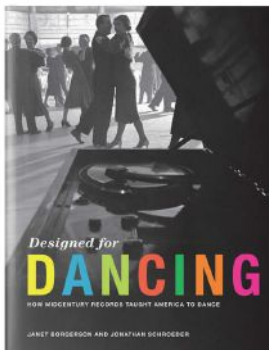
By Janet Borgerson, '86, and Jonathan Schroeder, '84, The MIT Press, 2021

What can we learn from old dance records? As it turns out, plenty — and not just about the foxtrot, mambo, or waltz.

Authors Janet Borgerson, '86, and Jonathan Schroeder, '84 — a fellow at DePaul University and a professor at Rochester Institute of Technology, respectively — are certainly the ones to teach us. In their previous book, “Designed for Hi-Fi Living: The Vinyl LP in Mid-century America” (The MIT Press, 2017), they showed how mid-century album art taught lifestyle lessons to post-war America: “the ideal living room, the ideal romance, honeymoon, and family... all were visible, tangible, achievable in the fantastical frame of the record cover.”

In “Designed for Dancing,” Borgerson and Schroeder return to their collection of vinyl (numbering 6,000–7,000 records, collected over more than 30 years) to show that dance records also “encouraged cultural confidence and greater ease with cosmopolitan identities, leading the U.S. postwar population onto the dance floor and out into the wider world.”

The book is colorful, thanks to the many photographs of record covers and, more figuratively, from the text accompanying the vinyl that the authors unearth. Take the accompanying booklet to one belty dance record, “How to Make Your Husband a Sultan,” which promised to “majestically transform the stale, white bread dullness of your ‘after hours’ marriage into an international world brimming with



tantalizing temptation, rhythmic finger cymbals, and salty body gyrations.” A wider world indeed!

There are some familiar names and faces: famed dance instructor Arthur Murray, twist pioneer Chubby Checker, and, somewhat more surprisingly, Mary Tyler Moore, who actually first appeared on TV as “Happy Hotpoint, an elf-like dancer for Hotpoint appliance ads.”

ACADEMICS THAT THEY ARE, BORGERSON AND SCHROEDER ALSO GO BEYOND THE TRIVIAL TO TELL THE STORIES BEHIND THE RECORD COVERS.

Academics that they are, Borgerson and Schroeder also go beyond the trivial to tell the stories behind the record covers. The limbo has its roots in a Trinidadian funeral rite, with the movement representing suspension between the worlds of the living and the dead. But as the authors report, at the height of its U.S. popularity, Wham-O — the company behind the Hula-Hoop and the Frisbee — introduced a limbo kit with the tagline “The Caribbean Fun Fad is Here.”

This highlights the darker side of the cultural artifacts that Borgerson and Schroeder have curated so carefully in “Designed for Dancing.” Cultural exploration is admirable, and the story they tell of “how mid-century records taught America to dance” is fascinating. But as the limbo story shows, exploration, however earnest, may go hand-in-hand with ignorance or lead to misappropriation. The authors do not shy away from this truth, even as they also take time to celebrate the innocent fun of learning how Baby Boomers learned the limbo, cha-cha-cha, and so much more. — MATTHEW BENZ, '98