

# The End of East Reading Guide

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## Author's introduction

In many ways, *The End of East* was the novel I had to write before I could write anything else, and also before I could move on with my life. I never intended to write a story about a Chinese Canadian family, but it seems that the story chose me, whether I liked it or not! This whole process of writing and seeing how readers, like you, are responding to *The End of East* has been hugely rewarding. Enjoy, and discuss!

## Description

Spanning eighty-five years and exploring themes of isolation, immigration, romance and sanity, *The End of East* is a moving portrait of one emblematic family and Vancouver's Chinatown.

Samantha Chan returns home to Vancouver to care for her aging mother, abruptly leaving an unfinished life in Montreal. Feeling abandoned by her four sisters and resentful at the city she thought she had escaped forever, she finds herself cobbling together a makeshift family history and delving into stories that began in 1913, when her grandfather, Seid Quan, then eighteen years old, first stepped on to Canadian soil.

*The End of East* weaves in and out of past and present, picking up the threads of Sam's grandparents and parents: Seid Quan, whose loneliness in this foreign country is profound even as he joins the Chinatown community; Shew Lin, whose hopes for her family are threatened by her own actions; Pon Man's tension between obligation and desire; and Siu Sang, who tries to be the caregiver everyone expects, even as she feels herself unravelling. Through it all, Samantha, who carries within her all the conflicts of the past, is embroiled in her own struggle, a volatile mixture of dangerous love affairs, a difficult and duty-filled relationship with her mother, and the still-fresh memories of her father's long illness.

*The End of East* sets family conflicts against the backdrop of Vancouver's Chinatown—a city within a city where dreams are shattered as quickly as they're built, and where history repeats itself through the generations.

## Reading group discussion topics

1. When Samantha returns home, one of the first things she stumbles upon is her grandfather's Head Tax certificate, paid in 1913.
  - How did the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act affect the inner, emotional lives of the Chan family?
  - What effect, if any, have these immigration policies had on Sammy and her contemporary life?
2. Early on in the book, Sammy thinks, "I nod and see relief on [Penny's] round face--the loosening of the muscles around her eyes and mouth. I wonder if I looked the same when I left Vancouver for Montreal six years ago, delirious with the kind of happiness only escape can bring."
  - What do you think Sammy has been trying to escape?
  - Have you ever felt a similar impulse?

3. Seid Quan's story begins as he is leaving the boat that has taken him from China to Vancouver. "He fears that the stink will be mistaken for the smell of China, but he does not know how to say that there would be no smell if Canada never was, if the boats were not so full of desperation, men trading one kind of poverty for another."
  - What do you think this means?
  - Do you think that this kind of fear and anger is common to people who leave a disadvantaged country for one like Canada?
  
4. Seid Quan and his friend Lim share the same origins, but the trajectories of their lives are completely different.
  - What do you think Seid Quan learns from Lim's experiences?
  - Whose vision of Canada and what can be achieved here do you think is the most realistic, or the most practical?
  
5. Seid Quan finds himself in the thick of Chinatown's "bachelor society" where he is compelled to be a leader.
  - What do you think would be more difficult: being a man in an unfamiliar country without your family, or being one of the women left behind, raising children without a father?
  
6. Sammy and her sisters have a conflicted and strained relationship, each of them trying to push the responsibility of looking after their mother on to someone else.
  - What do you think it would take for all five of the Chan sisters to mend their relationship?
  
7. At Penny's wedding, Sammy takes off with the bartender.
  - Why do think she does this?
  
8. When Pon Man arrives in Vancouver to live with his father, their relationship is strained from the very beginning.
  - What do you think is the reason that Seid Quan and Pon Man can never really connect emotionally?
  - What is it about Seid Quan that Pon Man resents so much?
  
9. After several years in Vancouver, Pon Man reflects that "everyone, like him, wants to escape this city, for despite the trees and mountains and pure water, Vancouver is as cold and hard at its core as anywhere else in Canada."
  - What do you think he means by this?
  - Do the other characters in *The End of East* share the same thoughts about Vancouver?
  
10. Sammy looks for, and finds, partners for disturbing and verging on violent sex.
  - Why do you think she does this?
  - Do you think it's common for young women to use their bodies in this way?
  
11. Siu Sang, as a young woman, accepts an arranged marriage to a man she's never met who lives in a country she knows nothing about.
  - Why do you think she is willing to do this?

- What is it about her personality that makes her so unquestioning?
12. On the way to Vancouver, Siu Sang reflects that “there is nothing they can do if things do not turn out well, if their husbands begin to beat them, if they are deathly allergic to the Canadian air. They will have to stay, no matter what.”
    - How common do you think this feeling of helplessness is to married women in the past and today?
    - Are there parallels between this and the compulsion that marriages must remain intact for the children?
  13. Siu Sang struggles with her emotions during her pregnancy and after she gives birth.
    - Do you think she is suffering from post-partum depression or from a mental health issue that has been latent in her from the beginning?
    - What do you think are some issues related to pregnancy and childbirth that women don’t talk about enough?
  14. When Samantha finds herself bleeding after a sexual encounter, do you think she’s hit rock bottom?
    - What parallels do you see between this and Siu Sang’s experiences as a mother?
  15. Often, Shew Lin is purposely cruel to her daughter-in-law, thinking that these small cruelties will help her keep her family together.
    - Do you think this is really Shew Lin’s intention, or is there a darker reason?
    - What similarities do you see between Shew Lin’s treatment of Siu Sang, and Siu Sang’s treatment of her own daughters?
  16. When Pon Man tells the very ill Shew Lin that Sammy has been born and looks just like him, Shew Lin replies, “Yes, that’s the right thing. She will do just as well. You must hold her as I would, as I held you.”
    - What do you think she means by this?
    - Is she hoping that Sammy will live to mend the emotionally fractured family?
    - Or does she think that Sammy will be just as good as a boy, and carry on the legacy of the Chan family, such as it is?
  17. After Sammy comes home from the hospital, Siu Sang attempts to start a real discussion with her. Sammy, however, isn’t quite ready to relate to her mother on this level.
    - What do you think is the reason Sammy is still afraid of an emotional connection with Siu Sang?
  18. Late in the book, Sammy says of Vancouver, “I walk this city every day, sidestep the garbage, hold my breath through the alleys. But even in the dirtiest of places, where the sidewalk is covered with gum and the hum of traffic and city-noise is so loud that you can’t even hear your own footsteps, you can always look north and see the mountains. And there’s always a breeze, faintly salt-scented, that touches your face as you turn to look west.”
    - What role do you think Vancouver plays in *The End of East*?
    - What do you think the city means to Seid Quan, Pon Man, Shew Lin and Siu Sang?
    - What about Sammy?

19. After voting at a clan association election, Pon Man returns to the car to wait for his father, uncomfortable with the idea of wandering through the streets of Chinatown.
- Do you think it's common for immigrants and children of immigrants to be ashamed of where they come from or their history?
20. When Pon Man is very ill with cancer, "he wants to cry because his mind has become glue and sludge and because he knows he needs to be forgiven for something, but what? What will he ask for, and how can he when he can hardly speak anymore?"
- What do you think it is he has forgotten?
21. As an old man, Seid Quan thinks "of how a man can identify with his work, can say to people he meets, 'I am a dentist,' and know that it's complete and true. 'I am a barber,' he says to himself, trying to remember what it felt like. He feels nothing, thinks that perhaps *I am lonely* or *I am arthritic* might be closer to the truth."
- How do think Seid Quan thinks of himself? As a father, a community leader, a husband?
  - Do you think that any of the characters in *The End of East* are ever at ease with their identities?
22. When Samantha meets her mother in Chinatown and resolves to go home with her, do you think that this is the beginning of a happier era for the Chan family?
- Do you think Sammy and her sisters as well as Siu Sang are capable of change?

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