



## Bury What We Cannot Take

*Kirstin Chen*

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## **Bury What We Cannot Take** Kirstin Chen

The day nine-year-old San San and her twelve-year-old brother, Ah Liam, discover their grandmother taking a hammer to a framed portrait of Chairman Mao is the day that forever changes their lives. To prove his loyalty to the Party, Ah Liam reports his grandmother to the authorities. But his belief in doing the right thing sets in motion a terrible chain of events.

Now they must flee their home on Drum Wave Islet, which sits just a few hundred meters across the channel from mainland China. But when their mother goes to procure visas for safe passage to Hong Kong, the government will only issue them on the condition that she leave behind one of her children as proof of the family's intention to return.

Against the backdrop of early Maoist China, this captivating and emotional tale follows a brother, a sister, a father, and a mother as they grapple with their agonizing decision, its far-reaching consequences, and their hope for redemption.

## **Bury What We Cannot Take Details**

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Author : Kirstin Chen

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# From Reader Review Bury What We Cannot Take for online ebook

## Natalia Sylvester says

This was a beautifully immersive story and one I know I'll be thinking about for a long time. Using multiple POVs, Kirstin Chen depicts a family torn apart by unthinkable circumstances. The way she reveals each character's truths and struggles and triumphs and losses is masterful, elevating the story past the usual question of "what would I do?" to arrive at a deeper, more complex understanding: that there are moments in life which rob us of choice, leaving us in their wake trying to somehow get through it.

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## Kate says

I think the book was good and played out some interesting scenarios - if and how and when to get your family out of your home country; family dynamics; sibling gender differences.

I totally rounded up the stars because it was refreshing to read a story that was not dependent upon frequent violence against women; or a book that alternates between different time periods; or writing that overly simplifies parenting as a perfect, loving, easy thing; or characters that never change or grow. I also appreciate that this is not an unreliable narrator story. I am thrilled that there were not any descriptions of the characters' boobs or butts.

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## Carrie Nelson says

Set in Maoist China, a young boy, Ah Liam, reports that his grandmother took a hammer to Chairman Mao's portrait because he believes that is the right thing to do. This causes Ah Liam's family to flee to Hong Kong, where his father has been living, but the government will not provide enough visas which results in one of the children being left behind.

A harrowing tale about living with the consequences of our choices.

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## Mia Bonardi says

I had the opportunity to meet the author, Kirstin Chen, in a Publishing course I took at Northeastern University this past Spring. My professor went to graduate school with Chen and she was on her Bury What We Cannot Take book tour in Boston, so she stopped by our class. The major topics that she discussed about Bury What We Cannot Take were cultural representation, her inspiration, the cover art, and her blurbs.

If you have an interest in Chen's struggle with cultural representation or her inspiration for Bury What We Cannot Take, please view the article she wrote about both, "Am I Chinese Enough to Tell This Story?" (<https://lithub.com/am-i-chinese-enough...>)

In regards to the amazing cover of this book, Chen said she knew exactly what she wanted for this book

because she had been unhappy with her previous cover for *Soy Sauce For Beginners*. Chen said she was specifically against having a lot of red on the cover of *Bury What We Cannot Take*.

I asked her about the blurbs for *Bury What We Cannot Take*, specifically the following because I am a huge fan of Celeste Ng, loved *Little Fires Everywhere*, and am looking forward to reading *Everything I Never Told You*:

“*Bury What We Cannot Take* explores what it takes to survive in a world gone mad—and what is lost when we do. Kirstin Chen has written both an engrossing historical drama and a nuanced exploration of how far the bonds of familial love can stretch.” — Celeste Ng, New York Times bestselling author of *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere*

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### **Stephanie Anze says**

"What if a mistake was too grave to live with? What if the guilt wormed its way deep into the flesh and grew more and more potent, devouring tissue and fat and skin, until one day, you looked down and your whole self had been ravaged and nothing remained?"

When nine-year-old San San and twelve-year-old Ah Liam find that their grandma has taken a hammer against the portrait of Chairman Mao, they agree to remain silent. However, in an effort to please the party, Ah Liam reports his grandma. The family already had a plan to flee China, one that they have to expedite now. When Seok Koon, their mother, goes to procure exit visas she is given only three and must choose one child to leave behind. Confident that she will be able to save the child that stays, Seok Koon makes the gut-wrenching decision of who will leave and who stays.

Kirstin Chen is a new author for me. Upon learning the premise of this book, I knew it was something I wanted to read. San San and Ah Liam arrive home from school and find that their grandmother is not in her usual seat, waiting for them. They do find her with a hammer and a smashed portrait of Mao. Knowing the strict rules, they remain quiet. Still, when the opportunity arises for Ah Liam to join the Youth League, he does what he thinks is correct and reports his grandmother. Following the incident, the family speeds up their plans to flee China. Unfortunately, Seok Koon only has an exit visa for one of her children. With a heavy heart, she leaves one of them behind but promises to secure passage for the other soon. I found the prose to be well written and thoughtful. What a moral conundrum. How is a mother supposed to choose between her children? Part coming-of-age, I especially like the narration of San San and Ah Liam. The narrative was harrowing, heartfelt and one that I read in two seatings. As each character struggles with their personal demons, they collectively worry for the one child left behind. Dealing with family and loyalty amid a country in turmoil, this was a great read.

While I enjoyed this book, I do have some issues. I wish this book had been longer, expand on some matters further more. Since this has multiple points of view, I would have liked to hear more from all the characters, particularly Ah Liam. The ending felt abrupt and difficult to grasp. I was by no means expecting a "happily ever after" but wanted something more cohesive to what the narrative had presented. Chen did a great job a presenting the prevalent fear that dominated China. "Red fear" (duubed so for the Red Army) dominated homes, schools and the streets. Reporting family, neighbours and friends was encouraged. Public denunciations and self-criticisms were common and forced even on small children. Anyone believed to be "capitalistic", "rightist" or "bourgeois" was targeted and some were targeted by the party for unknown reasons. All and all, this book presents a compelling narrative with great historical references.

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### **Afoma Umesi says**

This is one of those books whose titles grabbed me before anything else. I'm pleased to report that the rest of the book is just as evocative as that title. In Maoist China, twelve year old Ah Liam reports his grandmother for vandalizing a portrait of Chairman Mao and so starts a terrible chain of events. The family attempts to flee China, but in a heartbreaking plot twist, they are can only take one child. The novel follows the consequences of the devastating choice, Seok Koon (the mother) makes.

The story is dramatic and despite bearing the burden of multiple intersecting characters and subplots, it remains fast-paced. From a third person POV, Chen shows great mastery of a child's voice and San San's character anchors the story excellently. This sophomore novel lucidly captures the plight of the girl child, Chinese history and heartbreaking betrayal. Utterly mesmerizing from the first sentence, *Bury What We Cannot Take* paints a portrait of family shaken by a grave mistake, the results of which will linger after the story ends. This is what makes the book spectacular.

Kirstin Chen's *Bury What We Cannot Take* is unsettling, vivid and compulsively readable. Highly recommended.

Full review at [http://www.afomaumesi.com/2018/03/23/...](http://www.afomaumesi.com/2018/03/23/)

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### **Heidi Perling says**

I received this book and a Goodreads giveaway, but I would have loved it even if I had paid for it. It's a fascinating peek into life in China after the communist revolution. I'll be thinking about these characters for a long time... I really liked the way their emotions we're expressed through the descriptions of their physical movements. It was hard to put this one down, and I'm sure I'll revisit it someday.

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### **Ashley says**

I truly believe San San deserved better despite everyone's best intentions.

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### **Rosh says**

This book painted a painful picture of communism in China when the borders closed and the awful choices a family might have to make to get out of there. Did I like it? It was decent but I appreciate the story and intention of the author behind it.

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## Rachel says

Bury What We Cannot Take is a captivating novel about one family's attempt to flee from Communist China in 1957. Having been granted only 3 travel visas to Hong Kong for 4 family members, Seok Koon is forced to leave one of her children behind in order to legally exit the country, and Kirsten Chen explores the ramifications of this harrowing decision.

Bury What We Cannot Take is actually everything I had hoped Girls Burn Brighter was going to be. Both novels follow two parties which have been separated and which spend the novel seeking a reunion, and in both cases, these stories are filled to the brim with tragedy. But where Girls Burn Brighter indulges (at least in my opinion) a bit too heavily in the gruesome details of its characters' plights, Bury What We Cannot Take is more interested in the kind of resilience needed to survive. Though the chapters which follow the left-behind child can be difficult to read, I felt that the narrative was approached with sensitivity, and it quickly earned my emotional investment.

This novel is deceptively short for 300 pages, and as a result, my only complaint is that at times it felt a bit rushed. Though I loved how compelling and immersive it was - I think I read 20% in one sitting and then finished it in another sitting the next day - certain plot points were glossed over, and I wouldn't have minded spending a bit more time with the Ong family.

But ultimately, I really enjoyed this. It's a fantastic look at Communist China and its insidious regime, which follows a host of complex, sympathetic characters aged across multiple generations. Though I hadn't heard of Kirsten Chen before this, I'll definitely be looking into anything she writes in the future.

*Thank you to Netgalley, Little A, and Kirsten Chen for the advanced copy provided in exchange for an honest review.*

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## Imi says

I'll be reading Chen's debut *Soy Sauce for Beginners* before this (it's on the tbr soon pile!), but I really enjoyed this article about the author's concern on whether she had the right to write the story she was planning for this, her sophomore novel: *Am I Chinese Enough to Tell This Story?* - <https://lithub.com/am-i-chinese-enough-to-tell-this-story>...

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## Diane S ? says

3.5 Twelve year old, Ah Liam is a staunch supporter of the cultural revolution and of Chairman Mao. So much so that he reports his own grandmother for taking a hammer to the picture in their house, the picture every house must have, of their beloved Chairman. Coming from a privileged background, his family still living in their Villa, albeit on only one floor, but still maintaining a few servants, he already has much to overcome. This act though will start a crushing tide of circumstances, one that will find himself, his mother and grandma fleeing to Hong Kong, but forced to leave his nine year old sister San San, behind.

This book starts out very powerfully, a close look at the cultural revolution and the fear and divisions it caused in families and in its citizens. A time when people were encouraged to tell on each other, to curry

favor and gain in status. It is the story of a young girl left behind in the care of servants, that wants only to be reconnected with her family. She sees horrible things, endures much as she tries to escape. I loved the character of San San, hers was the most developed character, the rest just background.

The last part of the book though I thought not as strong. I'm not sure a young, nine year old could do all the things, think the way she does, rationalize and carry out her plans. So I felt the last part of the book lost credibility and turned into an adventure story rather than the strong historical in which it started. Glad I read this though, I did enjoy it for the most part. It is definitely worth reading.

ARC from Netgalley.

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### **Shawn Mooney says**

It's a harrowing story, set in China in 1957: a young boy reports his grandmother to the authorities for taking a hammer to a portrait of Chairman Mao. Unfortunately, the extremely weak characterization meant that, a fifth of the way in, I didn't care about anyone or anything that was happening. I shall not be continuing. Great cover, though.

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### **Ingrid Contreras says**

In *Bury What We Cannot Take*, a misjudged moment of anger uproots a family. The very beginning of the novel finds twelve-year-old Ah-Liam and nine-year-old San San returning home from school to discover their grandmother kneeling before the family altar and crying, her skirt partially hiding a hammer. Overlooking the room is a portrait of Chairman Mao "smiling benevolently at all who gazed upon him, oblivious to the spiderweb of cracks that scarred him."

As recently as 2015, an individual defacing a portrait of Chairman Mao faced a sentence of 14 months jail time. In *Bury What We Cannot Take*, Ah-Liam and San San imagine much more dire consequences. While San San tries to process her grandmother's "treasonous capitalist act," her older brother Ah-Liam, fervent to become a member of the Maoist Youth League, writes to the party in secret to confess "the horrific manner in which his grandmother had insulted the Great Helmsman."

The Ong family tries a ruse to flee — but the government will only give an exit visa to one of the children, and the family is forced to choose who to leave behind, Ah-Liam or San San.

This is just the first five chapters of the book — what follows is a page-turning drama of a divided family struggling to be free, both from capture and from their conscience.

Chen is a precise writer, with enviable control on the page. *Bury What We Cannot Take* is completely immersive, and the only times I stepped out of the story was to admire the perfection of her word choice. In one instance she writes: "The heady scent of honeysuckle tickled San San's nostrils, and her sneeze punctured the silence." I find Chen's choice of "puncture," so close to "honeysuckle," to be absolutely enchanting. And here's another majestic precision: "With her back pressed to the high stone wall lining the street, she crab stepped down the hill." I've been equally pleased watching a puzzle piece fitting accurately into place.

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**BlondeVsBooks says**

This gripping story epitomizes family, culture, radicalism, and living with the consequences of our choices. I have not read many books about Communism and I became emotionally attached to the characters as the borders began to close and they had to leave San San behind. The family's struggles were heart wrenching. I read *Bury What We Cannot Take* fervently, searching for consolation. We highly recommend this book for anyone looking for a cultural, political, all-around good read.

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[CLICK HERE FOR BLONDEvsBOOKS FULL REVIEW!](#)

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