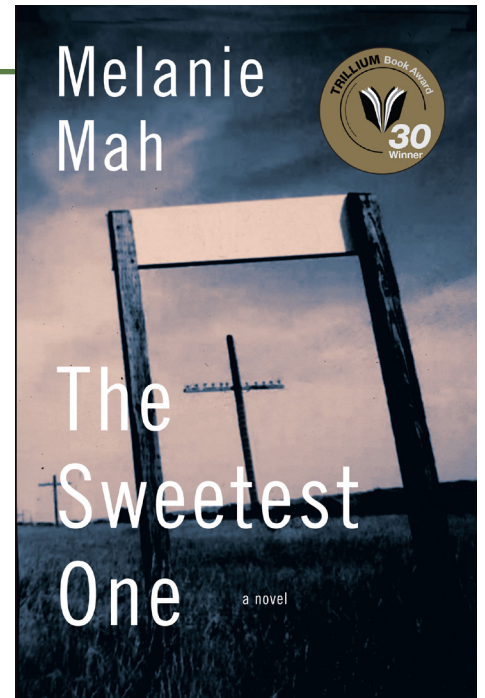


# READER'S GUIDE

## *The Sweetest One* by Melanie Mah

### INTRODUCING *The Sweetest One*

Chrysler Wong has spent her whole life in Spring Hills, a rural Alberta town, looking after her parents' store and watching her four older siblings leave her. Reggie, Stef, and Gene each died at eighteen and the last, Trina, disappeared on the evening of Chrysler's seventeenth birthday. Now in her final year of high school, Chrysler — though smart, strong-willed, and longing for change — is debilitated by fear. Fear that she's unlovable; that she will die at eighteen like her siblings. Then Chrysler meets Conrad, a boy from a neighbouring town who shares her love for books and biology. As their relationship develops and Chrysler starts receiving letters from Trina about her travels, Chrysler begins to imagine a future for herself beyond the confines of Spring Hills, and to come to terms with the immense losses her family has experienced.



### IMPORTANT THEMES

#### *Death, Grief, and Religion*

Chrysler's life is marked by loss. As the story winds through her thoughts and memories about her siblings, the stories of their deaths emerge. Each death is profound in its impact on the family and the narrative. Chrysler frequently returns to the question of what happens when someone dies. Her father's ancestor worship clashes with her mother's belief that there is no afterlife. Chrysler herself wishes the spirits of her siblings could remain with her in peace, but she is unable to truly believe.

#### *Love and Sexuality*

As Chrysler's relationship with Conrad develops, she begins to question what it means to love, and what it feels like to love. The enigmatic nature of her parents' relationship, which Chrysler often feels is marked by duty rather than love, leaves her unsure of herself. Friends' casual relationships and the memories of her siblings' relationship also complicate Chrysler's understanding of love. She also struggles to love herself, often refusing to accept compliments or believe in her own self-worth. Chrysler's doubts affect the sexual aspect of her relationship with Conrad as she struggles to balance what she wants — or doesn't want — with her perception of his expectations.

#### *Storytelling and Memory*

Holding the narrative together are questions about storytelling and memory. Chrysler asks her father to recount stories from his childhood, but with each retelling the stories shift. Facts are abandoned for emotion. Chrysler's memories of her siblings bubble up through the main narrative, and the way she recalls them emphasizes the circular nature of memory and storytelling as the timelines become less linear. Her desire to be a writer is fueled by her fear of leaving and dying, yet the comfort of storytelling is abandoned as each story about her siblings draws out her pain.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Chrysler's perspective shape how we view her family?
2. Chrysler's relationship with her father is complicated by mixed feelings of love and hate. How does this affect how Chrysler sees herself?
3. What do you think of Chrysler and Conrad's relationship? How does it develop throughout the novel? Is it healthy?
4. Chrysler's life in Spring Hill is affected by bullying and racism. Discuss the moments of racism that stood out in the narrative.
5. Why is higher education so important to Chrysler's mother? How does the novel treat the difference between education and learning?
6. How do Trina's letters affect Chrysler?
7. The topic of travel comes up many times throughout the novel: in the writing contest, in Trina's letters, in Chrysler's discussions about university. What does travel signify for Chrysler, and how does that change by the end of the novel?



### ABOUT MELANIE

Born in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, and now based in Toronto, Melanie Mah holds an MFA from the University of Guelph. *The Sweetest One*, her first novel, won the 2017 Trillium Award.