

## Lesson Two Overview

“All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir” by Nicole Chung

*Description:*

In this lesson, students will work in groups to read excerpts from *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir* by Nicole Chung, an autobiography that explores the identity of a Korean American adoptee raised in a predominantly white town. After students have looked over the text and worked through the comprehension questions, the class will engage in an open discussion about microaggressions, prejudice, discrimination, and racism. The lesson pushes students to appreciate the unique identity of Nicole Chung and value the differences in the people around us.

The text structure is simple, and most students should not have trouble working together to understand the content within this descriptive autobiography. This being said, the ideas presented within the narrative are deep, intricate, and subtle, and should be discussed as a class. The style is narrative-based and presents complicated social and emotional themes through familiar situations, allowing students to appreciate and understand the difficulties faced by Nicole Chung.

*Written below is the passage from All You Can Ever Know that students will be reading as a class and analyzing.*

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*Passage begins on the next page.*

# *Excerpts from All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir*

By Nicole Chung

The truth was that being Korean and being adopted were things I had loved and hated in equal measure. Growing up, I was the only Korean most of my friends and family knew, the only Korean I knew. Sometimes the adoption—the abandonment, as I could not help but think of it when I was very young—upset me more; sometimes my differences did; but mostly, it was both at once, race and adoption, linked parts of my identity that set me apart from everyone else in my orbit. I could neither change nor deny these facts, so I worked to reconcile myself to them. To tamp down the stirring of anger or confusion when that proved impossible, time and time again.

All members of a family have their own ways of defining the others. All parents have ways of saying things about their children as if they are indisputable facts, even when the children don't believe them to be true at all. It's why so many of us sometimes feel alone or unseen, despite the real love we have for our families and they for us. In childhood, I was uncertain who I was supposed to be, even as I resisted some of my adoptive relatives' interpretations—both you're our Asian Princess! and of course we don't think of you as Asian. I believe my adoptive family, for the most part, wanted to ignore the fact that I was the product of people from the other side of the world, unknown foreigners turned Americans. To them, I was not the daughter of these immigrants at all: by adopting me, my parents had made me one of them.

And perhaps I never would have felt differently—perhaps I, too, would have thought of myself as almost white—but for all the people who never indulged this fantasy beyond my home, my family, the reach of my parents' eyes. Caught between my family's "colorblind" ideal and the obvious notice of others, perhaps it isn't surprising which made me feel safer—which I preferred, and tried to adopt as my own.

Somewhere along the way, though, after leaving home, I had learned to feel strangely proud of my heritage. I'd made friends in middle school and high school who liked and accepted me even though I was one of the few Asian kids they knew. Then I had gone off to college and found myself living among huge numbers of fellow Asians; on campus, which soon felt more like home than the town where I had lived all my life, I finally learned how it felt to exist in a space, walk into a classroom, and not be stared at. I loved being just one Asian girl among thousands. Every day, I felt relieved to have found a life where I was no longer surrounded by white people who had no idea what to make of me.

Still, I did not know what it meant to be a Korean completely sundered from her culture, or if I could truly call myself a Korean at all... To me Korea was little more than a faraway country, less real to me than a fantasy, and my own Korean family existed in an alternate timeline I could hardly begin to imagine. I had yet to grapple with or resolve my adoption's place

in my life, what it meant and how I ought to think of it—at twenty-two, sitting in my new friends' dining room, a genuine, perhaps more generous understanding of who I was still flickered beyond my reach.

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I was in second or third grade when I heard my first slur.

I argued with a boy on the playground—I don't remember the reason. He called me ugly, which stung a bit, but it was also the sort of generic insult kids flung at one another all the time. If he'd stopped there, it might have remained a remote, laughable memory, a childhood squabble buried alongside dozens of other such moments.

Instead, he pulled his eyes into slits. His voice turned shrill as he sneered, "You're so ugly, your own parents didn't even want you!"

It was the first time anyone had ever used my adoption as an insult, and it would have been shocking and painful enough without the eyes, the broken singsong chant. He screwed up his face into a squint, asking how I could see. "Me Chinee, me can't see!"

Was "Chinee" supposed to be a nickname? I did not know what it meant, but I instinctively understood that he wasn't making fun of something about me, or something I had done. He wasn't mocking a name I could change into a nickname, or clothes my parents could replace, or glasses I could take off at recess. His target was who I was. How I'd come to be here, in this place where he believed I did not belong.

I waited, almost in suspense, for my own voice to emerge, for my sharp tongue to go on the attack. But any return insults withered and died in my throat. I couldn't have been more passive had I been invisible, a ghost floating high above the blacktop, watching the other kids laughing and feeling surprised, just as any witness or casual observer might, by my own shame and silence.

He made more faces, his eyes still pulled back tight; I wondered if he could see. To anyone watching, I probably looked eerily calm—the same girl I'd always been. This boy was in my carpool, and lived in my neighborhood, and until this day I'd thought of him as a kind of friend. When we rode home together that afternoon, side by side in the backseat of his mother's blue sedan, I was silent and so was he, pretending nothing had happened between us that day. But inside of me, something still and deep, something precious, had broken.

After that day, when I heard more words like that from him and other classmates—when adults I met questioned my nationality or my lack of an accent, or measured me against Asian stereotypes that were true in their minds—I would, to some degree, expect it. Each and every time I found myself on the defensive, defining an identity that seemed to require endless explanations, it would remind me of that day at recess when I learned what a slur meant, even if I did not yet know the name for it. And maybe I should have known to be angry as a child. Maybe

I should have realized that others were the problem, not me. But hadn't I already been suspicious before that day when my neighbor's words hit the bull's-eye? Hadn't I already wondered if I might be wrong, taking up space where I did not have a right to? The self-consciousness I'd felt but hardly known how to track since starting at that small white school bloomed to sudden, painful awareness. If I wasn't safe with a boy who'd known me for years, who knew where I lived, whose mother knew mine, then I couldn't trust anyone.

I remember I could tell my parents only part of the truth. I said that someone had made fun of me for being adopted. I didn't mention the other words the boy had used. This felt like a different kind of humiliation, one I could not expect them to understand. They had always insisted the fact that I was Korean didn't matter; what mattered was "the kind of person" I was. How could I tell them they were wrong?

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I never had a name for what was happening. I had never heard or read about any racism other than the kind that outright destroys your life and blots out your physical existence; even that was relegated in books and lessons to "it happened in the past." What I experienced on the elementary school playground, and then later on my middle school bus, and for the rest of my years in southern Oregon when people demanded to know where I was from and why I had a white family, always seemed too insignificant to be even remotely connected to real racism. My parents and I had certainly never discussed the possibility that I might encounter bigots within my school, our neighborhood, our family, in places they believed were safe for me.

The strange thing was that, inside, I always felt I was the same as everyone around me. I am just like you, I thought when kids squinted at me in mockery of my own eyes; why can't you see that? When I was young I certainly felt more like a white girl than an Asian one, and sometimes it was shocking to catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror and be forced to catalog the hated differences; to encounter tormentors and former friends and know that what they saw was so at odds with the person I believed I was. Why did I have to look the way I did—like a foreigner; like my birth parents, two people I would never even meet?