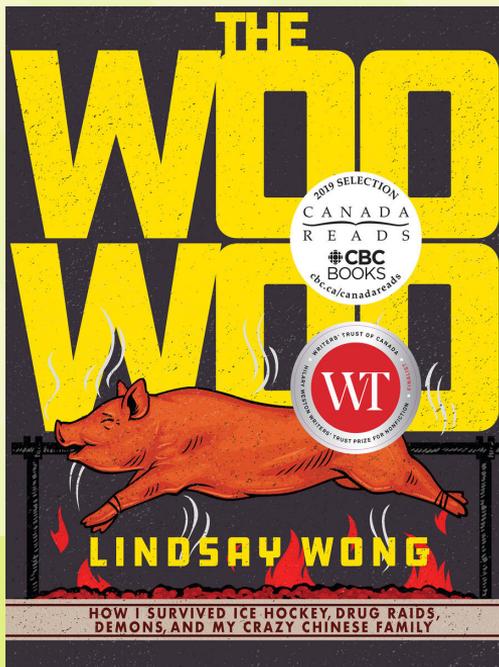


Book Background: **THE WOO-WOO** by LINDSAY WONG



In this jaw-dropping, darkly comedic memoir, a young woman comes of age in a dysfunctional Asian family who blame their woes on ghosts and demons when they should really be on anti-psychotic meds.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from **The Woo-Woo** and watch Lindsay Wong discuss her book.

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IMPORTANT NOTE FOR TEACHERS: Please be aware that the book this backgrounder is based on, **The Woo-Woo**, contains mature subject matter and coarse, offensive language. This backgrounder is meant to be used in conjunction with a book excerpt available on www.curio.ca/canadareads. Please ensure you fully review the excerpt before sharing it with your students.

LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



Book Description

Race and mental health are at the heart of this memoir by Lindsay Wong, about her youth growing up in a complicated Chinese-Canadian family in Vancouver. The events of the book are often so extreme, it's hard to believe it is nonfiction. When you think, "This can't get any worse," you are wrong. It always gets worse. It's both heartbreaking and hilarious. The writing is raw and straightforward and filled with highly unsavoury language, used mainly by Lindsay's parents.

The Woo-Woo is mostly chronological, following the author from childhood to early adulthood. At a young age, Lindsay is a nightmare child. She has no friends, is a terrible student and constantly gets into fights at

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school. She won't do anything unless her father bribes her with money. Her mother, meanwhile, has severe mental health issues, inherited from Lindsay's schizophrenic Poh Poh (grandmother). Her family, however, doesn't believe in mental illness. Instead, they believe they are haunted by the "woo-woo," mystical Chinese ghosts.

Because of their superstition and denial, the family refuses to consult western medicine. Instead the parents do things like force the entire family to spend their days at a mall fast food court, an environment which is believed to ward off and distract bad spirits. One day, Lindsay's mother sets Lindsay's foot on fire to get her out of bed, an act that is not considered especially out-of-the-ordinary.

Sometimes, Lindsay's mother will leave for long periods of time. When this happens, Lindsay's father blames Lindsay for making her mother go away. He says things like, "If you won your hockey game, your mother would come back." Lindsay feels shame and guilt about her mother's absences. Determined to be MVP at hockey, she accidentally breaks a girl's arm during one game. Her father mocks the girl with the broken arm and makes the unacceptable remark that she "must be retarded." (He and his wife use this term repeatedly.)

The book tells numerous stories about the trying circumstances that Lindsay's mother, Poh Poh and aunt faced in their earlier lives back in China. For example, Lindsay describes the fact that Poh Poh's family abandoned her by selling her into marriage for \$100.

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Though Lindsay experiences shocking verbal and sometimes physical abuse from her parents, she has a lot of compassion and love for them. She recognizes that her mother's behaviour is a result of untreated mental illness and past traumas related to growing up in extreme poverty and under societal restrictions. She sees her father as struggling to keep his wife and three children together under very trying circumstances. Lindsay's ability to empathize with parents who are often deeply cruel is a compelling aspect of the book.



Primary Characters

Note: Lindsay gives pseudonyms to all of her family members, mostly based on their Chinese names. None of them are mentioned by their real names in the book.

Lindsay a.k.a. Retarded One – Honest, straightforward, tough, Lindsay has basically zero friends growing up, and is often belittled by her parents for being “fat, retarded and lazy.” A journalist and writer today, she has managed to overcome not just a traumatic upbringing, but also an ongoing struggle with severe vertigo (diagnosed in her early 20s). At one point, doctors told Lindsay it would be impossible for her to read or write, though she was pursuing a writing degree at Columbia University in New York.

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Confucious Gentleman – Lindsay’s father is a man who makes a lot of mean-spirited jokes, a habit that Lindsay has inherited. Despite his cruel sense of humour (or perhaps because of it), they are fairly close. English is his second language and he is an engineer.

Quiet Snow – Lindsay’s mother struggles with mental illness, which she attributes to the woo-woo. Her mental health challenges come and go, and are sometimes particularly severe. While for the most part she’s not very maternal, “Quiet Snow” is protective of her younger sister (Lindsay’s aunt, “Beautiful One”). On occasion, she even comes to Lindsay’s rescue, including an instance where she flies to New York to bring Lindsay home after she experiences her first bout of vertigo.

Deep Thinker – Lindsay’s younger sister, “Deep Thinker” is not featured in *The Woo-Woo* very much, but seems to be the most well-adjusted member of the family. She often tries to clean the house, which is routinely a mess, and gets frustrated when no one will help her. Today Lindsay is estranged from her sister, who lives in Australia, but it’s not completely clear why.

Make Lots of Money – Lindsay’s younger brother, despite his nickname, struggles with unemployment. Lindsay only recently reconnected with her brother, who is not heavily featured in the book, and who is also interested in becoming a writer.

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Poh-Poh – Lindsay’s maternal grandmother, Poh-Poh struggles with schizophrenia, but her children distrust the medicine she is given. Her children often try to avoid dealing with her, and the book makes it clear that she had a pretty tragic childhood.

Beautiful One – Lindsay’s aunt “Beautiful One” is close to Lindsay, but is cruel to her own children. She attempts suicide a couple of times in the book, including in a high profile incident where she threatens to jump off a busy bridge on Canada Day, effectively holding the city of Vancouver hostage. Despite her mental health challenges, she owns a successful chain of restaurants, which impresses Lindsay.

Uncle E.T. – Beautiful One’s husband. Seems quite cruel and not very supportive.

Flowery Face – Beautiful One’s daughter, who is desperate for her mother’s affection but is coldly rejected. She resents Lindsay for having a closer relationship with Beautiful One.

Key Themes

 **MENTAL HEALTH** – Throughout Lindsay’s life, the Wong family deals with some very serious mental health issues, but chooses to believe in the “woo-woo” instead. This denial is not uncommon in Asian families, who sometimes consider mental illness something shameful, to be kept secret. Lindsay hopes to bring these issues to greater light, so that people will seek the treatment they need.

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 **RACE** – Lindsay riffs a lot on being Chinese in Canada and explores the intersection of mental health and being Asian.

 **DARK COMEDY** – Despite the dire subject matter, the book is very funny, even at times bizarre. In interviews, Lindsay has spoken about how humour has served as a significant coping mechanism for her throughout her life, allowing her to deal with experiences and traumas that would otherwise have been paralyzing.

 **COMING OF AGE** – Lindsay faces a lot of challenges and failures, but manages to come into her own as a writer and young adult. For Lindsay, this coming of age involves developing an understanding of

her parents as people whose profound dysfunction is rooted in their own trauma and challenges, and for whom she is able to feel empathy.

 **FAMILY** – How do you love someone abusive? Lindsay finds a way. Ultimately, she is able to find compassion for those she feels have done their best to raise her.

 **IMMIGRATION** – Lindsay offers a compassionate look at her family's lives before immigration and how they have coped with moving to Canada.

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About the Author

Lindsay Wong is a Vancouver-based author. She holds a BFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia and an MFA in literary nonfiction from Columbia University. *The Woo-Woo* is her first book.

Awards & Accolades

The Woo-Woo:

- Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize for Nonfiction finalist (2018)



Notable Quotes from Reviews

“From childhood, Wong’s ecologically damaged Vancouver suburb, where many Asian neighbors manufactured cannabis or methamphetamine in McMansions, seemed conformist, abrasive, and indifferent to criminal behavior. The author describes most characters with a grotesque sense of body horror, and she doesn’t ignore her own struggles with obesity and other maladies... A raw, profane, and funny memoir.” – Kirkus Reviews

“Darkly funny, steeped in the macabre and grotesque, the book is at once an unflinching portrait of a borderline abusive childhood and a testament to the power that family has to shape us for good or ill.” – Quill & Quire

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“CanLit is brimming with immigrant stories, but we’ve never had anything quite like Lindsay Wong’s *The Woo-Woo*. This madcap memoir follows Wong as she comes of age amidst her foul-mouthed, upwardly mobile Asian Canadian family. Although the household is riddled with mental illness, her mother blames their domestic chaos on a bevy of Chinese ghosts. Hilarious anecdotes and slapstick comedy make bearable a shattering account of childhood neglect, emotional abuse, and social ostracism. Wong navigates treacherous emotional waters with such masterful literary skill we are barely aware of the moment our laughter turns to tears.” – Writers’ Trust jury citation

CBC Links

- Book Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4759689
- Author Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4828824
- Why Lindsay Wong wrote a memoir about her family's mental health struggles: www.cbc.ca/1.4863368
- Lindsay Wong speaks about her memoir *The Woo-Woo* with *The Early Edition*: www.cbc.ca/player/play/1422988355513/



Watch Lindsay Wong discuss her book: www.curio.ca/canadareads

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Other Links

- An Interview with Lindsay Wong, author of *The Woo-Woo* (Rice Paper Magazine):
<https://ricepapermagazine.ca/2018/10/an-interview-with-lindsay-wong-author-of-the-woo-woo/>
- Q&A: Lindsay Wong talks about her memoir *The Woo-Woo* (Vancouver Sun):
<https://vancouversun.com/entertainment/books/qa-lindsay-wong-talks-about-her-memoir-the-woo-woo>
- Lindsay Wong uses humour to examine family history (Toronto Star):
www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2018/10/06/lindsay-wong-uses-humour-to-examine-her-family-history-of-mental-illness-and-supernatural-beliefs.html



Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *The Woo-Woo* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. Read the excerpt of *The Woo-Woo* on curio.ca. As a writer, Lindsay Wong swings between very high and very low diction, sometimes in the same sentence even. What is the effect of this on you, as a reader?
2. Superstitions tend to be very common — ranging from keeping a good luck charm to some of the extreme examples displayed by Lindsay Wong’s

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- mother, Quiet Snow. What superstitious beliefs do you hold? What do they reveal about you?
3. Much of the content of *The Woo-Woo* might be considered painful or embarrassing and yet Lindsay Wong shared it in her memoir. How willing would you be to share your personal past with a broad Canadian readership?
 4. What effect has your family had in shaping the person you are today?
 5. Lindsay Wong often appears ashamed of her Chinese heritage and upbringing. How are your everyday interactions made easier by your culture or background? Does it cause complications or difficulties?
 6. Gallows humour is a style of comedy that seek to find something funny in material that might otherwise depress or shock people. What is the power of humour in the face of a terrible situation? Is there still a place for gallows humour in a world that is sometimes very quick to react angrily to ideas that can potentially offend?
 7. With her health failing, Lindsay Wong writes “I knew that I could not reinvent myself anymore. The Ivy League graduate student in New York City who had escaped her crazy Chinese family: it was such a trope, a perfect reality show.” What might inspire a need to reinvent yourself? Who invented you in the first place?

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8. What characteristics do you expect a good parent to display? Would you feel the need to change your list at all for mothers and fathers specifically?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students can use a T-Chart to compare and contrast Western with traditional and/or alternative medicine.
2. Students can create a KWL (i.e. Know, Want to Know, Will Look/Learn) chart about superstitions held by cultures around the world.
3. Students might research community resources available to those experiencing domestic or family abuse.