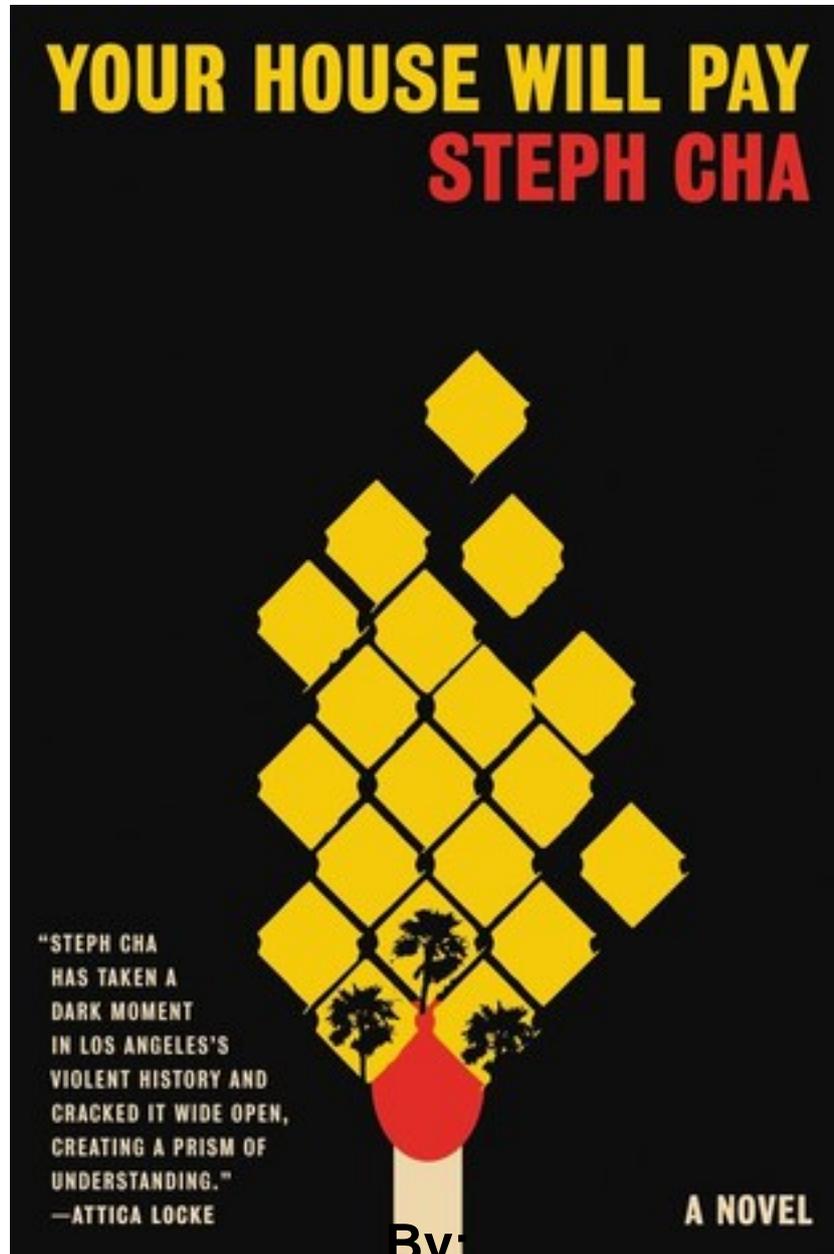

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By
Steph Cha

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What people Say:

karen

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when i heard about this book, the first thing i thought (after "what a fantastic title that is!") was that it would be a readalike for

, which was a sharp and gritty piece of crime fiction in which gang-affiliated characters used the racial tensions and violence of the l.a. riots in the aftermath of the rodney king verdict as an excuse to seek revenge for longstanding grudges, leading to a back-and-forth killing spree leaving many intended targets dead along with unaffiliated innocents caught

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but i was wrong, wrong, wrong, and while its central dramatic conflict occurs as a tangential result of the racially-charged atmosphere in los angeles following king's beating, this is a different take altogether—far less violent and nihilistic and closer in tone to a book like

; it's a tragic-but-redemptive family drama with such strong current-day relevance and moral complexity that discerning book clubs should take note.

cha's novel is based on a real-life incident; the death of fifteen-year-old african-american latasha harlins (here, ava matthews) who was shot in the back of the head by a korean convenience store owner named soon ja du (here, yvonne park/jung-ja han) in 1991, two weeks after the video of rodney king's beating surfaced. du had accused latasha of shoplifting a bottle of orange juice, and their verbal altercation escalated into the physical before the fifty-one-year-old woman grabbed a gun and fired, killing the girl. when police arrived on the scene, they discovered that latasha had the money for the juice in her hand. du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter but served no jail time, an outcome contributing to the unrest that culminated in the riots.

is set in the summer of 2019, after yet another police shooting of an unarmed black teenage boy provokes community outrage. the city is a simmering powder keg of tension; an atmosphere of violence just about to erupt as cries for justice and the unhealed wounds of those still feeling betrayed by the ava matthews verdict rise up during a vigil attended by an influx of the sneering

red-hat-wearing 'western boys' drawn to the scene by social media doing what it does best; riling people up and adding fuel to the fire, while the presumably more responsible professional media is no better, and tensions are high.

Steph

I've been working on this book since the end of 2014, and while I get maybe one more shot at sifting for typos, I think I can finally say it's done. It's a bit of a departure from my P.I. series, a literary/social crime novel about two Los Angeles families, a contemporary story with deep roots in the black/Korean tensions of the early '90s. I've worked long and hard on it, so I'm not gonna qualify this: I think it's really good and I can't wait for you all to read it.

Bkwmlee

4.5 stars

It's not often that a book I read impacted me so much that I was rendered virtually speechless immediately afterwards to the point that despite having finished this book several days ago, I had to wait to write this review because I needed time to regroup and gather my thoughts. The

reason this book impacted me so much is because the subject matter it covered hit a little too close to home for me, as it brought back memories from 27 years ago and emotions that felt so real

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It's not often that a book I read impacted me so much that I was rendered virtually speechless immediately afterwards – to the point that despite having finished this book several days ago, I had to wait to write this review because I needed time to regroup and gather my thoughts. The reason this book impacted me so much is because the subject matter it covered hit a little too close to home for me, as it brought back memories from 27 years ago and emotions that felt so real, I truly felt like I had been transported back in time to my childhood. Back then, my family lived in a little enclave of apartment buildings in Westchester, near its border with Inglewood in Los Angeles. Nearby, within walking distance, was a tiny strip mall with a donut shop, a laundromat, a small restaurant, and a Korean-owned liquor store on the very corner – a setup similar to the neighborhoods that the main characters in the book lived in during their youth.

The story, especially the events that took place during the –past– timeline of 1991 and 1992, was tremendously familiar to me because it aligned with much of what I remember experiencing growing up as an Asian American in the Los Angeles of the 1990s. I remember what happened to Latasha Harlins and the public outrage over the light sentence that Soon Ja Du ended up getting; I remember the already simmering tensions between the African American and Korean communities that were further exacerbated by the Harlins case; I remember the Rodney King beating that took place around that time as well as the infamous acquittal that came down a year later; and of course, I remember the LA Riots and the devastation that took place those 6 days. I was 13 years old at the time (around the same age as one of the main characters in the book when the story opened) and when the riots broke out, I remember most of us were still at school, anxiously waiting for our parents to come pick us up. Our school wasn't close in proximity to the riot area fortunately, however, due to the chaotic nature of things and the fear that the rioting might spread to other areas, it was advised for all the schools to shut down for the day. As we waited for our rides, there was a lot of nervous chatter among our group of friends, as many of them either had long commutes home or they would have to pass by the areas where much of the rioting was beginning to gain traction. Adding to those fears, we had heard that rioters had started venting out their anger at innocent bystanders, stopping random cars and pulling people out and beating them (a –rumor– that was confirmed later that night on the news when we all witnessed in horror the terrifying events that unfolded at the intersection of Florence and Normandie). The looting and burning down of stores followed, with the devastation spilling over to surrounding cities – news coverage showed chaotic scenes, with the destruction hitting heaviest in South Los Angeles and Koreatown (which had become a target due to the Latasha Harlins case). It was the worst time to be out in the streets – in fact, it was the worst time to be anywhere other than hidden away in the safety of our own homes with doors locked, windows barred, blinds drawn.

The experience of reading this book felt almost surreal to me. Even though the entire story was a fictionalized version based on past events and many of the details had been changed, plus a majority of the timeline focused on present day (2019) and how the various characters dealt with the

aftermath of what had happened so long ago, the memories it triggered were enough to bring the real-life events the story was based on back to life for me. The author Steph Cha did a great job capturing the sentiments and perspectives of both the African American and Korean communities during that period in history, but what floored me the most was how vividly she was able to depict the realities of what life was like growing up in Los Angeles in the 1990s, not just for people of color, but also for immigrants and others who were part of the community at the time.

Ten years after the riots occurred, on the way to visit friends, I happened to be driving through one of the areas hit hardest by the riots and I will never forget the shock I felt seeing how much of the area never got rebuilt. Steph Cha captured my sentiments exactly when, in the book, she described what one of the main characters, Shawn Matthews, saw when he was surveying the devastation that had taken place around him right after the fictionalized riots in the story:

This was actually the reality of what I saw as well, many years later “ and even now, nearly 3 decades later, some remnants of the devastation still exists, albeit in smaller pockets.

To come across a book like this one, that captures a history and time period and even elements of a culture that I was once so familiar with on a personal level “ THIS is one of the reasons why I read. With that said, I did struggle with the rating on this one, wavering between 4.5 and 5 stars“in the end, I decided on 4.5 stars, mostly because I’m not sure how I feel about the story’s ending and the way things played out. Needless to say, this is a book I definitely recommend, though word of warning, this is not an easy one to read, especially if you have a personal connection to parts of the story like I did.

Jessica Woodbury

This is an ambitious book. It's trying to tell a very specific story, tied deeply to a particular place and time, exploring the repercussions of an often-forgotten set of racial tension between Black and Korean people in Los Angeles. As Cha notes, the specifics are often lost in the larger story of Rodney King and the Watts riots. While it's very specific, it will also feel relevant to anyone living in the US right now, a time of protests and memorials and repeated unspeakable losses.

Janet

Steph Cha's

is simultaneously thrilling and thoughtful, a novel about the aftermath of a fictional grocery-store shooting in 1991, in South Los Angeles, just after the Rodney King verdict was announced. The pregnant wife of the Korean proprietor shoots and kills a 16 year old black girl in a rapidly escalating scene of anger, misapprehension and lethality--informed by a complex of relationships and events which Cha follows like the chain of radioactive ink spreading through the

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The bulk of the action is the story of aftermath, how this one violent event affects the lives of the two families, Korean and black, and their communities-- and goes on affecting them over time. Told in alternating chapters from the point of view of 2019, the main characters are the murdered girl's younger brother, Shawn Matthews, now an ex-con working the straight and narrow as a moving man in Palmdale, taking care of his family and the family of his older cousin Ray, still in prison, and the woman's younger daughter Grace Park, a dutiful child who had not yet been born at the time of the shooting. The action begins as Grace learns for the first time in 2019 what her mother had done, and Ray comes out of prison to throw Shawn's carefully balanced life into chaos.

This is an urban tale which moves into the intersection of political and personal, racial injustice and community solidarity, the preservation of memory, and the ultimate problem of narrative, the simplification of people and situations into a certain package--all wrapped up in a terrific, fast-moving story of two characters trying to live with the truth.

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