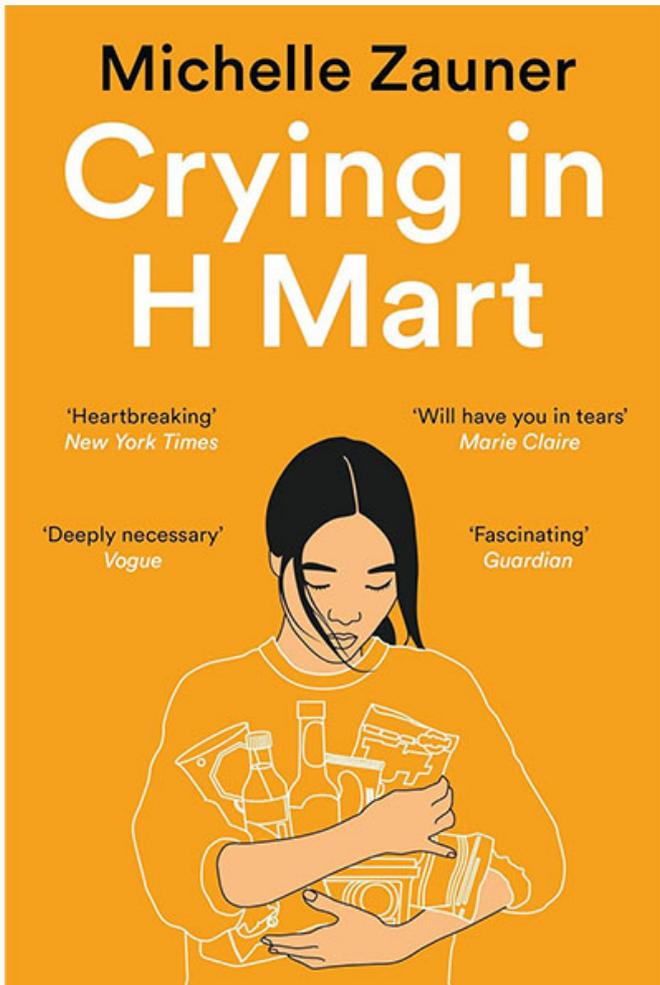


Dua's Monthly Read

SERVICE95
BOOK CLUB

Crying In H Mart



by **MICHELLE
ZAUNER**

Discussion Guide
April 2024

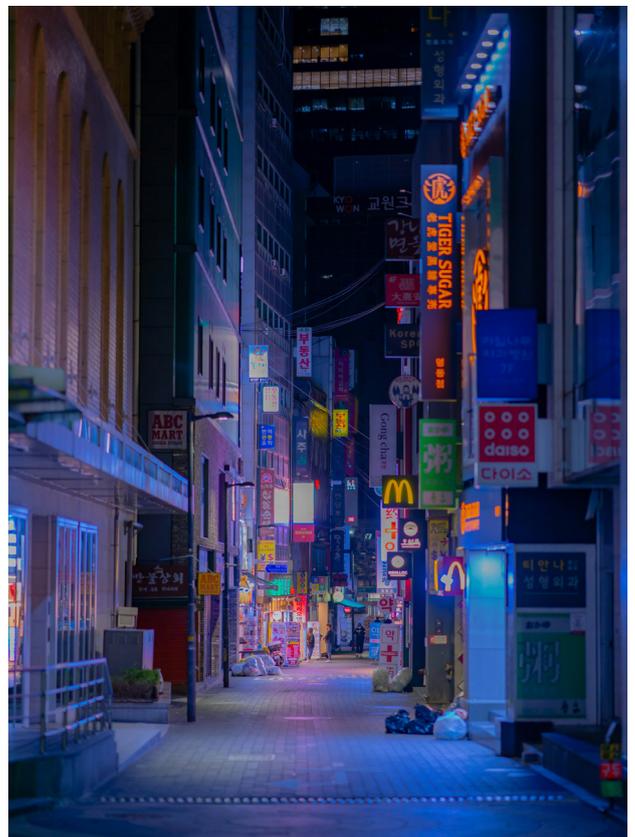


Michelle Zauner is best known as a singer and guitarist who creates dreamy indie pop under the name Japanese Breakfast.

She has won acclaim from major music outlets around the world for releases including *Psychopomp* and *Soft Sounds From Another Planet*. Her third album, *Jubilee*, was released in 2021 and was nominated for two Grammys. *Crying In H Mart* was a *New York Times* number 1 bestseller. She's currently adapting the novel for the screen for MGM's Orion Pictures, with the film to be directed by Will Sharpe.

Crying In H Mart Synopsis

Michelle Zauner grew up as the only Asian-American kid at her school in Eugene, Oregon and struggles with her mother's particular, high expectations of her. But there are treasured months spent in her grandmother's tiny apartment in Seoul, where she and her mother bond, late at night, over heaped plates of food. As she grows up, moving to the US's East Coast for college, finding work in the restaurant industry, performing gigs with her fledgling band and meeting the man who would become her husband, her 'Koreanness' begins to feel ever more distant, even as she finds the life she wants to live. It is her mother's diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer when Michelle is 25 that forces a reckoning with her identity and brings her to reclaim the gifts of taste, language and history her mother has given her.



Why we loved it



“Some of you may already know Michelle as the uber-cool singer and guitarist of the American cult indie band Japanese Breakfast. With this book, she also proves herself to be a first-class memoirist, writing with raw honesty about her difficult teenage relationship with her mother and the grief that follows her mother’s death from cancer.

“Michelle’s mother Chongmi was Korean, and much of this story centres around the cultural and identity issues Michelle grappled with growing up in the US with a feckless American father and a tough Korean mother. Somehow food, and specifically the intricate traditional Korean dishes her mother prepared with such love and skill, becomes the theme which keeps mother and daughter together, and unites Michelle with the Korean half of her identity even after her mother has passed away. Everyone with an immigrant background will find relatability searching in a specialist shop for food that reminds you of home, and for Michelle food is the connective tissue of a relationship between mother and daughter that even cancer cannot break. The love and aroma from the dishes practically rises from the page.

“This is a book about loss that is also about love; it’s a book about South Korea that is also about West Coast small-town America; it’s a story that is both beautiful and heartbreaking; it is as raw as it is precious. I bawled my eyes out, but I also loved it and I hope you do too”

— Dua Lipa

“IT FELT LIKE THE WORLD HAD DIVIDED INTO TWO DIFFERENT TYPES OF PEOPLE, THOSE WHO HAD FELT PAIN AND THOSE WHO HAD YET TO.”



What others say

“Zauner performs the work of creative memory that recovers and transmutes the past into something liveable... in her art, she has found the tricky yet transformative key to her inheritance”

— Sarah Shin, *The Guardian*

“What *Crying In H Mart* reveals is that in losing her mother and cooking to bring her back to life, Zauner became herself”

– NPR

“A memoir that will ultimately thrill Japanese Breakfast fans... while brilliantly detailing the colourful panorama of Korean culture, traditions and – yes – food”

– *San Francisco Chronicle*

The Importance Of Food In South Korean Culture

Fiona Bae



“When I go to H Mart... I’m searching for memories,” Michelle Zauner writes in *Crying In H Mart*. The ‘memories’ attached to food for many Koreans are of sharing meals with family, relatives and loved ones; of celebrating daily life collectively. Communal eating is at the heart of Korean food culture – as seen in the world-famous Korean BBQ style of dining. People grill meat together and eat traditional small dishes (known as banchan), and ssam (fresh lettuce and sesame leaves) with a mixed bean and red pepper paste called ssamjang. After the grilled meat, there are bowls of rice and doenjang-jjigae (soybean paste stew).

Food has strong ties to heritage, and Koreans are proud of their family recipes, whether it’s a particular variation of kimchi, pancake or rice liquor. Recipes are passed down from generation to generation, often not via books or written instruction, but son-mat, which literally translates to ‘flavoured by hands’ – meaning measurements and timings often aren’t written down. Instead, dishes are learned by watching others (usually older female relatives) cook instinctively.

Yin and yang are an important tenet of life in Korea and are all about harmony. The idea permeates Korean flavour combinations: for example, steamed pork is paired with fermented shrimp sauce, as it’s believed that not only will the salty shrimp cut through the fatty meat, it will also aid digestion.

Korea has four very distinctive seasons, including a brutally cold winter. Edible grasses, herbs, roots, seeds and even petals that were traditionally foraged and dried to be eaten in winter are known as namul. Deodeok (a mountain herb root) and shiraegi (dried radish green) are both popular examples of namul.

In summer, naengmyeon – a dish of cold noodles in beef broth, which originated from North Korea – is popular. On hot days, you will see people lining up in front of restaurants that specialise in samgyetang – a hearty soup made from a whole chicken stuffed with sticky rice, ginseng, Korean dates, chestnut and ginkgo nuts. The dish is said to give an energy boost in the heat.

Korean food evokes comfort and home for many across the diaspora. Many will tell you that tteokbokki – chewy, bite-sized cylindrical rice cakes boiled in a stock with fish cakes and gochujang (a sweet-and-spicy paste) – is what they miss the most when they are out of the country.

Food is a central part of culture in Korea – bringing families together, connecting generations, and as we see in *Crying In H Mart*, tying Koreans across the world to their heritage. Zauner writes, “Food was how my mother expressed her love.” And as her story also tells, on their birthdays Koreans eat miyeokguk (the seaweed soup served to postpartum women) in celebration of their mothers for giving birth to them. For Koreans, food is both love and their roots.

Book Club Questions

Here are a few questions to help you think about the book from different angles, whether you do that on your own, discuss them with your friends or take them to your local or virtual book club.



1. “We chased our cravings daily”. How does grief, food, cooking and eating link in *Crying In H Mart*?
2. “Hers was tougher than tough love. It was brutal, industrial-strength. A sinewy love that never gave way to an inch of weakness.” What is it like for Michelle to be under the weight of such “sinewy love”?
3. “Well, what are you then?” is the question that is shot at a biracial Michelle growing up in Eugene, Oregon. How does she negotiate this question throughout the book?
4. What does Michelle’s mother, Chongmi, mean by “save ten percent of yourself”?
5. “From day one, I’m told, nothing about me was easy.” Michelle’s voice is unflinching; in revealing her mother, their relationship and herself. What was it like reading such an unflinching voice? Do you read memoir differently to fiction?
6. Why is the YouTube chef Maangchi so important in this book?
7. When her mother dies, Michelle asks, “Am I even Korean anymore if there’s no one left to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy?” How does she reclaim her identity?
8. After her mother’s death, Michelle visits Vietnam with her father, but the narrative hints that father and daughter will drift apart. Do you think they do? And how do you feel about this as a reader?
9. “I envied and feared my mother’s ability to keep matters private.” Does every family keep secrets?
10. *Crying In H Mart* moves between the past and the present, as if Michelle is tasting the memories. What place do you think Michelle arrives at by the end of the memoir?

Interviews with Michelle Zauner

Read:

[Michelle Zauner: ‘I’ve reread Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping a hundred times’ – The Guardian, 2022](#)

The singer-songwriter on being captivated by Carver, quitting Bukowski and discovering Jane Eyre later in life.

Watch:

[Michelle Zauner on “Crying in H Mart” – CBS Sunday Morning, 2022](#)

Michelle makes a trip to her local H Mart with correspondent Hua Hsu to buy ingredients to make kimchi jiggae, a Korean stew.

Listen:

[In ‘Crying In H Mart’ Michelle Zauner Grapples With Food, Grief And Identity – NPR, 2021](#)

NPR’s Ari Shapiro talks with Michelle Zauner about her memoir, *Crying In H Mart*.



Further Resources

[When My Mother Died, My Father Quickly Started a New Life. I Chose to Forgive Him – Harper’s Bazaar, 2021](#)

In wake of her mother’s death, musician Michelle Zauner finds a way to make peace with her estranged father.

[Every Outfit Japanese Breakfast’s Michelle Zauner Wears in a Week 7 Days, 7 Looks – Vogue, 2023](#)

Michelle Zauner walks *Vogue* through her epic and quirky collection of Thom Browne, Simone Rocha and more.

[Maangchi & Japanese Breakfast Explore Effects of War on Korean Cuisine – Close to Home, 2019](#)

Zauner sits down with Sarah Lee, co-founder of Kimbap Lab, and Emily Kim, a YouTuber and author known as Maangchi, to discuss the evolution of Korean-American cuisine.

[Listen to Japanese Breakfast](#)

Japanese Breakfast performing live, recorded exclusively for KEXP in 2021.

