



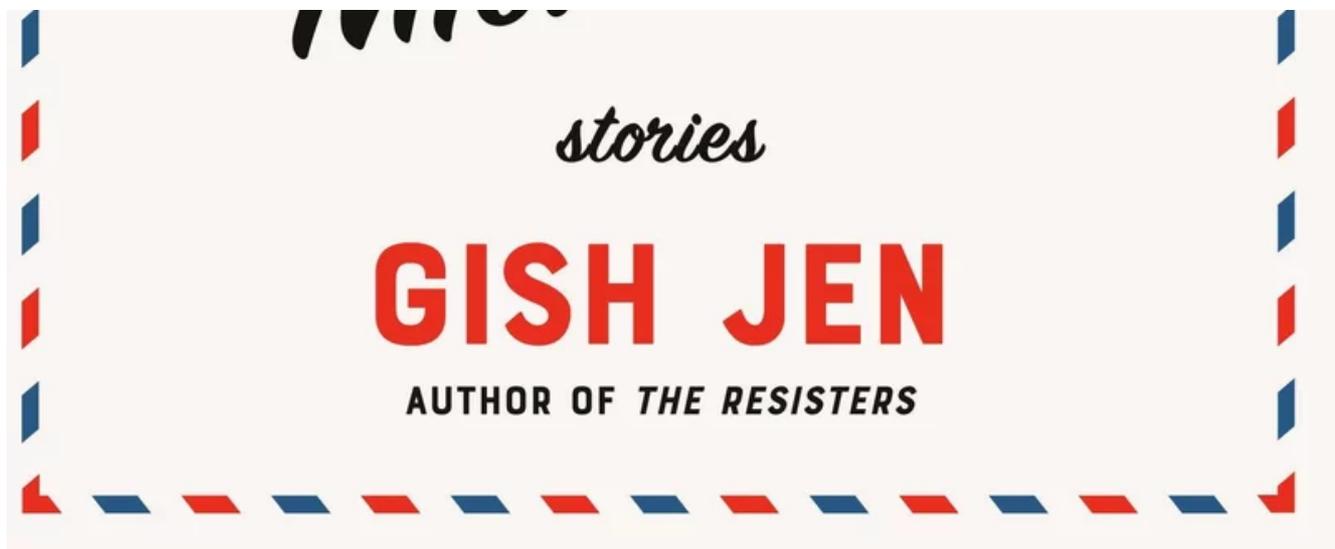
REVIEW BOOK REVIEWS

'Thank You, Mr. Nixon' is a collection written with intelligence, wit and grace

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Knopf

The letter is addressed to "Mr. Richard Nixon, Ninth Ring Road, Pit 1A." It's signed "Eternally yours, Tricia Sang," and begins, "I don't know if you will remember me, especially now that I am in heaven and you are in hell."

Tricia, it turns out in this story, met Nixon in 1972 in Hangzhou, when she was a little girl, and he made his historic visit to China. She wants to catch up with the American politician, and thank him for everything he did for her country. It's sharp and observant, just like many of the other stories in Gish Jen's brilliant new collection, *Thank You, Mr. Nixon*.

In the title story, Tricia has a lot to say to Nixon. She wants him to know that his visit to China was marked by artifice: "Really, the whole China you saw was a tailor-made China — a Potemkin China, you might say, not that anyone would have said that then." But, mostly, she wants him to know how grateful she is to his wife, Patricia, for sporting a red coat that Tricia fell in love with; the garment marked a big contrast with the black and gray clothing that was de rigueur in China at the time.

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When China opened up to the West, Tricia's family wasted no time getting into the coat business. "I am glad that you came," Tricia writes. "Coats, coats, coats, coats! I thank you with all my heart, Mr. Nixon, and am sorry for what happened to you. If you ever draw up a petition to be moved to a cooler pit, I will sign it."

The story beautifully illustrates a crucial chapter in the relationship between China and its residents, and America and ours. The tensions that arise between the two peoples, especially the ones felt by Chinese Americans, form a throughline in Jen's collection.

In "Duncan in China," the titular 27-year-old Chinese American man has a reputation with his family for being an underachiever. His mother "called every day, lest Duncan forget she was not speaking to him"; she's disappointed he's less successful than his younger brother, Arnie, who "was headed for the apex of the Chinese bourgeois experience."

After a series of aborted career paths, Duncan decides to move to the Chinese province of Shandong to teach English at a coal-mining institute. He butts heads with his cynical boss, develops feelings for one of his students, and finds the whole experience a little more depressing than he'd hoped: "He had not expected that it would be tinged with sad realism, though — all anyone wanted anymore, the students said, was to be left alone."

It's a wonderfully subtle story about building up impossible expectations, and trying to find deliverance in a land that's unsure of its own identity. Jen is masterful at conveying disappointment and ennui through small gestures and realistic dialogue.

The collection ends with a heartbreaker of a story, "Detective Dog," about a Chinese American family living in New York. Betty and her husband, Quentin, used to live in Hong Kong, then decamped to Vancouver, Canada, where they found the racism unbearable, thus moving to the States to start new lives.

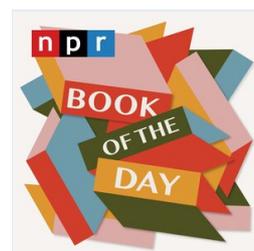
Their older son, 16-year-old Theo, wishes he were back in Hong Kong to participate in the protests that are gripping the country; he resents his parents, who pass on words of advice from Betty's mother: "No politics, just make money. See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing." He becomes increasingly disengaged from his family, who he's forced to spend time with during the COVID quarantine: "It is as if his heart is hidden. Disappeared under a blanket where no one can see it."

When Theo moves out after winning a small fortune in online poker, his parents are gripped with worry, although Betty realizes she's powerless to make him stay: "What is a mother but someone who cannot stop anyone?" Meanwhile Theo's younger brother, Robert, starts to wonder about another family member who disappeared a while back. Robert is a sensitive super-empath, and his questions to his mother eventually result in an answer that could upend his life.

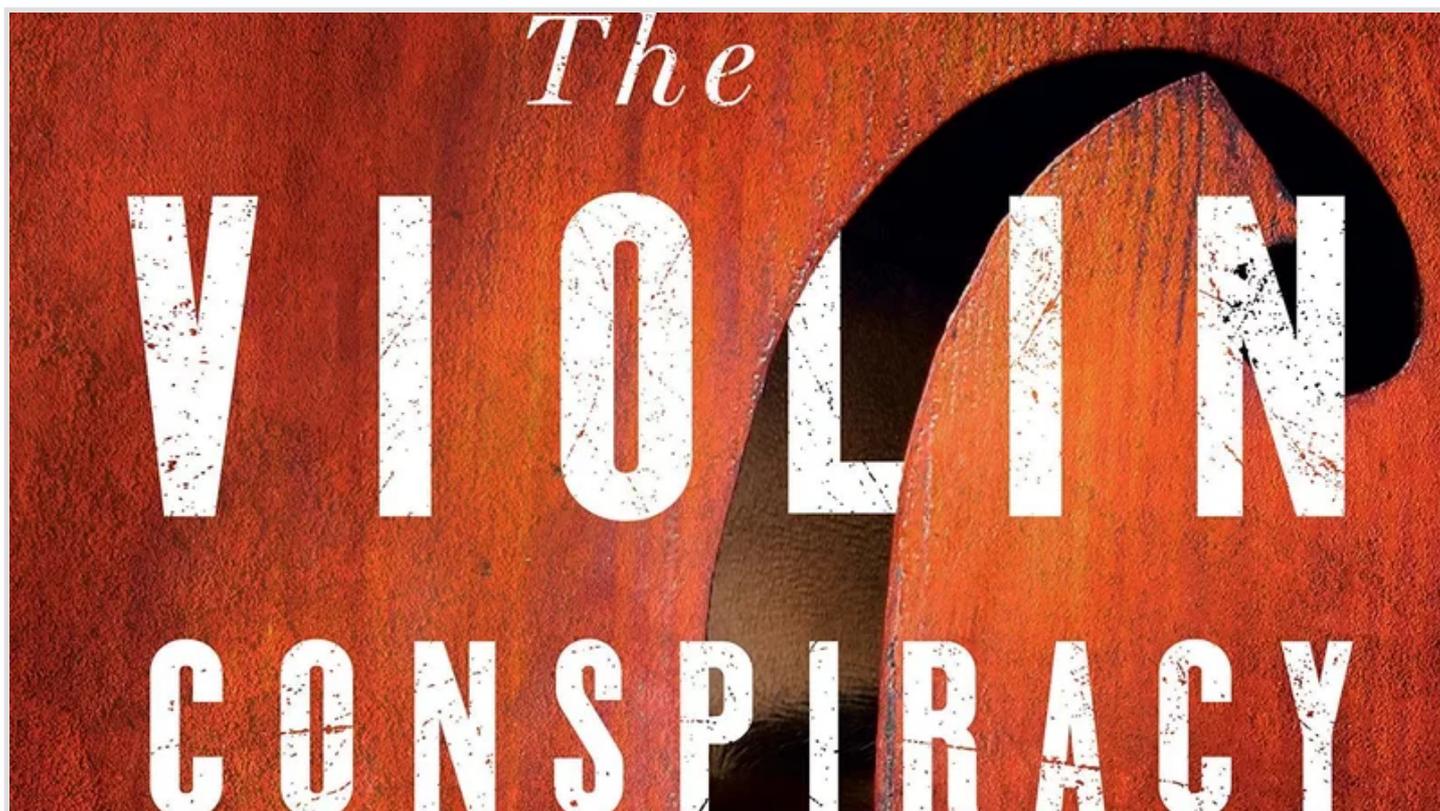
Emotional but measured, it's as close to flawless as a story can be. Jen perfectly understands the dynamics that both keep families together and tear them apart, and with Betty and Robert, she perfectly captures a specific kind of parent-child relationship. It could well be one of the first great short stories of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Every story in this collection, though, is outstanding. *Thank You, Mr. Nixon* is an exceptional collection, written with intelligence, wit and grace — it's one of the best books of Jen's remarkable career.

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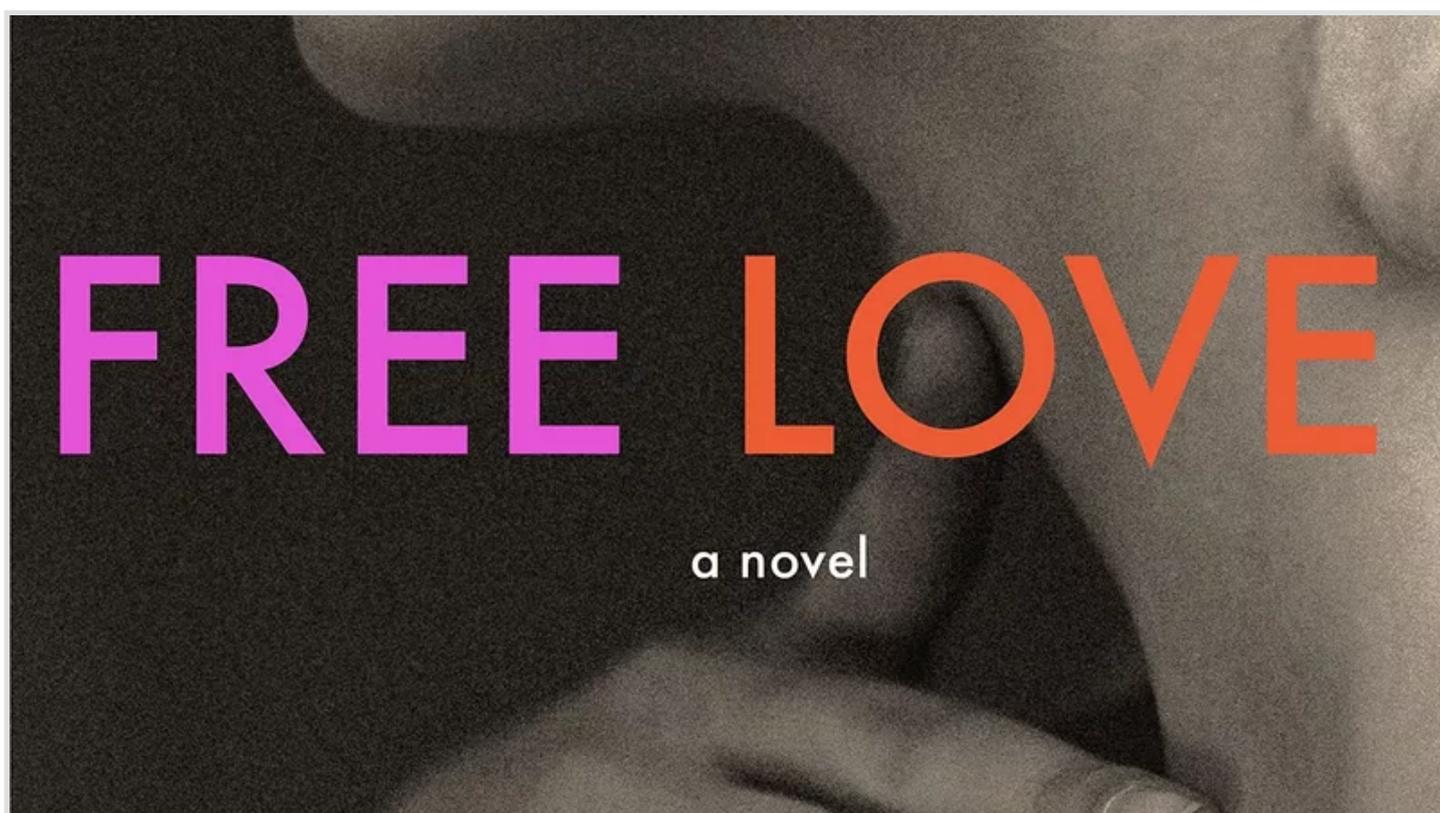
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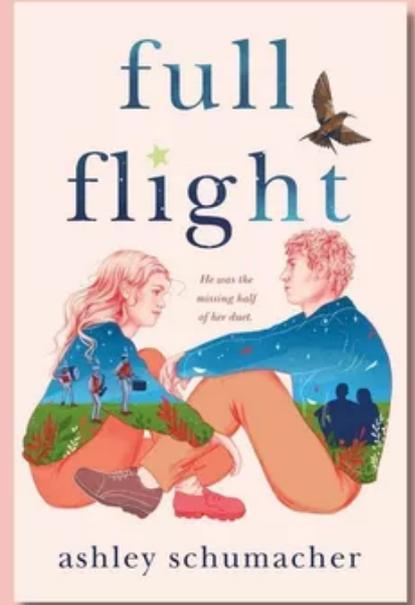
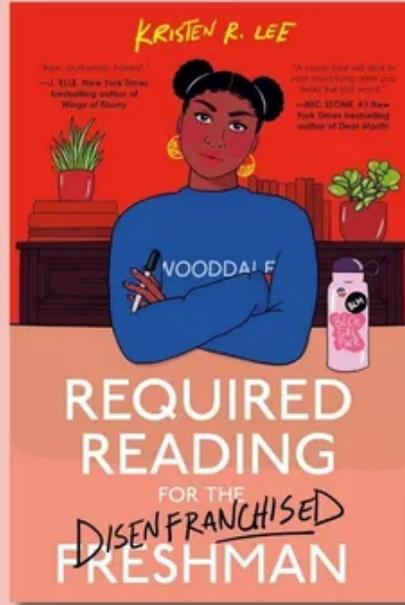
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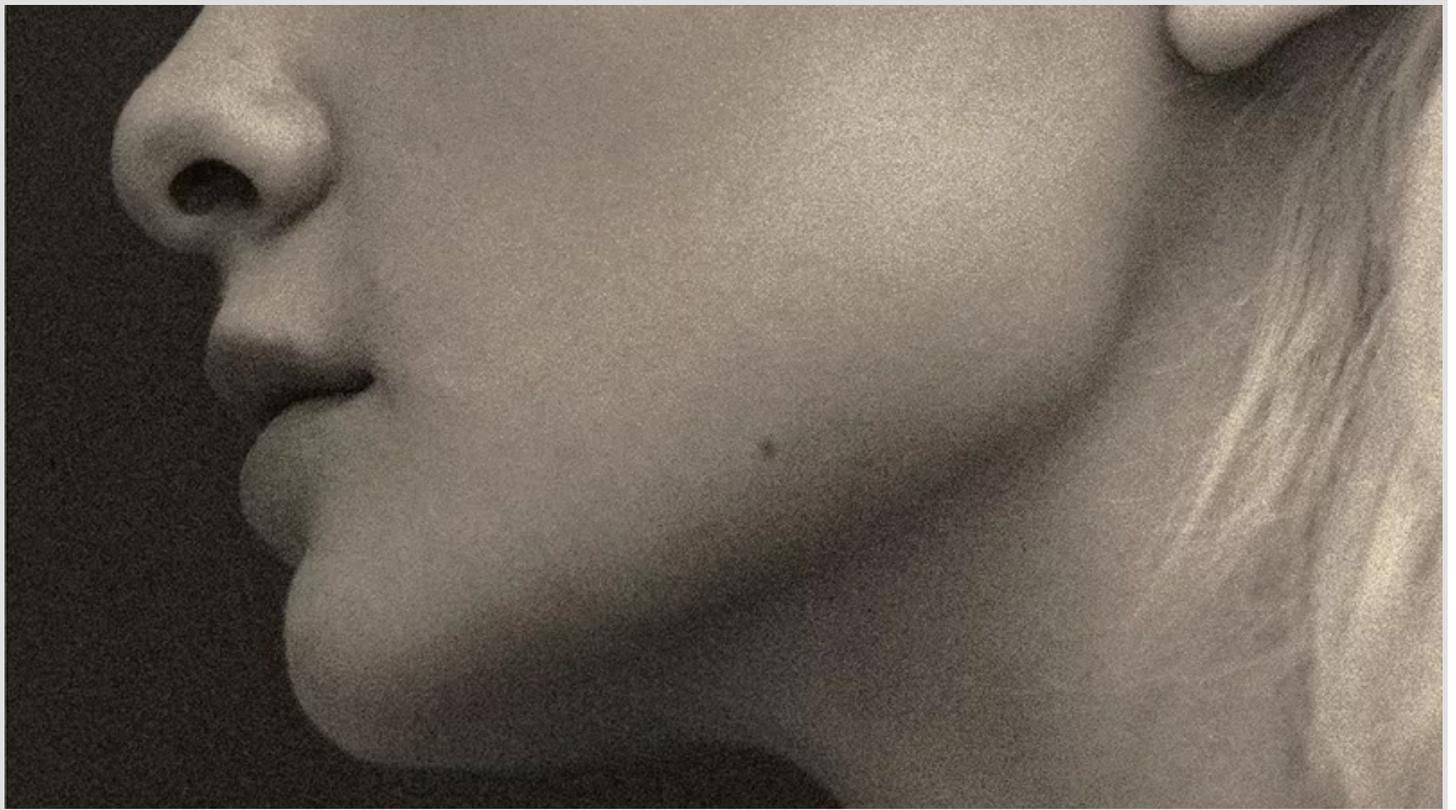
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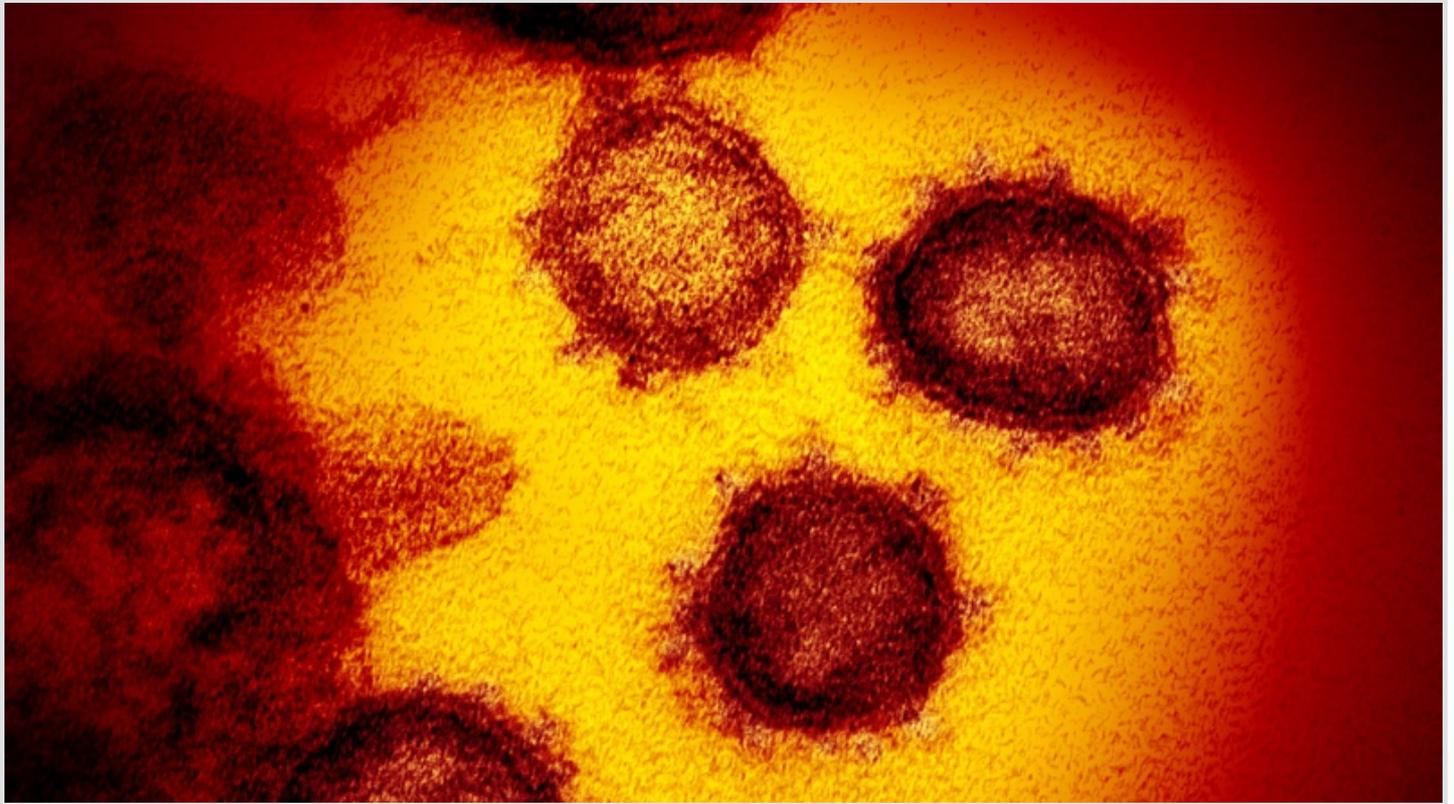
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