

Counterfeit

by Kirstin Chen



Summary

Ava Wong has always played it safe. As a strait-laced, rule-abiding Chinese American lawyer with a successful surgeon as a husband, a young son, and a beautiful home—she's built the perfect life. But beneath this façade, Ava's world is crumbling: her marriage is falling apart, her expensive law degree hasn't been used in years, and her toddler's tantrums are pushing her to the breaking point.

Enter Winnie Fang, Ava's enigmatic college roommate from Mainland China, who abruptly dropped out under mysterious circumstances. Now, twenty years later, Winnie is looking to reconnect with her old friend. But the shy, awkward girl Ava once knew has been replaced with a confident woman of the world, dripping in luxury goods, including a coveted Birkin in classic orange. The secret to her success? Winnie has developed an ingenious counterfeit scheme that involves importing near-exact replicas of luxury handbags and now she needs someone with a U.S. passport to help manage her business—someone who'd never be suspected of wrongdoing, someone like Ava. But when their spectacular success is threatened and Winnie vanishes once again, Ava is left to face the consequences.

Courtesy of HarperCollinsPublishers

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About the Author

Kirstin Chen is the *New York Times* best-selling author of three novels. Her latest, *Counterfeit*, is a Reese Witherspoon book club pick, a Roxane Gay book club pick, and a *New York Times* Editors' Choice. It has also been recommended by *The Washington Post*, *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *USA Today*, *Vogue*, *Time*, *Oprah Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Parade*, and more. *Counterfeit* has been translated into eight languages and is being adapted for the screen by Sony Pictures. Her previous novels are *Bury What We Cannot Take* and *Soy Sauce for Beginners*. Her next novel, *Tech Wives*, an exploration of the myth of genius tech founders—and the women who support them, is forthcoming.

She has received fellowships and awards from the Steinbeck Fellows Program, the American Library in Paris, Sewanee, Hedgebrook, Djerassi, the Napa Valley Writers' Conference, the Toji Cultural Foundation, and the National Arts Council of Singapore. Her writing has appeared in *The Cut*, *Real Simple*, *Literary Hub*, *Writer's Digest*, and *Zyzzyyva*. She has taught at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, the University of San Francisco, Ashland University, and elsewhere. Born and raised in Singapore, she currently lives in New York City and San Francisco.

Courtesy of the author's website kirstinchen.com/about

Discussion Questions

1. Before reading *Counterfeit*, how much knowledge did you have about how the handbag manufacturing business operated? Has this book illuminated the specifics of the industry in any surprising ways?
2. Although we never see or hear from the detective Ava is confessing to directly, were you able to grasp any character attributes about this person? Did you feel, as the reader, that you were being invited to be the arbiter of legitimacy in Ava's story?
3. Consider the emphasis on branding in fashion. Do you find that luxury brands are always synonymous with quality? Are you loyal to any brands, and if so, why?
4. What do you think a strong friendship requires? Are Winnie and Ava good friends for each other? How did you initially interpret their relationship, and how did your impression change as the novel progressed?
5. Winnie and Ava discuss the labor conditions in brand name factories. Do consumers have a responsibility to ensure the ethical production of products they purchase? Do you think most consumers care?
6. How do Winnie and Ava contend with the model minority stereotype that exists for the AAPI community in the United States? How do they take advantage of it?
7. How did your impression of Boss Mak shift over the course of the novel? How do you perceive his relationship with Winnie? Did you feel any sympathy for him at any point?
8. Did you see the main twist in the novel coming? How did your understanding of the story change after the reveal?
9. After the events of the novel, how do you see Ava's and Winnie's lives progressing? Have they been irrevocably changed by their experiences within these pages?
10. Does the title of the novel, *Counterfeit*, refer to more than just knockoff handbags? What else could the title pertain to?

Courtesy of HarpersCollinsPublishers

Professional Review

Kirkus Reviews (03/15/22):

What a tangled web we weave when first we practice selling fake designer handbags. Chen rejiggers some of the ingredients of her debut, *Soy Sauce for Beginners* (2014), and comes up with a winner in this clever, sharp, and slyly funny novel about a long con. Ava Wong, a Chinese American Stanford grad, has left her corporate position to be a full-time mom, but little Henri is such a terror she ends up delegating him to a nanny. Meanwhile, her surgeon husband, a Frenchman named Olivier, is working so hard to support the family that he takes an apartment near the hospital in Palo Alto. These disappointments leave her particularly vulnerable to the influence of the evil Winnie Fang. From mainland China, Winnie was Ava's roommate freshman year of college until she had to withdraw from school under the cloud of an SAT cheating scandal. All these years later, she's back, and boy, has she changed. She's had eyelid surgery, lost the accent, attained American citizenship, and is carrying the ultimate status symbol—a Birkin bag. A couple pages in, we learn that this narrative of renewed friendship is being delivered to a detective. It seems Ava was manipulated into working with Winnie in her global handbag scam. Her job was to buy a high-end purse at a luxury shop, then return it a few days later for credit. Meanwhile, the return is actually a meticulously counterfeited duplicate manufactured in China, and the real one is sold on eBay at a discount. As the story glides among San Francisco, Hong Kong, and China, Chen turns the stereotype of the docile Asian woman on its head. She also has great fun with status details, from collegiate Winnie's "pink T-shirt with the words cuty pie plastered across the front in multicolored rhinestones" to the "rare crocodile Birkin 25, the color of merlot, of rubies, of blood...worth at least forty thousand dollars" that Ava receives during a classic over-the-top, all-night business deal.

A delightfully different caper novel with a "Gone Girl"—style plot twist.