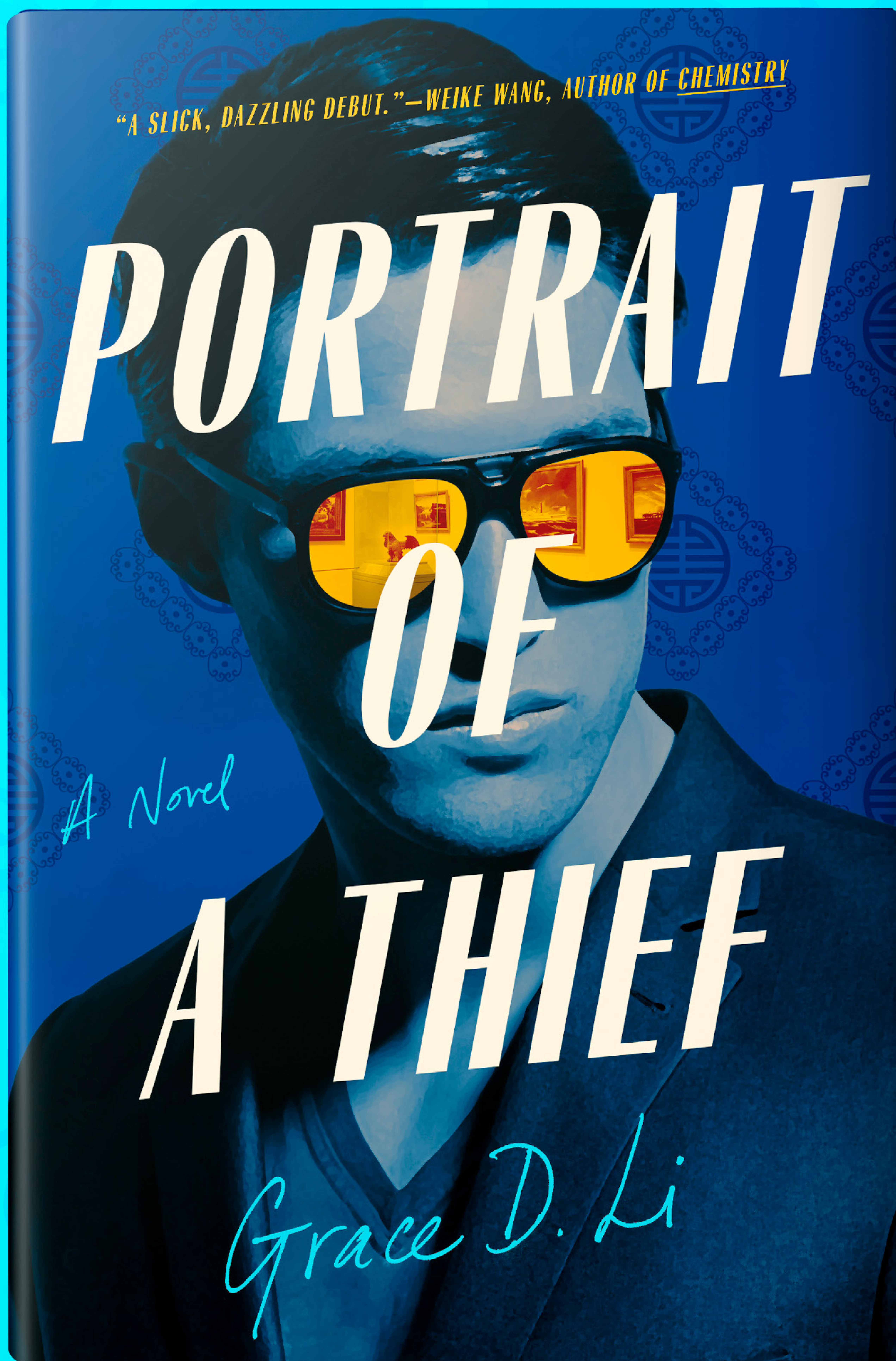


BOOK CLUB KIT



DEAR READER,

I've always loved heist stories: the high-octane car chases, the smooth-talking con artists, the crew that comes together against all odds. I've watched the *Ocean's* movies more times than I can count. At the same time, they often feel like glimpses into another world, one that doesn't always have space for people who look like me. *Portrait of a Thief* is my love letter to the heist stories I've grown up with, and also my response: What would a heist look like with an all-Asian cast? What would motivate these characters with so much to lose?

I started writing *Portrait of a Thief* as a recent college grad, living alone for the first time in New York City. I had just learned about the true story of Chinese art vanishing from Western museums, and in my tiny studio apartment, I thought to myself, *If someone asked me to do that, I might have said yes.* I visit my extended family in China every other summer, and even as a Chinese American, the loss—and reclamation—of China's looted art felt very personal.

The rest of the story came from there. I wanted to write about thieves who weren't expert criminals but Chinese Americans just like me, grappling with questions of identity and belonging as part of two cultures. I also wanted to write about the college experience I had so recently left behind, and what it felt like to be young and invincible and certain you can do anything—but also deeply terrified of everything that's about to change upon graduation. These characters all have a part of me in them: my love for art, my fear of failure, my own experiences with China and as part of the Chinese diaspora.

I finished writing *Portrait of a Thief* during the early months of the pandemic, as I was thinking even more deeply about these questions of identity and belonging in a time of tragedy, fear, and increased hostility toward immigrants and people of color. It was a relief to come back to this story, set several years after the worst was over, where Chinese Americans could move freely and fearlessly throughout the world, carrying out heists that were both for themselves and for a purpose bigger than themselves.

For all the serious themes in this book, though, I hope it's also a lot of fun. There are street races in the town where I went to college, karaoke in New York City K-Town, museum scenes inspired by my own experience as an art museum tour guide. There are college students falling in and out of love with each other—what are your early twenties for if not feeling everything too much?—and of course, nods to all my favorite heist movies (the opening scene comes straight from *Ocean's Eleven*, and anyone who has seen Jackie Chan's *CZ12* will recognize how these characters manage to evade customs!). I had so much fun with this book, and I feel so lucky to be able to share it with you. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

**TAKE CARE,
GRACE**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. With five main characters, each with their own motivations, families, dreams, and connections to China, there are many ways to enter into this story. Which character's perspective was the most relatable to you? Who did you feel you had the most in common with and in what ways did you feel connected to them?
2. Why was it important to the story for the characters to travel to Beijing at the beginning of the book? What did it mean to each of them to visit China—either returning to it or arriving for the first time? How do you think it impacted their decisions to participate in the heist?
3. The legacy of the colonization of art is a central theme for the book, bringing up the very real issue of museums' possession of other countries' art. Discuss the theft of works of art from their original countries and creators and what responsibility museums and private collectors have to return that art.
4. Several times throughout the book, Irene asserts the tenet "Art is power." What do you think she means by this? How is the possession and portrayal of art a demonstration of power? How has that power been wielded throughout history?
5. We learn early on Will Chen wrote a recent article for the *Harvard Crimson* titled "What Is Ours Is Not Ours: Chinese Art and Western Imperialism." How does the discussion of this topic in the first chapter set the stage for Will's passion for the heist and what's to come in the rest of the book?
6. How do you think the characters' ages and the points they're at in life—either in their last years of college or recently having started their first job—affects their decisions? Why do you think taking this job is so appealing to them as they graduate from school and think about what they want to do for their lives and careers?
7. Considering other movies, TV shows, and books in the heist genre, did you expect the art theft aspects of the story to play out the way they did? How did they echo other media in the genre and in what ways did they depart from them?
8. We're told this about Lily's perspective on diaspora: "Diaspora had always been an unmooring, a boat cast free. She did not know how to find her way back. She never had." How does each character grapple with their own experiences as part of the Chinese diaspora? How are their identities as Chinese Americans explored throughout the book?
9. Think about Daniel and his father's relationship and Will and Irene's relationship throughout the book. How does the arc of both of these loving but, at times, strained familial relationships help frame the story?
10. Early in the book, Will protests to Lily that he's an art history major, not an artist, saying, "I study history. I don't make it." Why do you think he was so hesitant to pursue art and call himself an artist early on in the novel? How do the events of the book change his perspective? In what ways do each of the characters discover more about themselves over the course of their journeys?



IMPORTANT LOCATIONS FROM *PORTRAIT OF A THIEF*

1. THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

New York, USA • Planned heist location

2. HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Will Chen's college

3. DUKE UNIVERSITY

North Carolina, USA • Irene Chen's and Lily Wu's college

4. MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (MIT)

Massachusetts, USA • Alex Huang's college, which she left before graduating

5. UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

California, USA • Daniel Liang's college

6. SILICON VALLEY

California, USA • Where Alex works as a software engineer

7. GALVESTON

Texas, USA • Lily's hometown

8. SANTA CLARA

California, USA • Will's, Irene's, and Daniel's hometown

9. CHINATOWN

New York, USA • Alex's hometown



IMPORTANT LOCATIONS FROM *PORTRAIT OF A THIEF*

10. BEIJING, CHINA

Where the crew meets for the first time, the location of the Old Summer Palace ruins

11. ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM OF ART & ARCHAEOLOGY

Beijing, China • The location of the first art theft, the heist that starts it all

12. THE BRITISH MUSEUM

London, United Kingdom • Planned heist location

13. KODE 1

Bergen, Norway • Planned heist location

14. DROTTHINGHOLM PALACE

Drottningholm, Sweden • Planned heist location

15. THE CHÂTEAU DE FONTAINEBLEAU

Fontainebleau, France • Planned heist location

GRACE D. LI'S

FAVORITE MOVIE HEISTS

OF ALL TIME

OCEAN'S ELEVEN

To me, this is the perfect heist story; there's an unlikely crew of characters, a glittering Vegas backdrop, a heist that is deeply personal in addition to the monetary payout. Like Will Chen in *Portrait of a Thief*, I took notes while (re)watching!

OCEAN'S EIGHT

A sleek, updated *Ocean's* movie featuring an all-woman cast, set at the Met—basically, this is my catnip. This was so much fun to watch and brought me such personal fulfillment as someone who loves heist stories but never saw myself represented in them.

FAST FIVE

I unabashedly adore all of the *Fast & Furious* movies (the cars! the glamorous locales! the emphasis on family!), but this one is my favorite. I can still remember seeing it for the first time in theaters and being awed at that perfect twist of an ending.

RED NOTICE

This just came out on Netflix, and follows an FBI agent and two rival art thieves as they attempt to beat one another to the heist of a lifetime. It's every bit as irreverent, funny, and drama-filled as you would expect, and I'm hopeful that this marks the beginning of many more art heist movies, shows, and books.

CZ12

This movie is pure, ridiculous fun. Jackie Chan is tasked with finding the remaining zodiac heads from the Old Summer Palace (sound familiar?) and tons of shenanigans ensue. No spoilers, but there's a scene that involves leaping into a volcano!

GRACE D. LI'S

FAVORITE TELEVISION HEISTS

OF ALL TIME

WHITE COLLAR

Perpetually one of my favorite shows, about a suave con artist / forger and the FBI agent who caught him as they work together to solve crime in New York City. It has unlikely friendships, tons of fun art theft, and some truly spectacular characters.

LEVERAGE

In this show, a group of thieves works together to pull off a series of heists—and each heist targets companies or individuals who have committed some injustice against ordinary people. The first episode is a masterclass in character development, and it constantly does incredible things with plot and that end-of-episode unexpected twist.

LUPIN

Seasons 1 and 2 are on Netflix and I love them both! The show is so smart, beautifully shot, and also one of the few BIPOC-led heist shows out there.

GRACE D. LI'S

FAVORITE BOOK HEISTS

OF ALL TIME

SIX OF CROWS

A complicated, beautifully executed heist story; this novel follows a crew of criminals in a fantasy world as they attempt to break into a highly secure prison, and showed me that much of the cinematic feel that I love from heist shows and movies can be executed in books, plus the intricate, layered character development that makes novels so special.

CHASING APHRODITE:

The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World's Richest Museum

This is a work of nonfiction, but it's so unputdownable it reads like a thriller. It peels apart years of scandal at the Getty Museum, and the many, many individuals involved in bringing looted art to museums. This was a foundational research book for me, as well as just a fascinating read.

THE GARDNER HEIST:

The True Story of the World's Largest Unsolved Art Theft

This book, also nonfiction, tells the gripping true story of the Gardner Heist—it's arguably the most famous art heist in the world, still unsolved, and was pivotal in my research as I studied what real-life art theft looked like. Not quite as glamorous as the movies make it out to be, but very, very close!