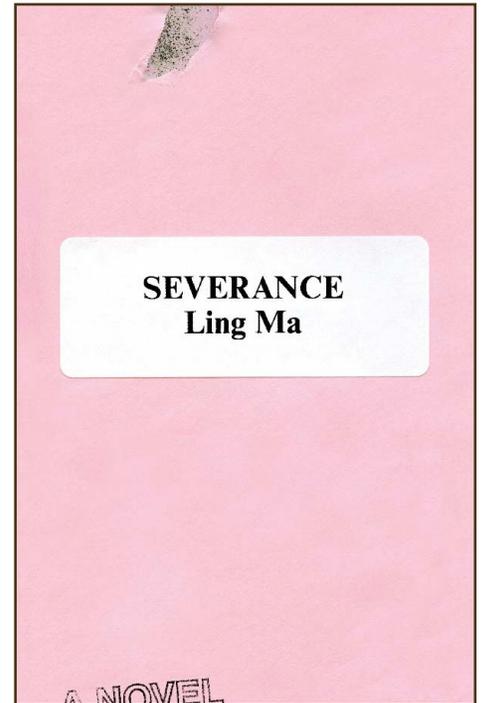


# Reading Group Gold

## *Severance*

*A Novel*

by **Ling Ma**



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*Severance* is a wise and wry satire of our automated age. One of the hundreds of dedicated employees in her Manhattan office tower, Candace Chen is a first-generation American who manages the overseas production of specially designed Bibles. In fact, she's so dedicated that she barely notices when a plague of biblical proportions begins sweeping the globe. When her free-spirited boyfriend announces that he's leaving New York, she moves into her abandoned office, sending taskmaster emails in an attempt to fulfill a lucrative contract. But as Shen Fever spreads, she eventually flees her decimated city, joining a small band of fellow survivors led by a power-hungry IT expert named Bob. Sustained by foraged junk food and Xanax, they encounter the wrenching sight of fever-stricken zombies who are trapped in repetitive, mundane acts of daily life. Then Candace reveals a secret to Bob, leading him to become increasingly ironfisted, and she must decide whether to risk an escape into an even more desolate world.

This guide is designed to enrich your discussion of *Severance*. We hope that the following topics will enhance your experience of this provocative tour de force from a rising literary star.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Explore the novel's title. In addition to severance from a normal world of work, what else is severed in Candace's life? What new connections does she form as a result of being severed?

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2. As you read about Spectra's Bible production process, from the deadly health hazards experienced by the workers to the VIP treatment Candace receives during her business travel, how was your perception of "sacred texts" affected? Are bejeweled religious objects at odds with Christian doctrine? What conflicts arise in the book between religion, morality, and the requirements of contemporary life?
3. As Candace navigates the business world and her family history, how does her understanding of her own identity shift? How do her parents reconcile the Cultural Revolution of their upbringing with the world of supermarkets and the Chinese Christian Community Church? How does Mandarin serve as both a bridge and a barrier for their daughter?
4. Candace chooses to inhabit L'Occitane in the Facility. If you had to be imprisoned in a mall, which store would you choose for your cell?
5. What does Candace's mother, Ruifang, teach her about being a woman? How are Candace's relationships with men affected by Candace observing her father, Zhigang, and his beliefs about love and marriage?
6. What is unique about the way Ling Ma weaves a darkly humorous thread through the story line? When did you find yourself laughing out loud? When did you find yourself worrying that a fungal apocalypse could actually happen?
7. What is the effect of the novel's time line? How does Ling Ma's use of flashbacks stay true to the way memories reflect and illuminate each other?
8. As Candace learns how to shoot a gun and scavenge for necessities, she proves how determined she is to survive. What is the purpose of survival in the absence of quality of life? How do you personally define "quality of life"?
9. *Severance* is packed with references to beauty products, clothing stores, and other brands that have defined American consumerism. After the pandemic, what replaces these labels in the survivors' quest for comfort and camaraderie? When money becomes useless, what new forms of currency emerge?
10. If you had been in Candace's situation, would you have left town with Jonathan? What accounts for the huge distinction between his approach to work and Candace's? Would you have accepted Spectra's final contract—and how committed would you be to making sure to fulfill it?
11. *Severance* shines a spotlight on soul-crushing mind-sets that flourish both before and after the pandemic. What are they? Will profit-driven cultural forces diminish in your lifetime, or will they gain momentum?

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12. How is the novel shaped by the presence of the undead who, instead of being predators like traditional zombies, are stuck in a mindless, harmless act? If you succumbed to Shen Fever, what repetitive act would your body perform?
13. How does Bob derive power? Which of his followers did you trust the most, and which the least? How does their bureaucracy compare to Spectra's?
14. From Candace's NY Ghost blog to the nostalgia-laden stalkings, the survivors crave a connection to what they've lost. Under similar circumstances, which memories and images would you want to stockpile?
15. How did you react to the closing scene? What do you imagine will happen next?

## PRAISE FOR *SEVERANCE*

"A satirical spin on the end times—kind of like *The Office* meets *The Leftovers*." —Estelle Tang, *Elle*

"Ma's writing about the jargon of globalized capitalism has a mix of humor and pathos that reminded me a little of *Infinite Jest* and a little of George Saunders." —Emily Witt, *The New Yorker*

"How do you fit a zombie novel inside an immigrant story inside a coming-of-age tale? Ling Ma . . . accomplished this feat in her gripping and original turducken of a novel . . . Fascinating." —Trine Tsouderos, *The Chicago Tribune*

"Shocking and ferocious . . . A fierce debut from a writer with seemingly boundless imagination . . . A wicked satire of consumerism and work culture . . . It's a stunning, audacious book with a fresh take on both office politics and what the apocalypse might bring: This is the way the world ends, Ma seems to be saying, not with a bang but a memo." —Michael Schaub, National Public Radio

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ling Ma was born in Sanming, China, and grew up in Utah, Nebraska, and Kansas. She attended the University of Chicago and received an MFA from Cornell University. Prior to graduate school she worked as a journalist and an editor. Her writing has appeared in *Granta*, *VICE*, *Playboy*, *Chicago Reader*, *Ninth Letter*, and other publications. A chapter of *Severance* received the 2015 Graywolf SLS Prize. She lives in Chicago.

Guide written by Amy Clements