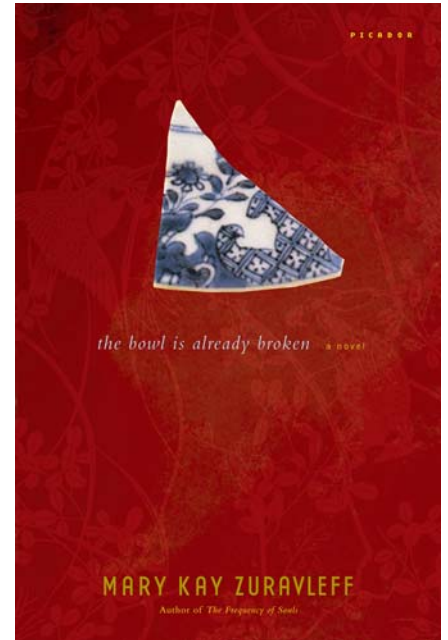


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Bowl Is Already Broken A Novel

by Mary Kay Zuravleff

ISBN: 0-312-42498-1



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Bowl Is Already Broken* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Bowl Is Already Broken*.

About the Book

Promise Whittaker, the acting director of the National Museum of Asian Art, is pregnant again—and that's just the start of her troubles. Her mentor, the museum's previous director, resigned without explanation and headed out to the Taklamakan Desert on an archaeological dig. Promise's favorite curator has dropped precious Chinese porcelain down the museum's marble stairs. Another of her colleagues, desperate for a son, has been embezzling museum funds to pay for fertility treatments. And the museum's handsome, elusive ancillary director is clearly up to no good.

What Promise wants is her life six months ago, when she studied illuminated manuscripts in the museum's basement and then went home to her husband and two children. Once a precious Chinese bowl is broken, however, she must not only contend with her burgeoning family, their comically rundown home, and the factions among her worldly staff but also defend her museum's very right to exist.

Main characters, in order of appearance

Promise Whittaker, a 43-year-old, petite scholar of Persian manuscripts, is named acting director of the Museum of Asian Art the same day that she discovers she is pregnant with her third child. Her husband, **Leo Wells**, works for Amnesty International, and they have two children: **Lydia**, 8, and **Felix**, 5. Promise's mother is **Peg**.

Joseph Lattimore, the former director of the museum, is on an archaeological dig with his wife, **Emmy**, who is a devout Buddhist and a breast-cancer survivor. They have four grown sons.

Arthur Franklin is the museum's curator of Chinese ceramics. His boyfriend, **Morty**, works for the Department of Transportation.

Talbot Perry, one of the museum's ancillary directors, is also a curator of Japanese art and was Joseph Lattimore's supposed successor.

Min Chen is the curator of ancient Chinese art. She and her husband **Douglas** have an 8-year-old daughter, **Sally**, and they desperately want a son.

"A tart, affectionate satire of the museum world's bickering and scheming."

—*The New York Times*

"This multilayered, erudite novel implies that it is only in the face of destruction, in the gathering of the shards, that meaning and humanity reside."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Her wit is equal to her wisdom."

—*The Seattle Times*

"Promise, a woman so diminutive that a resentful colleague describes her as little more than a knick-knack, is the magnificent heroine of this highly original, extremely funny and surprisingly moving novel."

—*The Independent on Sunday* (U.K.)

"One of those rare 'novel of ideas' that won't bore you to death."

—*Time Out Chicago*

“Zuravleff makes the creative synergies and political infighting behind the scenes at the museum vibrant, and she is equally perceptive on the warmth, whimsy and chaotic exhaustion of family life.”

—*Newsday*

“A novel so sweetly goofy and gently warm that you’ll be falling in love with the central character . . . and her creator, before you’ve turned the first page.”

—*The Star-Ledger* (Newark)

“An irreverent fictional account of goings-on inside a museum of Asian art.”

—*Art News*

“Knowledgeable about the inner workings of museums and the specifics of Asian art and culture.”

—*The Washington Post*

About the Author

Mary Kay Zuravleff was born in 1960 and grew up in Oklahoma City. She studied English and mathematics at Rice University in Houston and creative writing at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. In 1982, she moved to Washington, D.C., where she lives with her husband and their two children. She has held a wide variety of writing-related jobs as well as stints as an industrial engineer, math tutor, and disc jockey. She spent nine years as an editor for the Smithsonian Institution, first at the American Art Museum and then at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, the Smithsonian’s Asian art museums. She currently teaches at George Mason University.

The Frequency of Souls, her first novel, won both the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the James Jones First Novel Fellowship Award.

Discussion Questions

1. How did you feel about Promise, her passions as well as her many predicaments? Did her work or domestic life seem exaggerated? Ultimately, are she and Leo good parents?
2. Did Joseph abandon the museum, or did he understand that it was time for him to move on? How does Joseph’s perception of himself change when he receives the memo from the Castle and when he arrives in the desert? How did your opinion of him change throughout the novel?
3. Leo can be self-righteous about his Amnesty International efforts and critical of Promise’s work—both her zeal for art commissioned by ruthless tyrants as well as the notion of an American museum owning so many of Asia’s treasures. Why does he join her cause? Did you feel differently about him as the book progressed?

4. Why does the book begin with the bowl breaking? How does your knowledge of its demise affect the story of how it came to be so valuable?
5. Discuss the role that humor plays in this book.
6. Arthur is passionate about the Chinese ceramics in the museum's collection, and he believes his passion should be rewarded. Compare his attitude toward the museum and its visitors with Min's, Promise's, and Talbot's.
7. Joseph preached, "Never underestimate the power of an original work of art." How does the idea of the original play out through the book?
8. Why does Emmy so readily dismantle the Washington life that she and Joseph led? What is her connection to Asian art? Does she withdraw from or transcend ordinary life?
9. Is Min calculating or pragmatic? In what ways does her background illuminate the ethical dilemmas she and the museum face?
10. At one point, Promise thinks of Joseph, Rumi, and her mother as her personal trinity. What inspiration does she gather from Rumi, and where do his poems lead her? What about her mother's no-nonsense advice and actions?
11. What does Arthur see in Talbot? How complicit are Talbot, Leo, and Arthur in the bowl's destruction?
12. Several of the characters are stunned by loss, only to be bowled over by further loss. Joseph, for one example, loses his museum and his home before his life is also threatened. While Promise's family and work arrangement are already unmanageable, her pregnancy and promotion cause her to lose what balance she had—next, she discovers the threat to the museum, and then the bowl breaks! How does anyone overcome such breakage? Amid such difficulties, what allows us to appreciate that "the world outside is vast and intricate?"

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