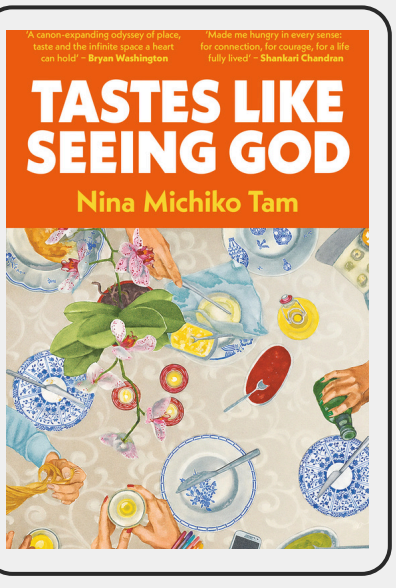
READING GROUP NOTES

TASTES LIKE SEEING GOD
NINA MICHIKO TAM

In the days following the accidental death of her brother, an up-and-coming chef, Jessie Wong is adrift and angry: at Tommy, for dying; at her parents for their silence; and at the confines of her conservative Christian Chinese upbringing. Then Jessie finds a list in Tommy's handwriting of the five meals that 'taste like seeing God'. Was his phrasing blasphemy, or a nod to some hidden belief? Is fate offering her the chance to know her brother in a new way?



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From Tommy's homemade pasta sauce and biscuits to the multi-component conceptual seafood dish at Severin and Maurice's thiebou jenn, the novel is filled with delicious, unforgettable meals. How is food used in the novel to display intimacy and to evoke emotion and memory?

How does each stop in her journey change the way Jessie sees her brother and expands her understanding of him?

In New York, Jessie asks Kara reflexively whether she will forgive Tommy, and then realizes that 'she does not know why she asks this. Only that forgiveness is big in the world in which she's grown up.' By the time Jessie faces her parents in Dakar, her definition of forgiveness has shifted from something automatic to something hard-earned and deeply considered. How is this visible in the ways she forgives her parents, herself and Tommy?

After Kara expresses her anger at Tommy for dying, she says to Jessie, 'It's just hard to stop being mad. When there's nowhere for it to go… But when you came along, I thought I should try.' How do the different characters process, or avoid, the feelings they had towards Tommy when he died? How do they each face their grief?

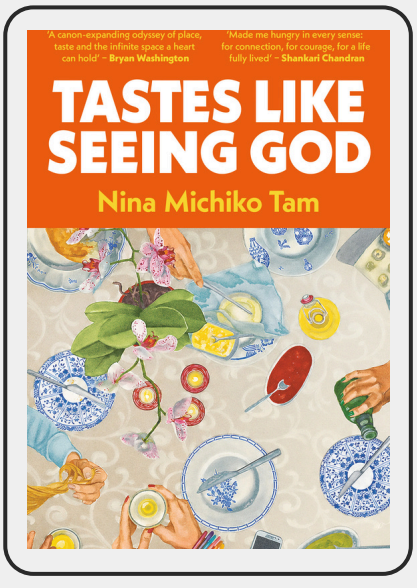
In New York, Jessie is given a list of places to visit and is encouraged to meet people she would never have otherwise. In Sylt, her path is more solitary, less clear-cut. How do Jessie's experiences in Sylt change the way she sees herself?

When she first faces the austerity and strict dedication of Severin, Jessie thinks, 'A spiritual undertaking. What a joke, a total misalignment with Tommy's values.' How does her experience in Sylt, redefine her relationship to prayer and what 'spiritual' means to her? How does it contrast with her parents' understanding of spirituality?

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Throughout her journey, Jessie meets many of Tommy's friends, and they introduce her to the world they shared with him. In Leo, she makes a friend all her own. How does the development of their friendship show different sides of Jessie?

Before going to Lila's opening night, Jessie has an internal conversation with Tommy, that leaves her thinking about what future she wants for herself. Why do you think she chooses not to eat the ortolan? What does she learn about herself in that moment? What does she learn about love?

Maurice invites himself to Tommy's funeral and invites the entire Wong family to Dakar. How do these actions upend the Wongs' way of living? Why do you think they are able to be more open with him than they are with each other?

Jessie played mediator between her parents and Tommy throughout their lives. What does she realize upon facing their rigidity herself? How does seeing Lila's play and hearing Lila's version of Tommy's story give Jessie permission to step out of her previous family role?

Despite the friction between him and his family, Tommy continued to come back to them: in his high-end cooking, his favorite meals, his conversations with Lila, and of course, with the planned Portland restaurant. From what we know and learn about Tommy, why do you think he always returned?

Throughout the novel, we get hints of Jessie's adult perspective. What do these hints suggest about the way these weeks and her travels affected her adult trajectory? What do these glimpses say about the nature of grief over time?