

SUMMARY

DEAR GIRLS

ALI WONG



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Summary of “Dear Girls” by Ali Wong

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Introduction

Ali Wong writes heartfelt hilarious letters to her infant daughters, the two she is famously seen pregnant with in each of her Netflix specials, *Baby Cobra* and *Hard Knock Wife*. She writes letters to cover everything they should know in life, including the embarrassing details of her dating life, how she met and trapped their dad, and how she deals with being a working mom in a male-dominated profession. If you've seen Wong's Netflix specials, then you are familiar with her unfiltered thoughts on marriage, sex, Asian culture, and working women. However, throughout her book, Wong shares even more personal stories and reveals parts of her life that have shaped her into who she is today. From growing up as a wild child in San Francisco to reconnecting with her roots and drinking snake blood in Vietnam, Wong's letters addressed to her daughters will make you laugh and cringe. But more importantly, they will teach you that the "secret" to success is simply dedication and staying true to yourself.

Who is Ali Wong?

Stand up comedian, Ali Wong, found success in 2016 when Netflix aired her comedy special, *Baby Cobra*. Since then, she has released a second Netflix special and has worked on television shows and movies that have skyrocketed her success. So what makes her different? First, both of her Netflix specials feature Ali Wong almost eight months pregnant. And while she certainly makes crude jokes about pregnancy, sex, and relationships, she also addresses what it's like to be a female Asian American in comedy.

She admits that writing this book was scary. Sure, she can write jokes and even television and movie scripts, but a book? What if people found out her secret that only her closest friends and family knew? For three years, Wong was on the writing staff of the ABC sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* and every year, a producer-writer named Matt Kuhn would run a quiz before their annual staff trip to Vegas. It was meant to get them excited and even allow them to win some extra spending or gambling money.

One year, the final question to this quiz was “How many miles to the moon?” A quick Google search will tell you the answer is about 238,900 miles. Wong recalls every other staff member guessing somewhere in that ballpark. But Wong's answer? She answered five billion miles. The looks on her coworker's faces are forever seared into Wong's memory, one person even took off her glasses and scream-laughed into a pillow for about five minutes straight. Some thought the answer was so outrageous that surely her answer was a joke, but Wong was serious. She goes on to say, “That day my coworkers found out my secret. That I'm a f**king idiot.”

Wong didn't want to risk the rest of the world finding out this secret; however, once she realized that her writing doesn't have to be as good as Maya Angelou or Malcolm Gladwell, she embraced writing the book. She became inspired by a letter that her father wrote her before he passed away that began with “Dear Alexandra.” She loved that letter and wishes he had written more about himself. She now has so many questions for him that

she, unfortunately, can no longer ask. She decided to leave her daughters with something before she dies, a collection of letters, each chapter a letter about a topic that is important to Wong and answers the many questions she receives about her life as a female Asian American comic. The girls, however, are instructed to wait until the age of twenty-one before they read the vulgar, raw, and honest account of their mother's life.

You Have Suffered Enough

Before Wong got married, she knew she wanted children. She's always felt destined to be a mom, and as an Asian woman, she knows she will live forever. Having kids is like having a 401(k) for companionship. She understands she will inevitably become a widow and live forever, so she doesn't want to be lonely for the second hundred years of her long life. Kids were a must. But, like anything, pregnancy, birth, and parenting are nothing like you see in the movies.

The very act of trying to get pregnant is not at all sexy, instead, it's a science of planning. Trying to schedule intimacy during ovulation, according to Wong, ruins sex instantly. She initially bought a pack of one hundred ovulation strips for ten dollars from Amazon, and after one month of scheduled sex, she became pregnant. Unfortunately, she lost that baby at eleven weeks and she quickly realized how hard pregnancy would prove to be. Like many women, she felt like a bad mother, that her body was defective. She received question after question about why she lost the baby. "Well, did you take the folic acid?" "Was it because you were stressed out?" "It was probably from all the performing."

Wong believes the underlying message of those reactions were, "Hey, Ali, how'd you manage to f**k up your pregnancy?" But, miscarriages are out of a woman's control and she was happy to learn that many women like Beyoncé and Michelle Obama have experienced them as well. Maybe she wasn't going to make such a horrible mother after all? Three months later, Wong became pregnant again. She embraced every uncomfortable moment, the sickness, the cramping, the weight gain. She was just happy that Mari, her daughter, was alive.

Towards the end of her pregnancy, she found out that she had a condition called intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR), which means that Mari wasn't growing enough and she would need to be induced at thirty-seven weeks. Her daughter was healthy, but Wong still felt like her body was

failing her. The day of the birth arrived and all of Wong's plans went out the window, she ended up needing a C-section which, afterward, she used to her advantage! Her husband witnessing her spleen and intestines outside her body allowed her to go the entire first month of Mari's life without changing a single diaper.

Of course, Wong wasn't immune to the inevitable "mom guilt" that many new moms face. Because of the major surgery of a C-section, Wong was prescribed Vicodin and she felt guilty about taking it while breastfeeding. That's when her pharmacist friend Aileen, gave her the advice that would become her mantra for motherhood: *You have suffered enough*. Being a mom is hard enough without all the unsolicited advice and judgment from strangers. So she believes that if you can make motherhood easier, make it easier, and don't feel guilty about it.

Being a Female Asian-American Comedian

A question that Wong gets asked frequently is: “What is it like to be an Asian woman in comedy?” According to Wong, this is one of her least favorite questions because she finds it reductive and requires a complicated answer. She would rather spend her time telling aspiring comedians how she got over her fear of having a joke fail on stage. Regardless, she still wants to address what it’s like to be a female Asian American comic and the obstacles she had to go through to become successful.

While every comic is constantly under scrutiny, Ali Wong reveals that for her, criticism was a frequent occurrence. Not only did she have to withstand absurd stereotypes and outright racism, but she also had to learn how to respond to misogynistic comments and put up with being undermined as a female. She recalls a time in Honolulu when she was in her early twenties, she entered the stage and immediately heard a man say, “Oh no, this gonna suck,” purely because she was both Asian and female. The man had no other basis to form such an opinion about her set.

To help her cope and lessen these misogynistic comments, Wong learned to downplay her femininity when performing on stage. She would arrive at shows wearing her hair in two buns on top of her head with loose cargo pants in the hopes that people would look past her being a female and simply listen to her jokes. The worst part was when white male comedians would patronize her success and tell her that she was “lucky” to be a female minority, like being a female minority is what made her stand out. They would bemoan “I’m just another white guy,” to that Wong would respond, “Well, be a funnier white guy.”

In a business where white men dominate, Wong relied on her hard work, passion, and motivation to become successful, but she advises her daughters to stay away from comedy. She believes there aren’t more women in comedy because of the many safety issues women face. Even small issues, like walking to your car at night, are issues that many men have

never had to think about. But it's issues like these that deter women from performing at certain clubs and taking certain opportunities.

For instance, one of the worst places that Wong performed regularly at was a place called "Our Little Theater." It seated about eight people and was in the heart of the Tenderloin district, a neighborhood that was home to Southeast Asian refugees, drug addicts, and a remarkable amount of human feces. She admits that walking to the venue never allowed her time to think about her set because she was too busy trying not to get robbed and avoiding syringes and "doo-doo" on the sidewalks. She says, "That's a game of hopscotch you 'need' to win. Because if you lose, your consolation prize is ebola."

How Wong Met Her Husband

By the fall of 2009, Wong had been living in New York City for a year and was sick of being single in the city. Sure, she had plenty of casual hookups and even managed to sleep with a few homeless guys (accidentally), but she was ready to settle down. That fall, her high school friend, Abby Goldberg, invited Wong to her wedding, where she would impress her future husband by initiating a conversation about veganism and yoga.

By the end of the short conversation, Wong would go on to invite her crush, the Harvard Business student, to one of her comedy shows. He agreed, and they spent their first date with Wong on stage bending over, pulling her pants down to show the whole audience her bare ass, and saying “What’s Crackin?” Anyway, she says, the risk paid off because he emailed her after the show and told her he hadn’t laughed that hard in a long time, he even invited her to have lunch with him.

Wong worked hard to not scare Justin away, he was, after all, a Harvard Business student and Wong’s dream was to become a stay-at-home mom. Stay-at-home moms, she believes, live their best lives because they have the luxury of using a private bathroom every day and don’t have to stress about pooing in public. On their fifth date, the couple shared their first kiss, which she explains was *magical* despite being on a grimy New York street full of trash bag mountains. A few years later, Justin proposed to Wong at that exact spot nearby a homeless man arguing with a pigeon.

Of course, like pregnancy, relationships are nothing like the movies. Sure, Wong and her husband attend couples therapy, which she explains is cheaper than divorce, but she has learned that supporting one another is the key to any relationship. They take hard work to maintain, and now that children are sprinkled into the family, their relationship takes even more time and energy. But the two make it work. For instance, shortly after the birth of their second daughter, Wong co-created and starred in a Netflix film called *Always Be My Maybe*. Unfortunately, this meant filming in

Vancouver for six weeks, leaving her husband to take care of their daughters back home.

While many men might struggle with this responsibility, Wong's husband took on the role happily and even traveled from LA to Vancouver every weekend with the girls so they could all be together. Their life may look different from the average family, but they have learned to support one another even when it means sacrificing your own wants and needs.

The Path to Success

As mentioned previously, living life as a comedian is far from glamorous. It takes hard work, dedication, and passion to find success and break into Hollywood as Wong has done. But one of her best pieces of advice is that you can never be great at something right away. When she first began performing stand-up, she bombed in front of strangers... a lot. She recalls many times where she would tell a joke and receive zero laughs, but she took those failures and learned from them. They helped her work on her craft and find her unique voice.

By reflecting on her sets and finding out what works versus what doesn't work, she gradually stopped bombing so much. She realized that creating material that revolved around her own experiences and family history made for some of her best jokes. Even though Wong was learning about herself and finding her voice, she still had to suffer through some less than ideal situations. For instance, one tour she took on in 2012 involved long travel days, cheap hotels, lumpy beds, and pretty terrible food. At one stop in St. Louis, Wong even performed nine stand-up sets in just five days in a cramped, smoky basement bar. Not only that, but she also struggled with feeling uncomfortable as she tried to ignore the male comics who were notorious for constant sexual harassment. However, she learned a lot about herself on that trip and being able to perform made the experience worth it.

While hard work and dedication are important, Wong also feels that stepping outside of your comfort zone is critical to your growth and understanding of yourself. She advises her daughters to move away from home. She tells them, "At some point, you gotta go. Mama loves you but it's so important to get out of your hometown and get the f**k away from your family." In fact, Wong learned some of the most valuable lessons while studying abroad in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, eating a fertilized duck embryo is a local delicacy. She wanted to experience life like the locals and being "grossed out" by something that

is outside her culture, she believed, was disrespectful. Vietnamese people enjoy eating the dish, so if she expressed disgust about eating it, then she is expressing that she thinks *they* are disgusting. She states, “Sure, you might study abroad to meet cute guys, but if that’s the only reason, you’re doing it wrong. Sit down, and eat the embryo.” In other words, get out and explore, try new things, and find yourself. Once she left home, she felt that she could be the person she was meant to be and she understands that her daughters will likely do the same.

Remember Your Roots

Growing up the youngest of her siblings, Wong was used to hearing criticism and insults tossed her way. Since her siblings were significantly older than her, she experienced merciless teasing her entire life; however, she believes that teasing prepared her for a life in comedy where she would outright bomb in front of strangers. She didn't allow the criticism to get to her and she used it to find her voice and hone her craft. Simply put, Wong's upbringing and her roots prepared her for her life and made her appreciate all that she has accomplished thus far.

For instance, whenever she was struggling to survive and pay rent in NYC and staying in less than ideal places on the road, she remembered her roots. Her dad was born in the U.S. and grew up in Chinatown in a one-bedroom apartment with no running water. He slept in a twin bed with his mom and two sisters while his father slept on a newspaper on the floor. His father came to the United States at the young age of eight, by himself on a boat that came through Angel Island.

In her family, they have a picture of her grandfather when he came to Angel Island and it reminds Wong of just how young he was when he traveled to America all by himself. She loves his story and tells herself that because of his hard work and dedication, she has been able to accomplish all that she's ever wanted. She inherited that strong work ethic and reveals that her grandfather is a part of her identity and it makes her feel proud of where she came from.

Her mother moved to the U.S. from Vietnam in 1960 when she was about 20-years-old. Growing up with immigrant parents gave Wong a childhood that she would never replace. She was thankful that they instilled an appreciation for what they have and taught her how to be thrifty and save money. Her appreciation for a small room, a bed, and a dinner of lentils made living in NYC much easier to manage.

Lastly, she grew up learning to appreciate her culture. Her family was very interested in art and would constantly take her to the Asian American Film Festival. Additionally, every time there was a new Wong Kar-wai film, her parents would take her to see it. Because of this, her parents instilled a sense of confidence that she never would've received if she only saw movies featuring white women and men. People always discuss how representation matters and Wong saw herself on screen all the time.

Wong tells her daughters that she hopes she can instill the same appreciation in them, and give them the same experiences her parents gave her. She tells them that she wants them to grow up and live their own lives, but always remember where they came from. At the end of the day, she hopes her daughters know “that it's okay to fail, to mess up, to sleep with the wrong person,” as long as you learn “to pick yourself up again and laugh about it.”

A Guide to Asian Restaurants

While the rest of Wong's book is filled with life advice and lessons learned from her past experiences, she tells them that one of the most important lessons "more crucial than money or love" is how to pick a great Asian restaurant. She reveals that life is too short to be wasting meals on bad food and that she would feel great shame if she ever caught them eating at a gross Asian restaurant. She tells her daughters, "I'd rather catch you trafficking cocaine into Thailand through any number of orifices than see you eating at a P.F. Chang's." So, here is Wong's guide to picking out the best Asian restaurants.

When it comes to Vietnamese food, find a place that opens at seven A.M. and closes at eight P.M. The back of the menu should feature advertisements for local dentists, lawyers, and real estate agents. All employees should wear open-toed shoes. There should be a buddha by the cash register and red fake candles with incense burning. Waiters should have long fingernails that may touch your food, that's okay. It should be cash-only, and the name of the restaurant should have a number in it. Avoid Vietnamese restaurants where customers are eating pho with a fork, the waiters are white, they take American Express, they don't serve tripe or tendon but they do serve chicken breast. Lastly, they shouldn't have a punny bulls**t name like "Pho Gettaboutit" or "What the Pho."

When it comes to Chinese restaurants, there should be a tank full of live fish in the front. The waiters might wear a maroon bow tie and vest. The bathroom should have a pearly pink opaque soap. It should be loud, and the pork and shrimp might arrive right away while it takes an hour to get a glass of water. Some bad signs include restaurants that serve truffle oil in the dim sum or when the dim sum is served on trays. The waitstaff should never ask you "How's everything going?" or say things like "Thank you," "Nice to see you," or "Did you leave room for dessert?"

Of course, she gives other advice for Japanese, Korean, and Filipino food; however, she typically believes you should avoid all Filipino restaurants unless you are going to an auntie or lola's house. Lastly, a general rule of thumb is that 99 percent of the clientele should be Asian, that is one of the best signs of a great Asian restaurant.

Final Summary

Ali Wong spent years doing what she loved, performing stand-up in dive bars despite battling racism and sexism in the entertainment world. Now as a full-time wife, mother, and career woman, Wong proves that you don't have to choose between family and career, you really can do it all! Despite Wong's success, she still grapples with everyday stresses that many women face such as mom guilt, and emphasizes that parenthood is not all "mommy blogs and matching onesies." As Wong writes a series of letters to her daughters, she wants to remind them that there are no secrets to success or happiness. Her book isn't about finding out how to become a success like her, instead, it showcases the amount of dedication, hard work, and even failure it takes. However, even if you don't "make it" as Wong has, the best thing you can do in life is learn to accept yourself for who you are and roll with the punches of life.



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