

Author Spotlight

MIN JIN LEE



Min Jin Lee was born in Seoul in 1968 and moved to the United States with her family when she was seven years old. She studied history at Yale and received a law degree from Georgetown. In 1995, Lee left her job as a corporate attorney to become a writer. Her first novel, *Free Food for Millionaires*, was published to widespread critical acclaim in 2007. From 2007-11, Lee lived in Tokyo, researching what would become her second novel, *Pachinko* (2017). *Pachinko*, a sweeping epic spanning the 20th century, tells the story of the trials and triumphs of a Korean family in Japan—a country where they are often scorned and abused.

Korea, 1911: While the country is caught in the throes of a brutal Japanese occupation, a matchmaker performs a small miracle. Hoonie, a disabled peasant with no marriage prospects, is wed to a 15-year-old girl named Yangjin. Against all odds, true love blossoms and they have a daughter named Sunja. Yangjin and Sunja are heartbroken when Hoonie dies of tuberculosis, and must support themselves with arduous labor. When Sunja meets the handsome fish broker Kho Hansu, a wealthy Korean gangster who lives in Japan, the two begin a passionate love affair. But when Sunja becomes pregnant with Hansu's child, he reveals that he has a wife and three daughters in Japan. Facing ruin, an infirm Christian pastor named Baek Isak offers to marry Sunja and raise her child as his own in order to save her family from shame. Sunja agrees and soon leaves Korea to live with Isak's family in Osaka. Thus begins an expansive, multigenerational saga charting the fates of Sunja, her children, her grandchildren, and their fortunes as members of the much maligned class of Korean-Japanese "Zainichi."

Lee was first inspired to write about the Korean-Japanese experience in 1989, when, as a college undergraduate, she heard a story about a Korean schoolboy who had committed suicide. She completed a draft manuscript in 2004. In 2007, she joined her husband who had relocated to Tokyo for business. In Japan, Lee developed a large network of Korean-Japanese contacts. She recalls: "I interviewed five dozen people. I was like a journalist, spending time with my subjects." As she grew closer to these people, she realized that her story was wrong. "To include all the complexities, I realized I'd need to cover seventy years, and every war in Korea. People thought I was cuckoo." When Lee returned to New York in 2011, she scrapped her original manuscript and spent another five years rewriting the novel.

After almost three decades in the making, *Pachinko* was published in 2017 and declared a triumph by critics. It is the first novel written in English about Korean-Japanese culture, and will be translated into 25 languages. It was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award, and named one of the best books of 2017 by the *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Review of Books*, NPR, BBC, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *The Guardian*. At present, Lee has plans to move to Boston, where she will work on the final volume of her "The Koreans" trilogy of diaspora novels, tentatively titled *American Hagwon*.

Prepared by Jody Smith

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Sources: MinJinLee.com, SueJLeonard.com, QKED.org



Discussion Questions for *Pachinko*

1. The book's first line reads: "History has failed us, but no matter." Why do you think Min Jin Lee chose to begin the book this way?
2. The inciting incident in the book comes when Sunja, the daughter of a boardinghouse owner, is seduced by Hansu, the mysterious and wealthy stranger. How does that moment reverberate through the generations?
3. What role does shame play in the novel?
4. How does being in exile and being perceived as foreign affect how Sunja's family members see themselves?
5. Sunja is told early on that "a woman's life is endless work and suffering ... For a woman, the man you marry will determine the quality of your life completely." How do the women in this book have or not have agency? And how do they struggle to reclaim it?
6. How did the book make you think differently about migration, if at all?
7. Did you know much about the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 through the end of World War II before reading this book? Or about Korean culture in Japan?
8. "There was more to being something than just blood," Min Jin Lee writes. How do the characters grapple with this idea throughout the book?
9. The epigraph for the third section of "Pachinko," from Benedict Anderson, describes a nation as "an imagined political community." Do you agree?
10. Which character throughout the four generations do you identify with most, and why?
11. How did the book make you think differently about what makes a family?
12. At one point in the novel, Min Jin Lee writes: "You want to see a very bad man? Make an ordinary man successful beyond his imagination. Let's see how good he is when he can do whatever he wants." How does that apply to characters in the book and the larger historical events happening around them?
13. Did you identify at all with Noa's efforts to "pass" as an identity different than his own — as Japanese instead of Korean — and if not, did it feel relevant to today?
14. "We cannot help but be interested in the stories of people that history pushes aside so thoughtlessly," Min Jin Lee writes. Do you think "Pachinko" is an effort to reclaim those stories?
15. After finishing the book, why do you think Min Jin Lee chose the title "Pachinko," from the game common in Japan? How does she compare the game of Pachinko to the game of life?

Source: New York Times/PBS NewsHour

