

Repeating Forbidden Words

A Profile of Linda Sue Park, Winner of the Newbery Medal

By Terry Hong

When Linda Sue Park first received the call early this year announcing that she had won the top honor in children's literature—the coveted 2002 Newbery Medal for *A Single Shard*—her immediate reaction was disbelief. “I had to ask the woman to repeat what she had said a couple of times before I could believe I had won,” Park recalls with a laugh.

The winning title, about a young orphan boy in 13th-century Korea who becomes the apprentice to an acerbic master potter, is Park's third book for middle-schoolers. Her first, published in 1999, is *Seesaw Girl*, about an aristocratic girl growing up in 17th-century Korea. Her second, published in 2000, is *The Kite Fighters*, about two brothers in 15th-century Korea who compete in the New Year kite competition secretly representing the boy-king. When Park won the Newbery, she became the first Korean American, and only the second Asian American, to win the award; Dhan Gopal Mukerji won for *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* in 1928.

Less than two months after receiving the Newbery, Park's follow-up, *When My Name Was Keoko*, debuted in March. “Having *Keoko* finished long before the Newbery was announced was a tremendous relief,” says Park. While Park's other titles are all historical novels based in Korea, *Keoko* is a departure from her earlier, noncontroversial works. *Keoko* is the first title for young audiences to deal with the Japanese occupation of Korea during the first half of the 20th century, a torturous part of history about which few outside of Korea are even aware.

“I never thought of *Keoko* as controversial,” says Park. “I was basically telling my parents' story of growing up in Korea.” Indeed, Park's mother's occupation-mandated Japanese name was Kaneyama Keoko. Rather than being concerned about potential controversy, Park's energies were focused on creating the book: “*Keoko* was a very different writing project for me,” says Park. “I was writing in first person, about a fairly recent time, so people were still alive to interview. Writing *Keoko* was also very difficult. It took close to three years to write, compared to six to nine months each for the other three books.”

Park's efforts paid off. Luminously written, *Keoko* tells a difficult story that spans the last years of the Japanese occupation, during which Korean language, culture, and traditions were literally banned. Told in the alternating voices of Kim Sun-hee, who is 10 years old in 1940, and Kim Tae-yul, her brother who is 13, the novel captures five years of Japanese brutality countered by Korean patriotism. The author's note at book's end is a valuable historical supplement.

For as long as Sun-hee and Tae-yul have been alive, the Japanese have occupied their homeland. All Koreans are

forced to speak Japanese, to study only Japanese history, and eventually they are stripped of even their Korean names: Korean Olympic gold medalist Sohn Kee Chung, for example, became Son Kitei and is listed in most records as a Japanese national. Sun-hee becomes Kaneyama Keoko, her brother Kaneyama Nobuo. (Korean and Japanese names are family name first, followed by the given name.)

Park shows her storytelling prowess by creating a work in which, in spite of the density of the history that drives the story, her characters still retain their everyday humanity: Sun-hee is a young girl with friends at school, chores she must accomplish, and homework to finish. Tae-yul is ever the older brother, making sure he sets the correct example, frustrated he is not yet a man and desperately trying to help his family survive. The children's hero is their paternal uncle, a headstrong, passionate young man who is a freedom fighter forced into hiding when his printing press is discovered to be producing resistance materials.

With the advent of World War II, Japan's involvement means further subjugation for Koreans. All the while, resources become

ever scarcer. Men and older boys are conscripted to serve in the Japanese military, where they are no more than human fodder. Tae-yul, shouldering the burden of his family's suffering, eventually “volunteers” in the hopes that his family will receive favorable treatment by the brutal Japanese. Young girls, ever younger, are urged to “volunteer” for factory work when in fact they will be forced into inhuman sexual slavery, tragically becoming so-called comfort women. Sun-hee escapes such a fate, but some of her fellow schoolgirls do not:

I hear that those girls weren't even allowed to go home and say goodbye to their families. They were taken by truck. ... after that probably a train ... and a boat.

And then what? A factory somewhere, sewing uniforms? Maybe.

One of the most ominous “maybes” in literary history.

Amidst the turmoil and uncertainty, the Kim family manages to survive and even thrive. Like the resilient, single Rose of Sharon plant—the Korean national flower—that the family saves, hidden in the darkness of a shack when all such plants are ordered destroyed by the Japanese, Sun-hee's and Tae-yul's spirits remain unbound.

Part family drama, part coming-of-age, part historical narrative, *Keoko* is a worthy follow-up to Park's award-winning *Shard*. She continues to bear witness to her rich Korean heritage. Ironically, although her books have all been set in Korea, Park, who is Illinois-born and raised, had very little exposure to other Korean Americans or Korean culture growing up in the 1960s and 1970s.

“We were never exposed to much Korean history,” Park says. “My father was very much the type who wanted his children to assimilate—I think that was the common immigrant mentality then. So one of the things we did not do was speak Korean. Now he jokes that the way to get kids interested in

When My Name Was Keoko

LINDA SUE PARK

Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin,
\$16.00 cloth, ISBN 0-618-13335-6

Korea is not to tell them anything when they're growing up." With four successful books, these days Park is a veritable expert. ■

INTERVIEWER/WRITER: **Terry Hong** writes frequently on books, theater, and film. She is coauthor of *Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence on American Culture: From Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism*.