

***Pachinko*¹** by Min Jin Lee
guided reading of excerpt

Assigned Reading:

Book 1, Chapter 1 (pp. 1-11)²

Book 2, Chapters 2, 4, 5, 15 (pp. 160-68, 179-197, 279-84)

Book 3, end of Chapter 21 (pp. 481-85)

Book epigraph:

“Home is a name, a word, it is a strong one; stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit ever answered to, in the strongest conjuration.”³

Book I
***Gohyang*⁴/Hometown: 1910-1933**

Overview

The book begins in the small fishing village of then-united Yeongdo, Korea in 1910, the same year Japan annexed the country. Hoonie, a young man with a cleft palate and limp, is not a societally desirable marriage partner, even though his parents run a boarding house, and he can write in both Japanese and Korean. Because of the famine in the country and because she was the last of a family of all girls, Hoonie is matched in marriage with a young woman named Yangjin. Yangjin and Hoonie have three children, each of whom die soon after childbirth, a common occurrence in Korea at the time. Hoonie’s parents die three years after his marriage to Yangjin. Hoonie and Yangjin’s fourth child, a girl named Sunja, is able to live past childbirth, and after she turns three, Hoonie and Yangjin are able to stop worrying she will die. Hoonie is devoted to his daughter, but he, too, dies, of tuberculosis, when Sunja turns 13 years old.

Enter Isak, a Christian missionary staying at Yangjin’s boarding house on his way from the north of Korea to a church in Osaka, Japan. Isak has consumption and is physically ill. Sunja has become pregnant out of wedlock with the child of a wealthy Korean fish broker/businessman, Hansu Koh. Hansu is married but offers to give Sunja a home in which to raise their child. Sunja, feeling shame at the thought of such an arrangement, cannot accept. Isak, out of a sense of Christian grace, offers to marry Sunja, to help her avoid single motherhood and societal disgrace.

¹ Min Jin Lee explains that “Pachinko is a kind of vertical pinball game played by adults in Japan. Although gambling is formally illegal there, pachinko bypasses this prohibition by allowing the player to win prizes, called *keihin*, which are exchanged outside the premises of the pachinko parlor for cash” (paperback edition, 496). Pachinko started in Japan in the 1920s,, and it is still fairly popular today. As of 2015, “pachinko generates . . . about twice the export revenues of the Japanese car industry” including Nissan, Toyota, and Honda (paperback edition, 496). Despite its popularity, many Japanese look down on pachinko parlors as gambling dens with connections to criminals, illicit activity, and lower-class people, many of whom are ethnically Korean.

² Page numbers taken from hardcover First Edition: February 2017

³ from Charles Dickens’s 1842-44 serialized novel, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (commonly known as *Martin Chuzzlewit*)

⁴ The Korean word for “home” or roots/origins, often connoted with one’s village of upbringing.

The trade-off is a relocation of Sunja and her and Isak's professed "child" to Osaka, where Isak will have a job at the church. Sunja agrees, and Isak and Sunja marry. In marrying Isak, Sunja receives an honorable family name; Isak, in return, gets the opportunity to have a family in spite of his illness and emigration to Japan.

Book II

Motherland, 1939-1962

Overview

The novel's second book begins in the year 1939 with Noa, the son of Sunja and Hansu, who is six years old. Noa still believes his father is Isak. Noa also now has an infant brother named Mozasu, Isak and Sunja's actual son. The Korean War is coming, and Yoseb, Isak's brother in Osaka, reads newspaper reports about how Japan "would protect Asia from the pernicious hands of Western imperialism" (154). After Sunja and Isak arrive in Osaka, they soon realize that the occupation continues for Koreans beyond the borders of Korea. Sunja cannot believe the poverty around her in the Korean neighborhood she and Isak move into in Osaka. Lee shows how even if a Korean-Japanese had the financial resources to buy a home, Japanese landowners would not sell land or buildings to them, because of the structural racism at the time against ethnic Koreans.⁵ Food scarcity is also an issue, and Sunja and her family idealize white rice and meat as an occasional treat, largely subsisting on fermented vegetables (like kimchi), potatoes, barley, and millet instead. In Japan's colonial period (1910-45), discrimination and police brutality toward ethnic Koreans is a common fact of life. Isak is imprisoned for unproven religious dissent. He is starved and beaten while imprisoned. To make ends meet, Sunja and her sister-in-law, Kyunghee (Yoseb's wife), join other working-class women (predominantly Korean) selling homemade kimchi and candy in an open-air market.

Now widowed, Sunja and her family continue to struggle in spite of Hansu's secret financial help. Although wanting to, they are unable to return to the north of Korea, where they have family, due to the dangerous political situation. Noa, always a hardworking and successful student, is able to pass the entrance exams for an elite Japanese university, Waseda University. Hansu, despite Sunja's resistance, pays for Noa's entire university education, pretending it is because as an older Korean man he feels responsible for helping the younger generation.

The scene of Isak's imprisonment⁶

At a Shinto shrine in Osaka, a young Chinese boy, Hu, affiliated with Isak's church, is allegedly "mouthing the words of the Lord's Prayer when they were supposed to be pledging allegiance to the Emperor" (155). Pastor Yoo and Pastor Baek (Isak) are arrested for defending Hu, with Pastor Yoo trying "to tell the police that the boy was misinformed, and that he didn't mean anything by it" (155). Lee writes, "[B]ut Hu refused to agree with Pastor Yoo. Pastor Baek tried to explain, too, but Hu said he was willing to walk into the furnace. Just like Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego!" (155). Hu, Pastor Yoo and Isak are then arrested and imprisoned. Sunja, Kyunghee (Yoseb's wife), and Yoseb visit the police station where Isak has been taken.

⁵ "Zainichi" (3.20) is a Japanese word meaning "living in Japan," first used during the colonial era to describe Korean migrants to Japan and their descendants, as well as people with partial Korean heritage living in Japan.

⁶ This section is the backstory for the excerpt from Book II, Chapters 2, 4, 5.

Yoseb tries to reason with the police, but they are unmovable. The family considers asking Canadian missionaries for help in getting Isak released but are unsuccessful.

In Chapter 2 (excerpted), Sunja visits the police station every day to give food to Isak, but she never confirms he is actually receiving the food. After around two years in prison, Isak is released, emaciated and ill. He dies upon his return home (Chapter 5 excerpt).⁷

Noa's schooling⁸

In Chapter 13, Noa is able to pass nationwide entrance exams and is admitted to Waseda University in Tokyo. Waseda is a highly selective private university, making it very expensive to attend. Sunja, Kyunghie, and Yoseb (who is ill), struggle to find a way to pay for Noa's Waseda tuition. Lee writes, "The women were in the kitchen worrying about Noa's tuition. They were worried when he was studying for his exams, and now that he had finally passed, they were worried about how they would pay. Somehow, they had to live without Noa's salary, come up with the cost of the boy's education, and pay for [Yoseb's] medicines" (266).

Hansu is proud of Noa and invites Sunja and Noa to his office in Osaka to celebrate Noa's admission to Waseda. Hansu, congratulating Noa, exclaims,

"I asked you to come today because I want Noa to know that he has achieved something great. Not just for himself or his family but for all Koreans. You are going to university! And to Waseda, an excellent Japanese university! You are doing everything a great man can do in his time—you are pursuing your education. So many Koreans could not go to school, but you kept studying and studying. And even when the exams were not good, you persevered. You deserve a great reward! How wonderful! I'm so proud. So proud." Hansu beamed. (Lee 269-70)

Sunja and Noa agree to Hansu's tuition help, but Sunja considers it a loan and wants to pay Hansu back eventually. After Noa enters Waseda University, he excels and studies English literature, falls in love with a young Japanese woman, Akiko, and tries to adjust to life in Tokyo (Chapter 15 excerpt).⁹

Book III Pachinko: 1962-1989

Overview

Still looking up to Hansu as an adopted mentor, Noa discovers Hansu is his father. Noa, ashamed and despondent, drops out of university and moves to Nagano, intending to work off his debt to Hansu. He breaks ties with his family and Hansu, essentially disappearing and refusing contact with them.

⁷ There are other instances where Isak's imprisonment and death are referred to by his sons and Sunja, such as in Book II, Chapters 11, 18.

⁸ This section is the backstory for the excerpt from Book II, Chapter 15. After Noa enters Waseda University, he excels and studies English literature, falls in love with a young Japanese woman, Akiko.

⁹ For more reading on Noa's schooling and his relationship with Akiko, see Book II, Chapter 18.

Meanwhile Mozasu drops out of high school and goes to work for Goro, a Korean man who runs pachinko parlors. Mozasu meets Yumi, a Korean seamstress, and they fall in love and dream of moving to America. The two marry and have a son, Solomon. Yumi dies in a car accident, and Mozasu raises Solomon alone.

Noa, in hiding from his family, lives undercover as a Japanese person. He eventually finds work as a bookkeeper for a discriminatory pachinko parlor owner who will not hire Koreans. Noa eventually marries a Japanese woman, Risa, and has four children with her.

Hansu, after around sixteen years of being out of contact with Noa, is able eventually to track Noa down. Hansu lets Sunja know he has found Noa. Hansu tries to keep Sunja from meeting up with Noa, as Noa wants to stay estranged from his family, but Sunja pleads to be reunited with Noa. Upon being reunited with her son in Nagano, Sunja asks that Noa come see her and their family in Yokohama. Noa tersely agrees, saying that he will call her later and abruptly saying goodbye to Sunja. The next morning Hansu calls Sunja to let her know Noa has committed suicide by gunshot (Chapter 8).

Despite not being formally schooled like his older brother, Noa, Mozasu becomes wealthy, eventually rising in the ranks of the pachinko business and owning his own pachinko parlors. Now widowed, he dates a Japanese woman, Etsuko, who refuses to marry him. Mozasu's son Solomon returns from studying abroad in New York City to work in Japan near his father. The novel ends in Osaka in 1989, with Sunja visiting the grave of Isak, which she visits regularly and cleans.¹⁰ She reflects on Isak's life and Noa's suicide, dusting off Isak's grave in ritual.

Works Cited

Lee, Min Jin. *Pachinko*. Grand Central Publishing, 2017.

Ebook link (for BU users): <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bu/detail.action?docID=5367560>

¹⁰ The novel's ending refers to "*jesa*," which is the Korean term for a funereal or memorial ceremony for the dead/one's ancestors (3.21.481).