

A GUIDE TO

Year of Impossible Goodbyes

Sook Nyul Choi

*“One’s life is short, but the life of the spirit is long.”***THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE**

Year of Impossible Goodbyes is a historical novel about a family’s courage, love, and determination to find freedom, based on the author’s childhood experiences in Korea near the end of the Second World War.

Setting: 1945–1946, Kirimni, a village in Pyongyang, North Korea.

Point of View: First-person narration, told by Sookan, the protagonist.

Protagonist: Sookan, a ten-year-old girl whose family bravely endures the cruelty of the Japanese occupation forces.

Conflicts: The main conflict that drives the plot is the struggle between the Japanese military and Korean civilians (representing the forces of dictatorship and repression versus freedom). This struggle is played out in several conflicts between members of Sookan’s family and Japanese officials. An additional external conflict materializes when Russian Communists occupy North Korea and threaten Korean civilians. The protagonist’s main internal conflict is one between fear and courage as she faces the Japanese, the Russians, and her flight into South Korea.

Resolution: The Japanese lose the war and are forced to leave North Korea. The Communists win over many Korean civilians, although not the members of Sookan’s family who are determined to seek freedom. Sookan’s bravery triumphs over her fears as she and her brother manage to escape into South Korea.

Themes: Family love makes people strong enough to endure terrible adversity. A cruel dictatorship may take away a family’s material wealth, but not the values of hope and determination to survive. Freedom is worth fighting and dying for.

violence. Students of Japanese ancestry may be upset by the negative characterizations of Japanese (see Approaches for Post-Reading Activities). The novel emphasizes traditional family and patriotic values.

BACKGROUND

Korea. The country is divided into two republics, the Korean Democratic People’s Republic (Communist) in the north, with its capital at Pyongyang, and the Republic of Korea in the south, with its capital at Seoul. Because of its strategic location in northeast Asia, the Korean peninsula has been torn by war for hundreds of years. It has long been considered the “invasion highway” into the mainland of Asia from Japan, or from Russia and China to Japan. The ancient kingdoms of Korea were first allied with China, with which it shared the Confucian philosophy and the Buddhist religion. Beginning as early as the 1500s, Japan and Russia sought to control Korea because they needed it to dominate China. By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan controlled Korea; it forced the last Korean king out in 1910.

During the Second World War, America’s allies (China, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union) pledged to create an independent Korea after the war. As the war ended in August 1945, Russia sent troops into northern Korea to accept the surrender of Japanese soldiers. To avoid conflict, the Allies agreed that American forces would stay south of the 38th parallel. In 1948, the Soviet Union refused to allow Koreans in the north to vote in the election organized to establish a democratic government. Russia established a Communist government in North Korea although the United Nations recognized the Republic of Korea (South Korea) as the only valid government in the Korean peninsula.

In 1950, North Korean troops and planes invaded South Korea. Fifteen countries who were members of the United Nations sent troops to Korea. After a terrible war, at great cost in lives and property, a cease-fire agreement was signed on July 27, 1953. A demilitarized zone about two and a half miles wide now runs along the 38th parallel. Today thousands of American and South Korean soldiers patrol the DMZ. Many Koreans on both sides of the border still hope that someday the two Koreas will be peacefully reunified.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

This novel should pose no problems for students reading at middle school level. There are references to violence against family members, but no graphic descriptions of

Reparations. In 1995, the Japanese government set up a private fund to gather donations and make payments to women who were kidnapped from villages and forced to work as “spirit girls” or “comfort women” for Japanese soldiers in the Second World War. There are believed to have been more than 100,000 such women, most of them Korean.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Sookan, the narrator, a ten-year-old Korean girl.

Grandfather, a frail, elderly man who had been tortured by the enemy for his activities in the Korean independence movement. Before the Japanese occupation of Korea, he was a Buddhist scholar, artist, and teacher.

Mother (Hyunsuk), formerly active in the Korean independence movement; speaks Japanese and Chinese fluently; now forced to supervise a factory that makes socks for Japanese soldiers; mother of six children: Theresa, the oldest, a nun in a Catholic convent outside of Pyongyang; Hanchun, Jaechun, and Hyunchun, three older sons who are in Japanese labor camps; Sookan; and the youngest, a boy named Inchun.

Captain Narita, a cruel Japanese officer in charge of the Imperial police supervising the village.

Kisa, the narrator’s cousin, a mechanic who limps and has lost two fingers on one hand.

Haiwon, a young, energetic worker in the sock factory; loves to talk.

Aunt Tiger, the narrator’s aunt, lives with her sister’s family; Japanese killed her parents and babies; her husband is away, fighting in the war.

Inchun, the narrator’s youngest brother, almost seven years old.

Narita Sensei, Captain Narita’s wife, teaches first grade at Japanese school.

Guide, unnamed man who leads the children to a house at Yohyun, close to the 38th parallel.

PLOT

Chapter One. Introduces the **characters** and describes the **setting**. The pine tree described at the beginning of this chapter **symbolizes** Grandfather’s strength as well as the bravery of the Korean people. Grandfather teaches Sookan and her younger brother Korean and Chinese, an activity that the occupying Japanese have prohibited. When the officious Captain Narita arrives to inspect the sock factory, the **mood** changes from relative tranquillity to fear and resentment. At eight o’clock the sock girls begin their difficult work at the shack that serves as a factory. The relentless machines **symbolize** the cruelty of the Japanese captors who do not even pay the Koreans for their work. As Sookan helps her mother and aunt, she contrasts their physical

appearance and **character traits**. Both are brave, but Aunt Tiger is a complainer; Sookan’s mother is always “elegant” and quiet.

Chapter Two. Sookan’s mother goes to her older daughter’s convent to get a book that she wants to give Haiwon, and also to get news from the nuns who have a hidden radio. When she returns from the dangerous trip (the Japanese have forbidden any traveling), she tells the family that their enemies seem to be losing the war. The next day the family prepares a birthday party for Haiwon with special food that Mother has been saving. When Captain Narita disrupts the party, Grandfather feels especially humiliated; he falls gravely ill when the Japanese destroy his beloved pine tree. Sookan and Inchun give branches of the tree to the sock girls and play in the yard. We see the resilience of the younger generation and realize that the older generation may never recover from the insults inflicted by the Japanese.

Chapter Three. Grandfather calls the children to his bedside and asks Mother to tell them about their family’s proud past. Mother shows the children photographs and tells them of the family’s role in the Korean independence movement. Grandfather asks Sookan to rub oil on his feet, and she sees evidence of his torture. Three days after the tree was chopped down, Grandfather dies. A desolate Sookan recalls his teachings and is able to find hope in the Buddhist idea that harmony and light will eventually prevail.

Chapter Four. Sookan feels conflicted by the different religious beliefs in her family: She worries that her mother’s Catholic God is punishing her for hating Captain Narita. Mother’s sadness has made her ill. Narita’s threat to take the sock girls away horrifies Mother, although Sookan does not understand why. After he leaves, Mother suggests that the girls hide, but there is no place. When Aunt Tiger says that the girls would rather die than become “spirit girls” for the Japanese soldiers, Mother warns Aunt Tiger not to talk about such things in front of the children. **Suspense** increases as the family begins to run out of food. Narita comes with a truck; the soldiers load the crying sock girls into it while the mechanic Kisa vainly resists. The soldiers take away the sock machines to be made into weapons.

Chapter Five. Mother is ordered to send Sookan to Japanese school where she will be punished if she speaks Korean. The teacher of Sookan’s class turns out to be Captain Narita’s officious wife. Students will easily identify with the clearly defined **external conflicts** in this chapter: The Korean students must hide the little kindnesses they show each other; Sookan’s teacher hits her with a ruler because she does not bow deeply enough; all of the children are called by Japanese names; the children have to sing the Japanese national anthem, recite the loyalty pledge, chant propaganda slogans, and make weapons for the Japanese soldiers. In the schoolyard, where the students are forced to stand

in the blazing sun, Sookan faints in the heat and is expelled from school. Under Japanese domination the Koreans are starving and must sell whatever possessions they still have to buy food. Mother sells her heirloom silver hairpin for a tiny bag of rice, which turns out to be half filled with sand.

Chapter Six. Aunt Tiger sends Kisa to the convent for medicine for Mother, who seems to be collapsing under the weight of all she has endured. He returns with the news that the Japanese have surrendered. **Symbolizing** their renewed hope, the children plant the flower seeds they have been saving, and Mother brings out colorful Korean outfits for the family to wear. Everyone enjoys a time of freedom and pride, although Mother and Aunt Tiger have heard nothing of their men, who have been fighting against the Japanese. A new **plot complication** arises when Kisa learns that Russians have come into the village and are taking Korean men to Siberia. The family is disappointed to learn that Korea has been divided at the 38th parallel; Russia will now control North Korea. Two Russian soldiers, rude and uncivilized, visit the house. Although they steal anything that they consider valuable, Sookan believes that the Russian soldiers are kinder than the Japanese.

Chapter Seven. The Russians succeed in converting some of the villagers to Communism. Unlike the Japanese, the Russians seem friendly. They speak some Korean and fly the Korean and Russian flags side by side, but they insist on dedication to the Party and its activities. The Russians also shoot anyone who is caught trying to escape into South Korea. Kisa again shows his bravery by pretending he is a Party worker while he tries to make secret arrangements for the family to leave.

Chapter Eight. Kisa reports that he has seen Sookan's father on the road. Father, a leader of the Korean resistance, has been in hiding in Manchuria. Now he is helping people escape to South Korea. He has found his three older sons, and they are now in Seoul. Kisa tells the family to be ready to leave for South Korea whenever Father comes. To cover up the family's plans, Aunt Tiger works her way into the Party leadership. Three weeks later, Kisa tells the family that Father cannot come, but he has sent jewels to pay a guide who will help them cross the 38th parallel. Kisa and Aunt Tiger will stay behind to help others escape and hope to follow later. From this point in the **plot** until the **climax** in Chapter 10, **suspense** builds steadily. In a **foreshadowing** of dire events ahead, the guide emphasizes that the children must pretend not to know or care about Mother if she is stopped for questioning. Mother, Sookan, and Inchun run after the guide as he goes through back roads to the train station. When the train arrives, there is a mad scene with people pushing and trampling others to get on. Mother, Sookan, and Inchun don't see their guide until they get off the train. When the Russian soldiers check Mother's passport, they pull her out of line. Sookan, who has always felt

responsible for her younger brother, grows in strength and courage even as Inchun acts his young age and seems to fall apart. The guide leads the children to a house and abandons them there. An old woman at the house tells them to go home; the unscrupulous guide, she says, is a double agent. With no money or passport, the children leave.

Chapter Nine. Sookan and Inchun stay nearby in the marketplace for three days looking for Mother. When they go to the Russian guardhouse to ask for Mother, a Russian soldier, Dobraski, seems to befriend them, but takes them in for questioning. Finally told to go away, the children return to the train station, but Sookan knows they cannot return to Kirimni because they will get Aunt Tiger and Kisa into trouble if they do. Unlike Inchun, she seems to have a full grasp of the situation. She knows she must weigh the alternatives and make the decisions that will mean life or death for both of them.

Chapter Ten. An elderly man sweeping the train station takes pity on the children and gives Sookan a ticket stub to show a train conductor who will help them. The old man tells Sookan how to get from the train tracks to the barbed wire fence at the 38th parallel. The conductor shields the children from view as they crawl underneath the train. From this point on, the **plot** moves with headlong speed towards its **climax** as Sookan leads Inchun down a hill through a cornfield. **Descriptive details** heighten the emotional effect of terrified desperation. It's night, the field is muddy, and a cold rain pours down as searchlights scan the area, trying to spot anyone attempting to cross the border. The final obstacle is a river bridged by railroad ties several feet apart. As barking dogs and shouting soldiers draw closer, the children run to the barbed wire fence, dig a hole just big enough for them to crawl under it, and make it through to the Red Cross tents on the other side.

Epilogue. The **resolution** answers most questions that readers might still have. Sookan and Inchun find their way to their father in Seoul. Sookan's older brothers are attending school there. After six months, Mother finds her way into South Korea. She has been working for the wife of a Russian colonel; she escapes by means of a secret tunnel. In June 1950, the Russians invade South Korea. Sookan's older sister and the other nuns escape to Seoul. They report that the Communists have hanged the noble Kisa and fierce Aunt Tiger as traitors. Sookan never hears from any of the sock girls or from the other friends she left behind in North Korea.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The two outstanding elements of this novel are **setting** and **theme**. Its focus on a specific time and place make it an excellent adjunct to social studies courses that include coverage of the Korean War. Discussion groups

or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Art

- Ask students to make a storyboard of the novel by dividing a large piece of paper into six equal sections. Students should then list and illustrate the six most important events in the novel.
- Students may want to make a map of North and South Korea and label places mentioned in the novel (such as the 38th parallel, Pyongyang, and so on). They should illustrate the map with landmarks from the novel (Sookan's home, the railroad station, the barbed wire fence, and so on) and draw a line showing her approximate route to freedom.

2. Extending the Novel

You may want to work with the social studies teacher to develop lessons on the causes (and effects) of war, armed peace, propaganda, and characterizations of the enemy. Here are some other ideas for activities:

- Ask a group of students to find, read, and discuss in a panel novels about the Second World War that are written from the Japanese point of view (for instance, *Hiroshima No Pika* by Toshi Maruki).
- Have students rewrite or dramatize one of the scenes in the novel from the Japanese (or Russian) point of view.

MEET THE WRITER

Sook Nyul Choi (1937–), like Sookan, the heroine of her novels, was born in Pyongyang, Korea. She has written that, as a child growing up in Korea, she loved

to collect and read books. She began writing fiction and poetry while still a grammar school student, and emigrated to the United States to continue her education. After graduating from Manhattanville College, she taught school in New York City for more than twenty years. Now a full-time writer, Sook Nyul Choi wants to share the history and culture of Korea with Americans. She hopes that readers will come to understand the different and intriguing culture of her native country.

READ ON

Sook Nyul Choi, *Echoes of the White Giraffe*. Romantic sequel to *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*; coming-of-age story. Fifteen-year-old Sookan, now a refugee with her mother and younger brother in Pusan during the Korean War, is attracted to Junho, a quiet, thoughtful boy, although Korean tradition forbids even this mildly romantic relationship.

Sook Nyul Choi, *Gathering of Pearls*. The most recent sequel to the two previous novels about Sookan, based on the author's experiences. Sookan leaves her family in Korea and comes to America as a college student.

Robert Cormier, "President Cleveland, Where Are You?" A famous short story of sibling sacrifice and devotion.

Ernest Hemingway, "A Day's Wait." A classic short story with a young hero who faces his fears with courage.

Yoshiko Uchida, "The Wise Old Woman." A cruel young lord learns that society cannot thrive without the contributions and traditions of the elderly.

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