

## ***Native Speaker***

Chang-rae Lee, New York, Riverhead Books

Review by Jerry Winzig

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Chang-rae Lee's first novel, *Native Speaker*, is neither easy nor straight-forward. In its opening line, the novel's second-generation Korean-American narrator, Henry Park, tells us "The day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was." We eventually discover that he is no longer separated from his wife, Lelia, although they do have an uncertain, almost mysterious relationship. Similarly, while Henry's occupation is central to the story, we learn only gradually that he is an industrial spy for a strange firm with unknown clients. Because the story is told as a series of flashbacks, we must assemble the puzzle from the pieces as we learn, bit by bit, about the death of Henry and Lelia's young son, Mitt, or the career of the novel's Korean-American political leader, John Kwang. The ethical conflicts of Henry's job are never really resolved and Lee's language style is often a stumbling block as the reader struggles to make clear what is really happening.

Nonetheless, *Native Speaker* is compelling for the reader who keeps at it. Its insights on the American immigrant experience and especially the Korean-American experience are hauntingly poignant. It vividly portrays the complexities of racial tensions in America. It captures the language challenge of non-English-speaking immigrants, and it records the give and take of family life and personal relationships in the midst of these dynamics.

One of the book's most powerful conclusions is that English can be an immense obstacle for those who do not learn it from birth. As Henry helps Lelia tutor young students in English, he recalls that when he started kindergarten he could speak only Korean. Older black kids would yell at him across the playground:

*Yo., China boy, what you doin' there, practicing'?" Henry says, "Of course I was," and goes on to explain: "I thought English would be simply a version of our Korean. Like another kind of coat you could wear. I didn't know what a difference in language meant then .... Native speakers may not fully know this, but English is a scabrous mouthful. In Korean, there are no separate sounds for L and R, the sound is singular and without a baroque Spanish trill or roll ....*

*I will always make bad errors of speech. I remind myself of my mother and father, fumbling in front of strangers .... Sometimes I'll still say riddle for little, or bent for vent, though without any accent and so whoever's present just thinks I've momentarily lost my train of thought. But I always hear myself displacing the two languages, conflating them-maybe conflagrating them-for there's so much rubbing and friction, a fire always threatens to blow up between the tongues.*

Henry tells the story of two Laotian boys in Lelia's speech class, Ouboume and Bouhoame, who he says remind him of the legendary founders of the city of Rome:

*As I look at the boys I keep thinking of Romulus and Remus, wayward children, what they might say now about their magnificent city of Rome and its citizenry. At their height, the*

*Romans lived among all their conquered, the outer peoples brought to the city as ambassadors, lovers, soldiers, slaves. And these carried with them their native spice and fabric, rites, contagion. Then language. Ancient Rome was the first true Babel. New York City must be the second. No doubt the last will be Los Angeles. Still, to enter this resplendent place, the new ones must learn the primary Latin.*

Ouboume and Bouhoame are first cousins through their fathers, who run a dry-goods business from the back of a beat-up Ford van. One day the fathers pick up the boys after school and show off their wares to Henry. Henry listens to the fathers and sons communicating with customers and each other in broken English; his account captures the poignancy of changing language patterns in immigrant families: “The boys know it, too, they’ve learned this well, and they’ll all wave good-bye with it, stridently, strong-armed, father-son, with the bombast of Americans, not yet knowing that is the last language they will share.”

The difficulty with language shaped the life of Henry’s father even more. Although he holds a college degree in engineering, his son doesn’t even know his specialty. Because his difficulty with English is too great an obstacle to find technical employment in his field, his father is forced to earn a living as a greengrocer. He is successful at it, builds a small chain of stores, and is able to afford a home in a very nice suburban development. But there’s a profound unhappiness in his life because he never wanted to sell fruits and vegetable for a living.

*Native Speaker* is a complex book that delves into far more than language. Lee’s scenes vividly illustrate what it’s like to be a Korean immigrant in New York City. His images of the dynamics that exist between Korean-American shopkeepers and African-American residents are real and non-judgmental. He explores the evolving relationship between Henry and Lelia, the sadness of learning about Mitt-the young boy we never get to meet, the hopes and dreams of John Kwang as he aspires to be mayor of New York City, and Henry’s inner struggles as he tries to come to terms with the ethical conflicts of a job that requires him to spy on John Kwang, and engage in other activities that result in his living a lie.

Lee explores the theme of identity, the struggle of immigrants who stand between two cultures. He describes how the descendants of non-Caucasian immigrants find that their identity is challenged generations later. For example, Henry describes what happens when Mitt is seven years old and the family goes to spend the summer at his father’s home in a well-off mostly-white suburb:

*The kids in my father’s neighborhood gave him trouble that first summer. One afternoon Mitt tugged at my pant leg and called me innocently, in succession, a chink, a jap, a gook. I couldn’t immediately respond and so he said them again, this time adding, in singsong, “Charlie Chan, face as flat as a pan.*

*.... That evening my father and I went around the neighborhood to talk to the parents. We walked stiffly in silence on those manicured streets, and it seemed a repetition of a*

*moment from many years before, when an older boy named Clay had taken away my cap pistol. I remembered how my father had spoken to Clay's mother in a halting, polite English and how he had excused her son for taking advantage of my timidity and misunderstandings.*

Lee also examines the pathos of children who are abandoned in Korea. One of Lee's most moving scenes is when he captures the loneliness of an older Korean woman who comes to work for Henry's father after the death of his mother. Lelia tries to befriend her, but one afternoon in the laundry room they end up having a small shoving match. The woman yells at Lelia in Korean: "You cat! You nasty American cat!" Henry tells her in Korean she can't speak to his wife that way; the woman leaves the room with her head bowed and Lelia, who doesn't understand what was said, runs off, sobbing. Later, Lelia says to Henry, "She's not a mystery to me, Henry .... I know who she is .... She's an abandoned girl. But all grown up."

But it is the issue of language and communication that is central to *Native Speaker*, and makes this book well worth reading. Its stories and images touch upon universal human themes that a wide audience will find hauntingly memorable. There is the narrator's own difficulty as a non-native speaker, his communication problems with Lelia, the dynamics of Lelia's work as a speech teacher, the constant trouble between Henry's father and his mother and later, between his father and his housekeeper. This book is about savoring and bridging the differences between people, cultural norms, generations, and personal histories. As Henry puts it softly at the end, as Lelia finishes one of her English as a second language classes:

*Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are.*