

## **Discovering Sook Nyul Choi's Autobiographical Novels for Young Adults**

### *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*

New York, Dell Publishing  
1991

### *Echoes of the White Giraffe*

New York, Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Adults  
1993

### *Gathering of Pearls*

New York, Houghton Mifflin  
1994

*Review by Jerry Winzig (Winter 1997 issue)*

This fall, as I approached my 50th birthday and my son studied at Yonsei University in Seoul, I found myself riveted by Sook Nyul Choi's autobiographical novels for young adults. While written for audiences of ten and above, Choi's novels are anything but childlike and speak powerfully and intensely to older readers as well.

The three novels tell the story of young Sookan Bak, who was born in Korea in the mid 1930s. Her personal story is interwoven with many of the major historical events and political issues of the twentieth century. Sookan spends her early childhood in Japanese-occupied Pyongyang (now the capitol of North Korea) during World War II. After the war's end in 1945, Russia occupies northern Korea and she escapes across the 38th parallel to South Korea on foot, accompanied only by her younger brother. Her family is reunited in Seoul but in 1950 flees to Pusan when North Korea invades the South. There, Sookan lives in a shack with her mother and brother on a muddy mountainside along with thousands of other refugees. When Seoul is liberated, they return to rebuild her family's home. Sookan finishes high school at the newly-reopened Ewha High School (just a few blocks from Yonsei University, where my son is now at school) and passes the rigorous exam required to study overseas. In 1953, she comes to the United States alone in 1953 to attend college in New York City and finds herself the only Asian person on the campus.

Choi has a wonderful ability to address major issues by focusing on personal stories in incredibly vivid detail. One especially poignant story occurs in the first novel, *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, when Sookan recounts the death of her grandfather, who was imprisoned years earlier for being a member of the Korean resistance. He has withdrawn to his bedroom after Japanese troops chop down his favorite pine tree to punish the family for hoarding brass dishes for personal use.. (They were supposed to donate them to the Japanese army!) As her grandfather lies dying, he asks his two young grandchildren to rub some lemon oil on his feet. Sookan's mother objects, but the

grandfather whispers with determination, “My daughter, did you not hear me ask my grandchildren, not you, to do it this time . . . It won’t hurt them.”

Sookan lifts the cotton blanket and gently removes her grandfather’s white socks. She has never seen his bare feet before. Her story continues:

His feet were long and bony. They felt cool to the touch. I could see the veins, which seemed to form a road map down to his toes. But his toes were very strange. The tips of his toes were all wrinkled and looked like some little girl had practiced her sewing on them. He had no toenails. I knew he had no fingernails on his right hand and I always thought he had hurt himself whittling. But no toenails! At first, I thought it strange, but then it occurred to me.

Sadness washed over me like a big ocean. My fingers trembled as I went over each toe with lemon oil. My head started to throb as all the horrible stories I had heard of Japanese cruelty went rushing through my mind. . . . Inchun sobbed, “Grandfather, do they hurt?” “No, not anymore,” Grandfather replied. “I am well now.” Mother drew close to me and whispered, “Grandfather must rest now.” Inchun sobbed as he followed me out.

Grandfather died soon after we left him. He died three days after Haiwon’s birthday; three days after his beloved pine tree was chopped down.

Just as powerful is the description of Sookan’s flight from North Korea. Sookan and her mother and young brother leave Pyongyang at night, accompanied by a smuggler they have hired. When the smuggler abandons them near the border, Sookan’s mother is detained by Russian and North Korean border guards, but Sookan and her brother Inchun escape into a nearby village. Over the next few days, several villagers help them out, and an old man gives them directions to the border, explaining how to crawl under the barbed wire fence. One night, they set off for the border on their own.

In the early dawn hours, ten-year-old Sookan and her younger brother discover that they must cross an open railroad bridge over the swollen river that lies between them and the border. They are desperate because they can hear the sounds of pursuing dogs and soldiers behind them, so they begin to crawl across the bridge. Inchun’s small arms can barely reach from one railroad tie to the next but somehow they get to the other side and run for the barbed wire fence. There they dig frantically, as the old man had told them, until:

Little Inchun slipped under the wire and then, instead of running as I had told him, he tried to lift the wire with his little hands. I heard the dogs drawing closer and I thrust my body under the wire. The barbs dug into me. My hair was caught, my clothes ripped, and I could feel the blood pooling in the cuts on my back. I kept going and finally, I made it through. I grabbed Inchun’s hand. We cried and kept running.

While *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* is the most suspenseful of the three novels, the others are quite powerful in different ways. *Echoes of the White Giraffe* recounts Sookan's early teenage years, first in the refugee camp in Pusan and then in war-torn Seoul. In Pusan, Sookan falls in love with a young teenage boy. Her mother notices their friendship and permits the two young people to spend time together, even though Korean tradition frowns severely on such contact. But when Sookan and Junco have their picture taken by a professional photographer, Junco's parents angrily condemn their son and complain to Sookan's mother about her behavior as well.

Sookan's mother reacts much differently: Filled with shame for putting my mother through such a humiliating experience, I took the photo out from its hiding place and gave it to her. She patted my head and unfolded the many layers of wrapping. She looked at it again for a long time and smiled calmly. "How peaceful and happy you both look. I'm sure even Mrs. Mine's bitter heart would melt if she looked at this picture long enough. You can keep it, but make sure no one else sees it."

The third novel in the series, *Gathering of Pearls*, recounts Sookan's first year of college in New York City, with all the bittersweet challenges of living away from home and being the only Korean student on the entire women's campus in 1953. As she reads the letters that arrive from her sister, Theresa, back in Korea, she begins to realize that her sister has very rigid expectations for her, expectations that are backed by Korean tradition. At the same time, she is surprised by the differences in American culture.

Because she babysits for one of the professor's children, she is invited to spend a weekend with the family. When she arrives on Saturday morning, the children lead her into the kitchen:

Standing at the stove was Professor Bennett wearing a large red apron that said "Best Chef" in bold black letters. He waved us in with his spatula, and said, "Sookan, come on in. You can sample my cooking."

I could hardly believe my eyes! Never before had I seen a man cook or even enter a kitchen. Cooking was a woman's job. Mother was always in the kitchen alone, except when I kept her company. At mealtime, she and I always did the serving, and afterward, we always cleaned up. My brothers just sat at the table, and talked and laughed and ate. . . . I knew that I was doing my duty as a daughter and sister, but I resented the fact that it was Mother and me who had to do all the work. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the men would serve us sometime? I used to think to myself, knowing all too well that this was a fantasy.. But now, right before me, was my very own professor slaving over his family's scrambled eggs. It seemed like a miracle to me.

Later, after hearing other girls complain at length about their frustrations with their families, Sookan explodes:

... every day I worry about disappointing everyone back home. I hear you and Ellen saying that you're eighteen years old and have to lead your own lives, but in Korea, it

wouldn't matter if I were fifty years old. I would still have to obey and respect my elders. It is my duty and obligation. If I fail, I bring shame on myself and on my family.

Choi's novels have integrity because they are centered around the realities of one young girl's growth into adulthood. They also have a broad sweep because woven into the fabric of her life are the conduct of nations and impact of culture and tradition. The result is a series of books that this middle-aged reader could scarcely put aside until all were done.