

## When Dreams are all we have

### *House of Winds*

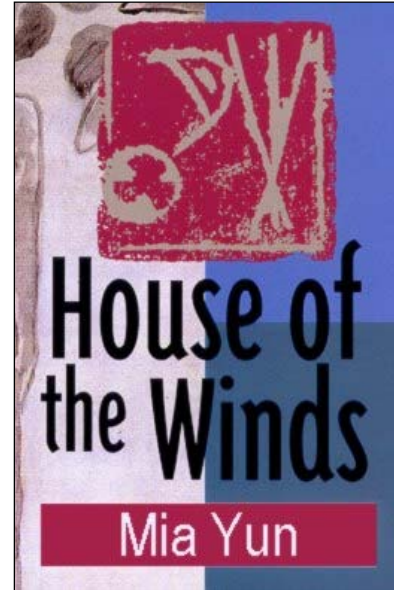
by Mia Yun

Interlink Books

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*Review by Martha Vickery (Fall 1998 issue)*

A rich and pervasive child's memory colors the pages of Mia Yun's *House of Winds*, making it much more than a well-told story of a girl growing up in Korea. Although never clearly stated, the story contains an underlying theme and purpose, that this account, unlike many others, will describe and authenticate women's experiences and define women's reality in Korea. In this intent, the narration is faithful and unique.



The book opens with a poetic, but very accurate description of how our memories work as children, and hints to us that as much as we cannot trust our recollection of events that happened in childhood, our view of reality as children is valid because it is an honest witness of events, unaffected by adult preconceptions. Memories are rich, living things to the narrator, even as she warns that her narration of certain events may not be completely reliable.

One night, they became so full and living inside me, they broke loose uncontrollably, as the water breaks in the uterus ready to give birth. I let go, and memories gushed out, to my surprise, as songs and poetry, unleashing little truths hidden so far from me. The pear that I once took for an apple. I am glad mother didn't try to explain then what I saw was an apple not a pear. She said, Here, everything's in front of you, and it is up to you how you see and remember. She trusted my eyes.

The story revolves around a girl, the narrator (never named), her older sister and brother, and their mother, who is really the central figure in the story. Abandoned by an unreliable, philandering husband who dreams of making it big in a succession of failed self-employment schemes, the mother fends for herself and her children in a society that refuses to recognize her predicament as a single mother. She lies about her husband habitually, making up stories for neighbors of respectable reasons why her husband is never seen. In the world of the little girl narrator, her mother needs nothing but her three children to ensure her complete happiness. The mother tells her children that she creates clothing, rice and other essentials of life with a magic wand which she can only use when the children are in bed.

As the narrator grows older, she begins to understand the situation her family is in as they move from one dilapidated house to the next, and their lifestyle gradually deteriorates. Along the way, the girl learns about harsh reality through the stories of various women,

all of whom have had their lives shattered, in one way or other, by the Japanese occupation and the war – the Pumpkin Wife, a neighbor who lost both children in their flight south to Pusan, their grandmother, whose husband drank himself to death after Japanese occupiers stole his land, her sister's desperate flight to Pusan in search of something other than the grinding poverty which is the family's daily experience, and a cousin Young-ok, who dreams of romance but whose birth destines her to an ordinary marriage and the same impoverished condition she grew up in. Most important to the story is the narrator's own mother's history. Although the mother shelters her children up to a point, she does not hesitate to blurt out bits of truth in order to help them know the real family history and not the facade she needs to show to society around her. These bits are the building blocks of maturity for the narrator as she grows up.

The narrator must also come to terms with her father, a shadowy figure who goes in and out of her life, and seems to exist on dreams alone. He enchants her with his visions of success, and bitterly disappoints her when he repeatedly disappears without a trace, only to return even poorer than before, and with a new moneymaking scheme in the works. The mother, as much as she takes care of the necessities of life, dreams in order to temporarily escape the desperate predicament in which she finds herself. Having grown up pampered in a rich family, she is raising her children with none of the trappings of life she once took for granted. Unlike the children, she longs for material things, and engages in impulse buying in a vain attempt to satisfy her need for a different kind of life

The story bends and weaves its colors like a needle creating an embroidery, the image never really clear until the very end. The stories create dreams in the minds of the hearers. The dreams become part of the stories. The imaginative girl who narrates may be creating her own reality, creating stories around what she sees whether or not her observations are true. The reader never knows for sure.

Ultimately the narrator is a grown woman, her reality having been shaped on the stories of other women, particularly those of her mother. Her knowledge of reality and her rich fantasy world, a personal escape hatch, are developed simultaneously. Only when her mother develops a fatal illness and suddenly dies does the now-adult narrator understand how she depended on those dreams to nurture and strengthen her through a childhood in a traumatized country.

House of Winds is the story of how a family survives through a crazy combination of denial and an illogical reliance on hopes and dreams in the face of a reality that is so bleak and hopeless that they can barely take it in. In surviving and accepting a new reality, there are lifelong scars, but there is also resolution and hope. House of Winds is a story that describes the yin and yang of existence, and experiments with holding both extremes in a dangerous balance. It is at once fanciful and realistic, unreliable, and matter-of-fact. It is richly written and starkly written, a charming and terrifying read.