

12 Multicultural Novels

Reading and Teaching Strategies

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WALCH
PUBLISHER

Portland, Maine

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Introduction

I grew up in Mexico, Maine, a paper-mill town of 4000 residents whose “culture,” if such a word had been used back then, might have been labeled “white working class.” Despite its exotic name, Mexico was anything but diverse. Ethnically speaking, we all looked more or less the same. Economically, we were more or less equals—equally dependent on the mill. Politically, we were mostly labor-union Democrats. Religiously, too, we weren’t far apart—either Catholic or Protestant; in any case, Christian. There was one Jewish family in town, though I can’t imagine where they worshipped; the nearest synagogue was fifty miles away.

My family lived almost literally a stone’s throw from Ste. Therese, a French Catholic church and school. Our kitchen window framed a view of Ste. Therese’s modest steeple, and yet it was St. Athanasius, an Irish Catholic church and school in a different town, to which we belonged. At my mother’s urging, my father drove my sisters and me across the river to St. Athanasius every morning, a route far out of his way. Because my father worked first shift at the mill, this daily trek was an early one; we were always the first ones in the schoolyard.

What on earth compelled my parents, who could hardly spare the gas money, to go to all this trouble? The schools were nearly identical. The children at Ste. Therese began the school day with the Lord’s Prayer *en français*, but that was the extent of their French indoctrination. The sisters at the two schools belonged to different religious orders, but (to my sisters and me at least) nuns were nuns: taller than us and cloaked in black. When it came time to send us to school, however, my mother and father believed in small differences. They were Americans who thought of themselves as Irish. They came to Maine by way of an Irish enclave in the province

of Prince Edward Island, Canada. In short, they were not French.

All through my childhood I told people I was Irish, not understanding the difference between Irish and American. My best friend, Denise, who attended Ste. Therese, told people she was French. Her family emigrated from Canada, too—French-speaking Quebec. Her family—including 14 bouffanted aunts and a hundred cousins—sang louder than our family, their songs were funnier (and in French), and they cried a lot. In my dry-eyed family, the songs tended, paradoxically, toward melodrama: “Danny Boy,” “The Boy Who Wore the Blue”—anything with a dead soldier in it made the list. I had far fewer relatives, and what relatives I had were quieter and less elaborately coiffed.

I had another friend, Janet, whose parents were a diluted French mix and decidedly nonchurchgoing, although their hard, relentless hours came to resemble something like religious fervor. They ran a bar down by the river at one end of the footbridge to the mill. The bar was heavily shadowed, dusty smelling, and peopled at all hours by rheumy-eyed men with no prospects. They did not sing in Janet’s house, which was an apartment upstairs from the bar, but there was music of sorts in the intermittent ring of the cash register, the yapping of two chihuahuas, and the high, unmistakable note sounded by a foil cover being peeled back from the lip of a TV dinner.

If the family workings of friends varied from mine, those of the neighbors were even more separate. According to a story my mother told whenever we seemed ungrateful, our Lithuanian landlady had staggered into America with rags on her feet. Her kitchen, through which I staggered myself once a week to pay the rent, emitted the stink of cooked cabbage throughout the seasons, and she wore a winter hat and sweater straight through the dog days

of August. Around the corner lived a molelike family whose garden was a tangle of thistle and whose shades stayed pulled the entire length of my childhood. Whether they called themselves Irish or French, where or if they attended church or work, whether they ate boiled cabbage or TV dinners, I had no idea. I knew only that their world was as different from mine as Janet's was from Denise's, as mine was from my landlady's.

Someone once asked me, "How did you escape the mill-town mentality?" I understand what he meant to say—it's the way people sometimes speak of the South, or the Upper West Side, or, more pointedly, of blacks or Asians or Latinos. I can look back to my childhood and see what this man thought he saw: 4000 white, working-class, American Democrats in a valley town with a paper mill at its literal and metaphorical center. But we could not have been gathered under one umbrella even if someone back then had thought to try. Behind identical kitchen doors resided too many variations in the way people ate, celebrated, mourned, fought, and sang. How, then, do I call myself? What is the word for my "roots," my "heritage," my "culture"? mill town? Catholic? blue-collar? Irish? Maine? In some ways I was and still am all of these; in some ways, none. The presumed clarity of adulthood has only confused the designations. I've lived in the same city for 20 years but when people ask where I'm from, the word "Mexico" forms on my lips. I haven't been to Mass in over a decade; why do I still write "Catholic" on hospital forms? My genetic line follows a single path straight back to Ireland, but my cultural heritage is a winding road indeed.

All this is to say that I deliberately cast a wide net when compiling the book list for this guide. Multiculturalism is a slippery notion these days, one whose parameters, judging from anthologies I have seen lately, is narrowing to include only race and ethnicity rather than expanding to include various ways of looking at and living in the world. Many of the authors herein represent ethnic heritages normally associated with multiculturalism, and rightly so, for these voices are frequently excluded from mainstream literary discussion: Walter Dean

Myers and Mildred D. Taylor are African American, Sherman Alexie is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian; Sandra Cisneros and Gary Soto are Mexican American; Helen Kim was born in Korea, Kyoko Mori in Japan. Two Jewish writers, Art Spiegelman and Edith Konecky, represent a tradition less ethnic than religious, one that is only sometimes included in anthologies of multicultural literature. The remaining authors, however, are not so easily categorized. Virginia Euwer Wolff deliberately obscures the ethnicity of her main characters in *Make Lemonade*, leaving room for their inner-city housing-project existence to emerge as the only "culture" that affects their world view and the world's view of them. Similarly, in *Ellen Foster*, Kaye Gibbons offers us a culture of environment in her main character's rural Southern, poverty-stricken, loveless existence. In *The Dreams of Mairhe Mehan*, Jennifer Armstrong evokes the world of Irish immigrants during the Civil War, a world in which the poet Walt Whitman urges a lonely Irish girl to embrace the best and worst of this country that seems intent on dividing itself.

I chose these authors not for their multicultural résumé but for their fluidity with language, their vision, their gift for storytelling. It is not the cultural circumstances of these myriad characters that we remember best; it is their *stories*, their way of compelling us to enter an experience and see a brand-new slice of the world. Allegra (*Allegra Maud Goldman*), Thomas Builds-the-Fire (*Reservation Blues*), and Yuki (*Shizuko's Daughter*), so different at first glance, have more in common with each other than with their own families. Like all the characters your students are about to meet, they are keenly observant, in search of their place in the world, and motivated by hope even in hopeless situations. These characters possess many gifts (and failings) that are shaped by the various cultures they come from, but it is the gifts that *transcend* culture—LaVaughn's hope, Junehee's imagination, Mairhe's dreams, Jimmy's forgiveness—that make them unforgettable. Your students will be happy to meet them.

—Monica Wood



How to Use This Book



In addition to expanding your students' notion of multiculturalism through this book, I hope I can help you intensify their participation in classroom discussion. Many English teachers feel inadequate to the task of leading class discussions about contemporary fiction, especially multicultural fiction, if they are not fiction writers themselves. As any teacher knows, even the most creative discussion questions can be met with a blank silence. With this in mind, I have followed each discussion question with several possible answers, references to the text, observations about the writing process, and suggestions for expanding the scope of discussion. Because each discussion question is so thoroughly explored, two or three questions are often sufficient for filling an entire discussion period. My goal is to help you find original ways to present and discuss familiar books and to make the discussion of new books stress free and engaging for you and your students.

Each section begins with a quote from the novel's author—some are taken from interviews, others were contributed expressly for this book. My purpose is to satisfy students' inevitable curiosity about the authors of books they love and to reinforce the notion that authors are not disembodied voices. The quotes should reveal the authors as hardworking people who make difficult, conscious decisions about how stories begin and end, which characters

do the storytelling, and how certain techniques contribute to a novel's final shape.

Students are notoriously reluctant to revise their own work; this book is an admittedly subversive vehicle for impressing upon them the great joy of the writing process and the rewards of revision. Writers create the illusion of seamlessness only by a hard-earned "stitching and unstitching," to use a phrase from Yeats. I hope to encourage students not only to read more, but to *write* more. Like the author quotes, many of the discussion questions for each novel address the wonderful challenges inherent in writing good fiction. The student writing assignments that follow the discussion section include not only suggestions for analysis and interpretation, but also suggestions for trying out fiction-writing techniques similar to those used by the authors.

Each section includes a chapter-by-chapter synopsis designed to help you refer back to certain scenes without having to search through the entire book. Also for your convenience, a reading quiz for each novel follows the student assignment sheet. You may make as many copies of the assignment and quiz sheets as you need for use with your own students. I hope the teaching tools contained in this book will help you find enjoyable, creative ways of presenting contemporary multicultural literature, and that as a result, your students will find fresh ideas for telling their own stories.



“In third grade I wrote a short story about our family with only daughters, and it won first place. I was then living in Seoul, Korea. Three years later our family immigrated to America. I continued to write stories and poems in Korean, but over the years I began to use less Korean. It would be a long time before I had the command of the English language . . . I kept a journal in Korean, Konglish, then eventually in English. At the university I initially studied math and science like other Asian students, then changed my mind to study literature because it was what I loved.

“Eventually I received an M.A. in English and American Literature, which gave me the confidence to continue writing. *The Long Season of Rain* started as a short story assignment but quickly turned into a longer piece when I realized what the story was about: a girl coming of age in Korea in the sixties. I wanted to write a novel with a universal theme in simple language that anyone from 12 up could understand and identify with.”

—*Helen Kim*
author of The Long Season of Rain





The Long Season of Rain

by Helen Kim

Synopsis

PART I, THE RAIN

The narrator, a Korean girl named Junehee Lee, begins the story of how a young boy came to live with her family—Grandmother, Mother, Father, older sister Changhee Uhnni, and younger sisters Moonhee and Keehee. Orphaned as a result of a mud slide that killed his entire family, Pyungsoo is delivered to the Lees because no one else can take him. When Pyungsoo throws stones at Changhee in response to her meanness, Mother comforts him, enraging Changhee, who accuses Mother of harboring a deep desire for a son.

Auntie Yunekyung, Father's sister, arrives with lots of advice. Flashy and overbearing, Auntie suggests that the Lees keep Pyungsoo as a house-boy. Grandmother, who wields much power in the household, won't hear of such a thing.

Despite Changhee Uhnni's threats, Junehee befriends the boy, accompanying him on an obligatory visit to Auntie's. There, Pyungsoo is taunted and hit by Sungjin, the youngest and meanest of Auntie's sons. On the way home, Junehee takes Pyungsoo to the store, where he is caught stealing a toy soldier. To cover for him, Junehee borrows the payback money from Soonja Uhnni, her family's helper.

Then Father returns from a visit to the United States with gifts. Mother must choose last, after Grandmother, Auntie, and other relatives and friends. For the girls, to whom he rarely offers gifts, he brings sequined coin purses. After this kindness,

however, he criticizes their excellent schoolwork and reneges on a promise to take them out for dumplings. He scolds Pyungsoo and makes clear that his stay is temporary.

Junehee becomes increasingly fond of the hapless Pyungsoo. They perform a mock burial ceremony for his dead family and talk about the meaning of each other's names. Junehee explains that her name should mean "outstanding leader," but because she is a girl it means "prominent beauty." Pyungsoo's name means "warrior"; together they are a team: leader and warrior.

Mother announces that Changhee and Junehee may move into the spare room, to share with their sisters and Pyungsoo whenever Father is home. Changhee divides the room into quadrants, leaving no room for Pyungsoo. Junehee further divides her quadrant in two, making room for Pyungsoo after all. In the meantime, Grandmother is hatching a plan to get Mr. and Mrs. Kim, a couple with no children, to adopt Pyungsoo. Before she can take Pyungsoo to meet them, Pyungsoo breaks his arm when Sungjin pushes him off a swing. Furious that the boy is no longer presentable to the Kims, Father lashes out at all the children. When Grandmother berates him for being a bad father, he begins to weep, claiming that he cannot live up to anyone's expectations.

PART II, THE SEA

Leaving Pyungsoo behind with Grandmother and Soonja Uhnni, the family takes a four-day vacation

to Manlipo. During the passage by ship, Mother and Father are tense with one another, as are the children, still reeling from Father's shocking emotional outburst. Once settled in a small beach house, everyone relaxes a bit: Mother even becomes somewhat romantic. That night, Junehee overhears Mother begging father to keep Pyungsoo; she was pregnant twice with sons, both of whom died from a premature birth.

By morning, Mother and Father's disagreement is palpable. When Father disappears to go on a fishing expedition, Changhee Uhnni informs the shocked Junehee that Father has "other women." Mother is restless and angry; she chops off her own hair, finally shedding the older-woman bun she has so dutifully worn for years. Father does not return until the last minute, as they are boarding the ship to go home. He is horrified at Mother's hair, as is Grandmother once they return home.

PART III, THE VISITS

When Mother has her hair corrected and styled at the beauty parlor, she is transformed in more ways than one. She takes Junehee and Pyungsoo to Grandma Min's house for a visit. Mother confides to her how much she wants to adopt Pyungsoo, but Grandma Min warns her to separate what she wants from what is best for the boy. On the way home, Mother stops at the boutique of her old friend, Mrs. Parks, who gives her a short dress to go with her new hair. Again, Grandmother is disapproving, but does not say much.

Grandmother visits her wealthy sister (Great-Aunt), whose opinion she reveres. She hopes Great-Aunt will think well of the family's adopting a boy so that Father will be taken care of in his old age. But Great-Aunt will not hear of adopting a boy "out of their bloodline." After Grandmother explains that Mother's reproductive system is weak, Great-Aunt suggests that Father must have a son somewhere by his other women. Mortified, Grandmother halts the conversation.

Unable to submerge her desires any longer, Mother finally announces her intention to adopt

Pyungsoo. Father will not hear of it, and Grandmother, who will not go against Great-Aunt's opinion, reluctantly sides with Father.

With Grandmother's secret approval, Auntie takes the girls to see Father's father, who abandoned Grandmother and her children long ago to take a second wife and have another son. Father is furious when he finds out, but cannot stand up to Grandmother.

In the meantime, it is almost time again for school. Junehee and Pyungsoo go to the store to buy supplies for a school project. When the owner, remembering Pyungsoo's earlier theft, is hostile to the boy, Junehee claims that he is now her adopted brother.

PART IV, THE SON

Behind Mother's back, Grandmother brings Pyungsoo to the Kims, who have decided after all to adopt him. Junehee is so angry that she sasses Grandmother; instead of scolding Junehee, however, Mother bursts into tears, lamenting her 16 years under her mother-in-law's thumb. She takes Junehee on a walk up the mountain, confiding that she cannot take much more of her confining life. Shortly after this, Auntie tells Grandmother that she will begin investigating whether Father does indeed have a son out in the world somewhere.

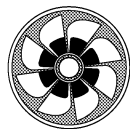
Mother disappears, leaving a letter for each daughter. Father snatches the letters away in a rage, but Junehee refuses to give hers up even as Father slaps and hits her. On a hunch, Junehee takes a bus by herself to Grandma Min's where she finds Mother, who is trying to "clear her head." They share a wonderful few hours together, but then Mother sends Junehee back home.

Mother's absence is unbearable to everyone. On Sunday, Father takes the children to Mass, then hails a taxi to Grandma Min's. En route, he tells his daughters that Mother is admirable and that he is not. The children are overjoyed to see Mother, who comes back home just in time for the start of school. In school Junehee finds Pyungsoo, who is healthy and very happy.

EPILOGUE

Family life improves after Mother's return. Father announces that in three years he will move

them all to America. Three years seems like a long wait to Junehee, who fears that before they have a chance to leave, Auntie will locate Father's son.

**Class Discussion**

Exotically flavored and delicately written, *The Long Season of Rain* is a story of the human search for identity and respect. Caught in a culture in which the protocol of family obligation is suffocatingly rigid, Junehee's mother wages a desperate battle to maintain an identity in her own household. Readers may not be convinced that Junehee's mother succeeds in her mission, but the beauty of the book is that Junehee becomes the beneficiary of her mother's efforts.

As she meticulously examines her mother's unending *han* (sorrow and regret), Junehee is the one who sharpens her own sense of identity and self-respect. It is probably too late for Mother—who is never named except as “Changhee's mother” or “their mother”—to gain an authentic position of respect in her home and culture. For fiery, compassionate, imaginative Junehee, however, a different fate awaits. The girl who gradually stands up to all those who oppress her—Father, Grandmother, Changhee Uhnni, even the man on the ship—will not collapse under the weight of tradition as her mother did.

QUESTION 1

The Long Season of Rain is an evocative title. What do you think it means?

Students will have varying opinions about this and may apply the metaphor of the title to different characters. This may be a good starting point for discussing the similarities and differences among the characters, and soliciting students' opinions about various characters' dilemmas.

After students suggest several possibilities for the title's meaning, ask them to examine the

descriptions of the rain in Part I. Perhaps a student could read the first few pages aloud. In the opening paragraphs, the stultifying heat and humidity that accompany the rain are described in detail, illuminating the everpresent, overpowering sense of the rain: “. . . everything in the house—clothes, food, papered walls, and even the wooden floors—soaked up the dampness.” The rain is something that cannot be escaped, and for which certain changes are required: One must wear special shoes, avoid playing outside, calculate and plan for damage. Indeed, it is possible to lose everything and everyone under the weight of such rain, as Pyungsoo's tragic situation illustrates.

This sense of inescapability and possibility for tragedy transforms the rain beyond mere description and into the realm of metaphor. A metaphor for what? Some possibilities follow.

- *Mother's life.* The most obvious connection is to Mother's life. She seems to slog through her days and months and years, heroically coping with conditions she cannot control, stultified and suffocated by the incessant and seemingly irrational demands of the rigid place she occupies in her culture. As a woman, she is expected to obey her husband and submit to his needs, his mother's needs, even his sister's needs, before her own. She has absolutely no identity except as “Changhee's mother”—and even this identity only partly describes her, since she has three other daughters. Even Junehee, the most sensitive and observant of narrators, does not give us her mother's name. Mother can make no decisions on her own, and the few she does make can be taken away at any time, without notice. (Point out especially the passage in Chapter 28 in which Grandmother takes the girls for haircuts behind

Mother's back. This is the same chapter in which Grandmother takes Pyungsoo to the Kims behind Mother's back.)

You might ask students if they believe Mother's "long season of rain" ends when she finally stands up for herself and leaves. She returns only when Father makes the first move. Is this enough? Can her moment of rebellion, so quickly given back, renew her or sustain her? What will happen after her daughters are grown? What will happen after the family moves to America? These open-ended questions will help students examine the significance of Mother's seemingly small rebellion and imagine outcomes for her that are only barely implied in the book.

- *Father's life.* Some students might argue that the metaphoric title works equally well for Father, who is nearly as rigidly bound by obligation as Mother. True, he comes and goes as he pleases, takes women on the side, and all but ignores his role as a husband and father; but he still bends to the rigors of a son's duty. He has limited power in his own home because Grandmother is the more powerful person. The responsibility of a Korean eldest son is great. When he finally breaks down in Chapter 13 we cannot help but feel sorry for him. Throughout the book, Junehee implies that inside this stern, joyless man resides another soul, one more willing to embrace the possibility of happiness. In Chapter 6, Junehee describes how he sometimes sings in front of the mirror or makes silly faces for his daughters' entertainment. In Chapter 7, she describes a photograph in which he smiles widely, holding baby Junehee. In Chapter 9, we learn that the younger Colonel Lee was polite to his employees, and was a rather shy suitor to Mother. We learn that they held hands at the movies, and later, in Chapter 16, we learn that Father was so smitten with Mother during their courtship that he flew to Seoul twice in one day to see her. Father appears to have forgotten this story—and to have forgotten ever being happy. His long season of rain began sometime after their girl

babies began coming and his mother moved into the household, and continued as it became clear he would have to bear the shame of having only daughters. For Mother, there is some hope that her season will end; for Father, who in the end bows to Mother as well as to everything else in his life, there seems to be no end.

- *Others' lives.* For some characters, however, *changma*, the rainy season, does end, after all. In nature, *changma* is followed by renewal, growth, sunshine, vegetables, and flowers. For Pyungsoo and Junehee, certainly, this is what happens. Pyungsoo is adopted by a loving family; when we last glimpse him, in the epilogue, he looks healthy and happy.

For Junehee, as well, *changma* does not appear to be a lifelong sentence. She has learned to fight back by watching her mother's fruitless struggles. In Chapter 8 we learn that Junehee has a boy's name that means "outstanding leader." As a girl, this same name translates to "prominent beauty," but it is clear which meaning Junehee prefers. Students can find dozens of places where Junehee's warrior spirit shows, especially in the following instances.

- *Chapter 19.* She stands up to the man who pushes Moonhee on the ship.
- *Chapter 28.* After Grandmother sneaks Pyungsoo over to the Kims without so much as letting Mother have her goodbye, Junehee rages against her, calling her names.
- *Chapter 31.* Junehee helps Mother confront Father by demanding to know where he goes at night.
- *Chapter 32.* Junehee's rage is every bit a match for her father's when she refuses to give up Mother's letter despite Father's slaps. In this same chapter, Junehee finally bests Changhee Uhnni, of whom she is no longer afraid.
- *Chapter 33.* Though she has never taken a bus alone, Junehee goes to Grandma Min's to find Mother.

QUESTION 2

How do other images and metaphors enrich the story?

There are several images in *The Long Season of Rain* (in addition to the title image) that are so powerful as to evoke in the reader a deep awareness of the characters' situations. You might begin by asking students to point out some of their favorite passages and lift from those passages a central image to examine more closely.

For example, some students might especially like Chapter 5, "The Toy Soldier," in which Junehee and Pyungsoo seem to bond as sister and brother. One lingering image is of the toy soldier flung into the puddle (an image recalled later, in the epilogue, when Pyungsoo shows Junehee that he still has the soldier, damaged but recognizable). Junehee retrieves the toy soldier for Pyungsoo, a gesture of compassion and friendship. That Pyungsoo keeps the soldier, even after his life has been filled with new parents and far lovelier toys, implies that Pyungsoo has not forgotten Junehee's kindness at a time when he himself had been flung into the world, alone.

Here are some further suggestions you might make to your students before sending them on a hunt for imagery and metaphor.

- *Changhee's match house.* This fragile, empty house (Chapter 25, "The Match House") seems to serve as a metaphor for the solitude and control that so many of the characters yearn for. At first, Junehee sees it as an imaginary refuge, thinking she would like to live inside it and not allow anybody in. This thought is imaginary indeed, for as a Korean female she will never be alone. She will have to get married and bend to the call of her husband and all his family. A page later, Junehee reconsiders living in the match house alone, deciding that she would allow Mother to live there with her. Here she is showing the depth of her compassion for Mother, and also the insight that what Mother needs most of all is one spot in the world to call her own.

The match house appears again in Chapter 33. Junehee is no longer afraid of Changhee, and dares to break her match house after Changhee breaks the giraffe. But something else is happening here: Changhee is clearly in a prison of her own. Being the oldest daughter in a household is no easy path; she must get the high grades, and she must be punished for the transgressions of her sisters. Also, her own character, so like her father's and grandmother's, suddenly overwhelms her. "I'm not like them," she wails, knowing she is wrong. Junehee, sensing her sister's pain, puts the match house back, unbroken. Changhee, who seems to rule the children of the household, is as needful of a place of her own as anyone else.

- *Hands.* Throughout the book, Junehee makes many observations about people's hands, particularly her mother's. Toward the end of Chapter 9, Junehee describes her parents' hands. Mother's hands are "large and soft" and used to "make hot soup or rub our stomachs." Father's, by contrast, are "even." His "fingernails were always perfect, not too long or short." She sees this same hand "flying across my face" in Chapter 32.

Father's controlled, perfect hands mask a great frustration, just as his perfect features and proper posture contain a roiling unhappiness. Mother's hands, however, more closely match who she is. "Mother could pick up a pot right off the stove, then hold her earlobes to cool her fingers" (Chapter 18). Her hands endure the unendurable—just as she herself has endured 16 years of oppression and disrespect. Mother often bites her own hand, hard enough to leave scars—evidence of her escalating frustration. Later in Chapter 18, she bites Changhee's fingers, one by one. "Why do you think I want a son?" she challenges Changhee. "Because I can't bear that all my fingers will be cut away from me someday." Here, Mother's hand becomes a metaphor for her family. She will lose her daughters to their future husbands and new family loyalties.

This search for images is an ideal time for discussing the writing process itself with your students. Do authors "plant" images deliberately in order to imply certain aspects of character? Not exactly. The image of the toy soldier may have

come from a variety of places. Perhaps the author saw a toy soldier in a store window, or remembered a toy soldier from her own childhood, and this soldier marched its way into the chapter she happened to be writing that day. Many, many other images flowed from her pen (or word processor) on that same day; but in the *process of revision*, she realized that the image of the toy soldier being flung into a puddle connected deeply with Pyungsoo's tragic predicament.

Most metaphors and images come from the unconscious—writers do not deliberately set out to create metaphors and symbols. Often, they begin with a blizzard of images, most of them strong and good, then, in revision, they ferret out the images that most closely match the architecture of the story. Good writers have the fortitude to edit out even good passages that do not fit the mood or meaning of the story, which changes from draft to draft.

As a companion exercise to this discussion, ask students to examine something they have written. Are they brave enough to edit the passages that no longer add resonance to the story? Are they astute enough to recognize (and perhaps expand upon) images that *do* shine light on the hidden aspects of their characters?

QUESTION 3

So many characters in this book—Father, Mother, Grandmother, Soonja Uhnni—seem unhappy with their lot in life. Is it possible to be happy in the Korean society the author describes?

Despite the oppressions so vividly depicted in this novel, students should be able to identify pockets of happiness. Here are some suggestions.

- *Auntie Yunekyung.* Auntie is the one person in Father's family who appears happy. She seems to have no misgivings about adopting a Western style, with her bright makeup and clothes, and her habit of running around on marathon visiting sprees. Why is Auntie so free, while Mother is condemned to wear dowdy clothes and an old-woman's bun? The differences are both obvious and subtle: Auntie's husband does not have the

same hold over her as Father has over Mother. In Chapter 3, Uncle tries to get Grandmother to control Auntie's behavior. "What makes you think she will listen to me when she doesn't listen to you, her husband?" Grandmother says. Auntie seems to have simply decided to act how she pleases, no matter what. Perhaps Auntie, who has three sons, feels she has secured her place in her society by bearing three sons. Now she can do what she wants, for she has accomplished the only real task anyone has ever expected of her.

Still, even Auntie has her private sorrow. In Chapter 39, she plays dress-up with Junehee, then asks, "You want to be my daughter?" Auntie's three sons cannot make up for the daughter who would "take after her."

- *Grandma Min.* Grandma Min seems happy, too, and for similar reasons. She does not bow to convention as rigorously as the other characters. She does not keep a house servant, and her son is a priest; therefore, she lives by herself. Her home is the opposite of Junehee's: At Grandma Min's children can run free, leave their shoes out of order, ask for food. Even the flowers in Grandma's garden seem more colorful to Junehee. Nevertheless, Grandma is quick to remind Mother that she should be grateful for what she has: a husband who does not hit her after he drinks. Her standards are clearly entrenched in the expectations of society, even though she herself doesn't follow them to the letter.
- *Mrs. Park.* Mother's friend seems to have found a path to contentment by embracing a more Western lifestyle. Remember, the year is 1969; American culture is undergoing dramatic change, and these influences are felt continents away. To go to America is a common dream. Mrs. Park has a boutique, bright clothes, and a Western hairstyle and attitude. She claims she does not intend to live with her son and his wife. Her husband is much older, and past the "womanizing" stage she claims all men go through. She seems independent and sure of her value.

These people, and others—Father Cho, Mother's priest-brother, and other friends are alluded to—could free Mother from her bonds if only she would

let them. In Chapter 9, Junehee observes how different her mother is when in the company of these people. She is charming and witty and interesting. All of this energy drains out of her, however, in her own home. She is not allowed any semblance of her true personality.

QUESTION 4

Junehee's mother tells her over and over how alike they are. Are they? Is Junehee anything like her father and grandmother as well? If Junehee takes after her mother, will she be doomed to unhappiness?

Students may have differing views about this. The assumption in the Lee family is that Changhee is nothing like Mother and Junehee is nothing like Father. In fact, students can find evidence of both Mother and Father in Junehee's character.

Junehee possesses Mother's fortitude; she is a good girl who can endure adversity without complaint. But while Mother's excessive fortitude has robbed her of her natural exuberance and cast a muddy light over her entire life, Junehee practices fortitude more judiciously. She bends to Changhee's will, but mostly to keep Moonhee and Keehee protected. She acquiesces to Mr. Moon when he is mean to Pyungsoo (Chapter 5), but inwardly she hatches a plan to pay back the money on Pyungsoo's behalf. She seems to have a natural ability

to decide when fortitude is necessary and when to show her warrior spirit. After Grandmother gives Pyungsoo to the Kims, her fortitude is nowhere in sight!

Junehee has also inherited her mother's creativity and imagination. Mother imitates sounds and voices (Chapter 16); she is a lovely dancer (Chapter 29); she can help her children fashion art projects (Chapter 31). Junehee's imagination shows in her excellence with words. She wins writing contests at school and manipulates phrases so well as to make even Father smile (Chapter 7).

Unlike Mother, however, Junehee is fiery and strong, not only internally but externally. This outer strength—her way of insisting upon her will—comes from Grandmother and Father. By the end of the story, Junehee has stood up to Father, Grandmother, the man on the ship, and to the domineering Changhee. Junehee's deep connection with her Mother will be a lifelong blessing, but her Father has given her some blessings, too.

Students may want to discuss the ways certain qualities—acquiescence, forcefulness—can become either an asset or a liability, depending on how a person applies her natural leanings to the people and situations that surround her. How do both Mother and Father make liabilities out of qualities that, in moderation, are considered good?