

# Contemporary South Korean Books in Translation

BY JESSICA TEISCH



**F**OR MANY READERS, understanding of Korea has come from writers like American novelist Adam Johnson, who portrayed North Korea's Orwellian world in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Orphan Master's Son* (★★★★ **SELECTION** Mar/Apr 2012), or from English author David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2004), which presents a dystopian Korea. Other depictions come from writers born in Korea but now living in the United States. Suki Kim, for example, went undercover in North Korea to research *Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2015), and her novel *The Interpreter* (2003) involves a mystery about a young Korean American in New York.

There is, of course, an elephant in the room: with few exceptions, the literature coming out of Korea is from South Korea. North Korean literature is highly censored, and—save for defector memoirs by authors who have escaped their homeland, like Kang Chol-hwan's *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* (2000) or Hyeonseo Lee's *The Girl with Seven*

*Names* (2015)—the books that emerge from the autocratic regime tend to be hagiographic or didactic.

Hence we turn almost exclusively to South Korea.

Thanks to the Library of Korean Literature, published by Dalkey Archive Press in collaboration with the Literature Translation Institute of Korea, international marketing efforts, and the work of acclaimed translators, in recent years, novels by native South Koreans have reached a much wider audience. Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2016), for example, won the Man Booker International Prize and was named one of the best books of the year by the *New York Times*.

We highlight novels published in the last few decades to reflect South Korean culture from the 1980s onward—decades of immense change that saw the violent emergence of democracy, as well as further industrialization and Westernization, both in custom and in popular culture.

As South Korea becomes a major player in the global literary scene, it's clear that there's no single entry point to its fiction. The literature is, by turns, social realist, experi-

mental, avant garde, and subversive, and filled with family dysfunction, parables, drifters, dispossessed, the beautiful (and not), and the transgressive. *Cheonmanaeyo* (“You’re welcome.”)

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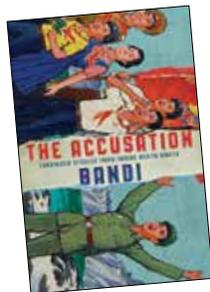
## The Lone North Korean Novel

### The Accusation

**Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea**

By Bandi, translated by Deborah Smith (2017)

This collection of seven stories is the first work of dissident fiction by a living North Korean writer ever smuggled out of that country. Bandi (1950–; a pseudonym) is, by most accounts, a prominent writer in North Korea and a member of the official, state-controlled writers’ association; he smuggled this fierce indictment of totalitarian life to a North Korean refugee activist in China, and the book was published in South Korea in 2014. Through ordinary citizens, the stories collectively offer a devastating testament to the paranoia, rigid social hierarchy, bureaucratic incompetence, and fruitless careerism during Kim Il-sung’s and Kim Jong-il’s reigns. “Bandi’s stories,” wrote the *New Yorker*, “are not about outright rebellion but about the slow onset of despair; their protagonists are, for the most part, hopeful strivers struggling to keep their spirits from shattering in the face of mounting evidence that their government has betrayed them.”



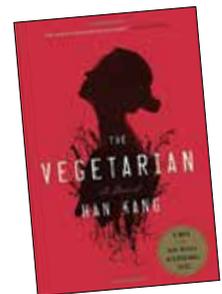
in the second person through the selfish, browbeating characters—Mom’s adult, careerist daughter; her wealthy, favorite son; her faithless husband; and Mom herself, who wanders through her memories—the novel asks how well we know family and the sacrifices they make. Shin addresses the Korean concept of *han*, or profound sorrow and suffering, as family fractures and secrets start to surface. “The lost mother clearly,” wrote NPR, “stands for values that are fading from Korean culture as industrialization and urbanization triumph.”

### The Vegetarian

By Han Kang, translated by Deborah Smith (2007, 2016)

♦ MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE

Kang’s (1970–) novel is part thriller, part fable, part existential nightmare. When a terrifying nightmare convinces dutiful suburban housewife Yeong-hye to adopt a strict vegan diet, her family and friends are initially incredulous, but their casual contempt soon turns to outrage. “The very idea that there could be this other side of her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing,” broods her husband. Yeong-hye’s growing obsession—and her family’s increasing hostility—is recounted by her husband; her brother-in-law, an artist who is infatuated with her; and her sympathetic but overburdened sister. “A brilliant and menacing account of one woman’s collapse into apathy, in which Han makes clear the plight of women in a macho society,” wrote the *Irish Times*. (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2016) See also *Human Acts* (★★★★ **SELECTION** Mar/Apr 2017, translated by Deborah Smith), about the aftermath of the prodemocracy uprising in Gwangju, South Korea, in 1980.



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## South Korean Fiction

### Please Look After Mom

By Kyung-sook Shin, translated by Chi-young Kim (published in Korean 2008, published in English 2011)

♦ MAN ASIAN LITERARY PRIZE

In 2011, Shin (1963–) became the first woman to win the Man Asian Literary Prize, beating out the likes of Haruki Murakami, Amitav Ghosh, Banana Yoshimoto, and other worthy rivals. The novel subsequently became a best seller in Korea and sparked renewed interest in Korean fiction abroad. When the suffering, illiterate Park So-nyo is separated from her husband and disappears in a bustling Seoul subway station while visiting her grown children, her family goes in search of her. Narrated



### At Least We Can Apologize

By Lee Ki-ho, translated by Christopher J. Dykas (2009, 2013)

The simpleminded Jin-man, who lives in an abusive mental ward, narrates this short, dark, and comically tragic novel. With his buddy, Si-bong, he rationalizes the institution’s violence and invents wrongs to confess to their caretakers, which the friends then commit after their beatings. When the ward is shut down, Jin-man and Si-bong find themselves ill adapted to the real world. With such experiences under their belt, they decide to hire themselves to deliver apologies on behalf of people who have offended others—for a hefty fee. Unfortunately, their concept of wrongs is shaped by their pasts, and their apologies deliver unexpected results. The *Times Literary Supplement*



described the novel as a “wickedly funny story, a kind of *Waiting for Godot* recast by Stephen King,” filled with uncomfortable philosophical questions and various forms of normalized madness.

## Our Happy Time

By Gong Ji-young, translated by Sora Kim-Russell (2012)

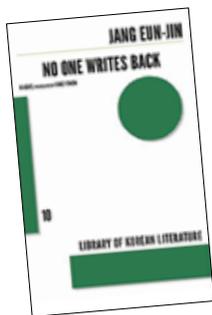
Gong (1963–), a feminist author, writes about women’s struggles, laborers, the underprivileged, and social activism. This best-selling novel addresses peace, forgiveness, and capital punishment. Yujeong, an privileged former pop star, awakes in a hospital after her third suicide attempt. Her aunt, a nun, offers to take her home only if Yujeong will accompany her to visit inmates on death row. When she meets convicted murderer Jeong Yunsu, Yujeong feels nothing but disgust. But as the weekly visits pass, the two misfits begin an unlikely friendship as they reveal to each other their darkest secrets and begin to heal. Told through alternating chapters, *Our Happy Time* “plays out in overwrought, clichéd fashion, but with moments of beauty. Many readers will find the tone overly preachy, but Gong’s sincerity at times breaks through the heavy-handed moralizing” (*Publishers Weekly*).



## No One Writes Back

By Jang Eun-jin, translated by Jung Yewon (2009, 2013)

“I left home with an MP3 player and a novel in an old backpack,” says Jihun, who, for three years, has traveled through a series of nameless Korean cities with his late grandfather’s blind guide dog. Spending each night in a different motel, he starts one-sided correspondences with members of his family or with people he meets along the way. “I write letters because I want to convey to someone the stories of these people,” he explains, “but also because I want to let someone know that a day had existed for me as well.” At center is a women selling a novel to subway commuters and a letter to Jihun’s sister, whose addiction to cosmetic surgery reflects a society obsessed with images. A universal story of alienation and displacement, *No One Writes Back* “has the trappings of the avant garde—the carefully affectless style, the way it is told in numbered paragraphs—but in terms of the emotional impact it delivers, it is, in its way, as sentimental as [Dickens’s] *The Old Curiosity Shop*,” wrote the *Guardian* (UK). “All I can say ... is read it—you’ll love it.”



## The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly

By Sun-mi Hwang, translated by Chi-Young Kim and illustrated by Nomoco (2000, 2013)

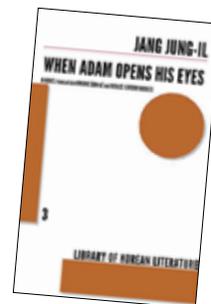
Well, this novel by an acclaimed children's author is unusual. Hwang's (1963–) “sublime story is ... a fable of farm animals that belongs on a bookshelf somewhere between the innocent frivolity of *Charlotte's Web* and subliminal politics of *Animal Farm*” (*Toronto Star*). The novella, which sold more than two million copies, features the endearing Sprout, a hen who, one day, decides to never lay another egg. Thrown from the coop, she experiences both freedom and danger. When her wildest dreams come true and she finds an abandoned egg in a briar patch, she nurtures it until Baby—a duckling—arrives. As an improbable connection develops between mother and baby, Sprout faces both friendship and hostility from other animals, and as Baby grows up, their own bond is tested. Charming, heartbreaking, uplifting, and tragic all at once, this speciously simple, philosophically rich novel explores fate, happiness, family, and courage.



## When Adam Opens His Eyes

By Jang Jung-il, translated by Hwang Sun-Ae and Horace Jeffery Hodges (2013)

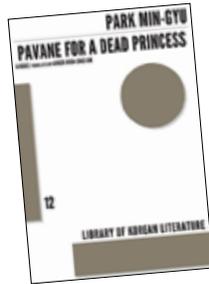
“I was nineteen years old, and the things that I most wanted to have were a typewriter, prints of Munch’s paintings and a turntable for playing records,” opens the alienated teenage narrator (called Adam by a lover). Set in the year leading up to the Seoul Olympics, with a weak form of democracy just emerging, this short novel was considered shocking at that time for its depictions of freedom and explicit sex; Jung-il (1962–) was even arrested for his “pornographic” work. Adam, who has failed entry to the top university, decides to spend the next year cramming for the test again. As he experiences further cynicism and isolation, what ensues is a coming-of-age story about sex, death, contemporaneous Korean mores, and a critique of South Korea’s competitive society. “The conspicuous problem which emerges through this narrative concerns character formation: what happens when the phoniness Adam detects in others’ tastes extends to the tastes of people he values?” asked the *Literateur* critic.



## Pavane for a Dead Princess

By Park Min-gyu, translated by Amber Hyun Jung Kim (2009, 2014)

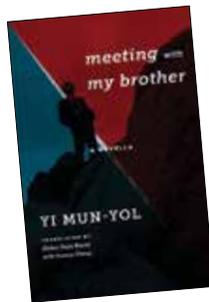
The handsome narrator, 20, a valet at a ritzy shopping mall in Seoul, revolted against aesthetics when his dashing father abandoned his common mother for the silver screen. Perhaps for this reason, he's drawn to "the world's ugliest women"—an intelligent, sweet, but never-promoted woman confined to an underclass in a culture with beauty fetishes, "where pretty trumped justice and pretty has the last word." Set in the mid-1980s, this poetically written, flawed love story veers into metafiction with its footnotes and multiple endings, while critiquing South Korea's rapidly industrializing, consumer-oriented, superficial society. But before the novel ends, tragedy and farce intervene. "It's a pleasant read in the vein of *Norwegian Wood*, Haruki Murakami's classic love story set during a period of great change," wrote the *Three Percent* critic. "And like his Japanese counterpart, Park shows that regardless of the dark that surrounds us, true love can shine a light."



## Meeting with My Brother

By Yi Mun-yol, translated by Heinz Insu Fenkl and Yoosup Chang (2007, 2017)

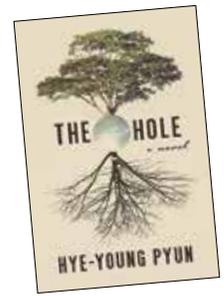
In this slim, controversial novel, the prominent South Korean novelist (1948–) questions long-held assumptions about the two Koreas. During the division of Korea, Yi's father abandoned his family to defect to the north in 1950; he subsequently spent 30 years in prison camps and took another family. Yi imagines a fictional meeting between two half brothers; one, his own middle-aged alter ego, travels from Seoul to the Chinese-North Korean border to meet his North Korean half brother after his father's death. They soon discover that their highly regimented lives are not as different as one would think despite their personal rivalry and ambivalence, the great chasm between their upbringings, and the South-North divide. But reunification—political and personal—comes at great cost. "*Meeting with My Brother*," commented the *New Yorker*, "is one of the best descriptions of the contemporary political and social dynamics between North and South Korea."



## The Hole

By Hye-young Pyun, translated by Sora Kim-Russell (2016; 2017)  
Pyun (1972–) gained acclaim for her short story "Caring for Plants," which originally appeared in the *New Yorker*.

That story's main character, Oghi, occupies this tense, slow-burning, best-selling thriller. When Oghi, a South Korean professor, awakes from a coma after causing a car accident that killed his wife and left himself paralyzed and disfigured, he finds himself isolated and neglected by his grief-stricken mother-in-law. Imprisoned inside his room, he recalls his troubled relationship with his wife, who had realized none of her life goals except cultivating their garden. Then his mother-in-law starts to dig it up. A creepy tale in the spirit of Stephen King's *Misery*, the novel considers the tiny surrenders in daily life, as it explores power struggles that reflect a socially divided Korean society. "By the time Hye-young Pyun's taut psychological thriller *The Hole* has tightened its grip on the unsuspecting mind, it's too late to escape," wrote *Shelf Awareness*. "It takes a maestro to create a short novel of such atmosphere and depth."



## The Private Lives of Plants

By Lee Seung-u, translated by Inrae You Vinciguerra (2000, 2015)

As the story opens, the shallow Ki-hyeon, taking over the duty from his mother, is procuring a "lady of the night" for his brother Woo-hyeon, who lost both legs in a military accident. Ki-hyeon feels responsible for his brother's military career, a punishment for having taken photos of police throwing tear gas bombs and clubbing protestors during the demonstrations of the mid-1980s. In this dysfunctional family saga and bizarre love story, the father interacts more with his plants than with his family; Ki-hyeon seeks out his brother's former girlfriend; Woo-hyeon borrows a page from the Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne, "pray[ing] to be transformed into a tree." Filled with heightened passions and small traumas that represent the larger tragedies of Korean history, the novel—whose plot really can't be defined—combines the surreal and the real. "Think of Murakami drifting into the lands of Borges and Kafka," wrote *Kirkus*, "and you'll have some of the feel of this strange, enchanting tale."

### Further Reading

- BLACK FLOWER** | YOUNG-HA KIM, TRANSLATED BY CHARLES LA SHURE (2003, 2012; ♦ MAN ASIAN LITERARY PRIZE LONG LIST)
- A GREATER MUSIC** | BAE SUA, TRANSLATED BY DEBORAH SMITH (2003, 2016)
- RECITATION** | BAE SUA, TRANSLATED BY DEBORAH SMITH (2011, 2017)
- THE BOY WHO ESCAPED PARADISE** | J. M. LEE, TRANSLATED BY CHI-YOUNG KIM (2016)
- THE COLOR OF EARTH (COLOR TRILOGY #1)** | KIM DONG HWA, TRANSLATED BY LAUREN NA (2003, 2009)
- ONE HUNDRED SHADOWS** | HWANG JUNGEUN, TRANSLATED BY JUNG YEWON (2010, 2016)
- RINA** | KANG YOUNG-SOOK, TRANSLATED BY KIM BORAM (2015)
- VASELINE BUDDHA** | JUNG YOUNG MOON, TRANSLATED BY JUNG YEWON (2010, 2016) ■