

# Backwards in Time and Forward in Spirit: Teaching *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*

Terry Martin and Tracey Brown

In *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, Sookan, a ten-year-old girl, describes her family's experience of the horrors of World War II—first, as they battle the oppressive and tyrannical Japanese military who occupied Korea during the war, and then as they deal with the Communist takeover of North Korea after the war. This is an incredible story of a family's love, their response to adversity, and their willingness to risk everything to find freedom.

Author Sook Nyul Choi, who immigrated to the United States from Pyongyang, North Korea to pursue her university education, and then taught in the New York City Schools for twenty years, says, "Having lived through this turbulent period of Korean history, I wanted to share my experiences. So little is known about my homeland, its rich culture and its sad history. My love for my native country and for my adopted country prompted me to write this book to share some of my experiences and foster greater understanding" (1991).

And "foster understanding," it does. In addition to providing insight into World War II and Korean culture, this book addresses such themes as freedom, responsibility, growing up, and the ability of the human spirit to not only survive, but triumph in the face of real adversity.

This is a book well worth sharing with middle level students. The following are our suggestions for teaching *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* as part of a thematic unit on World War II in a middle school Language Arts/Social Studies block class, including pre-reading activities, re-

sponse journal topics, discussion and essay questions, and related teaching ideas.

## Pre-Reading Activities

In order to help students expand their knowledge of Korea, increase their understanding of Korean customs and values, and compare differences in cultures, before reading *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* consider the following pre-reading activities:

### "Getting to Know Korea" Research Activity

First, create a "grab bag" by writing interdisciplinary questions on a small slip of paper, and dropping them into a paper sack labeled "Getting to Know Korea" Research Questions. (See Box 1). Next, work with the school librarian to gather and assemble world almanacs, encyclopedias, maps, and other related resources. (Research questions may be adjusted to reflect the availability of appropriate resources). Finally, divide the class into triads. Each group will then send one person up to draw a question from the "Getting to Know Korea" grab bag. They will have the next thirty minutes to research the answers to their question, then will present their questions, their findings, and the sources they found useful to the whole class.

### "Thinking About War" Prereading Activity

*Year of Impossible Goodbyes* deals with a young person's response to war. War

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### Box 1

#### "Getting to Know Korea" Research Questions:

(Questions adapted from exercise found on AskAsia Homepage  
[http://www.askasia.org/for\\_educators/fe\\_frame.htm](http://www.askasia.org/for_educators/fe_frame.htm))

Where is Korea? What countries surround it? What are its nearest bodies of water?

What time zone is Korea in? When it is noon here, what time is it there? How long would it take to fly to Korea from the airport closest to our school?

How large is the country? Describe its size in terms familiar to the rest of the class: Is it as big as the United States? Is it bigger than our state?

Describe the climate in Korea. What is the average temperature? How much rain falls there in a year?

Describe the country's chief geographic features. Are there mountains? Rivers? What places would you compare it to, geographically, and why?

What is the latitude and longitude of Korea? What is the significance of the 38th parallel?

What is the official language of Korea? What other languages are spoken there?

What religions are practiced in Korea? Is there an official Korean religion? What kinds of religious freedom exist there?

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is an issue that evokes strong emotional responses from people. Some will argue that war is never right under any circumstances, while others will charge that people who take that stance are cowardly or unpatriotic. People who believe that war is justified may point to freedom and democracy as ideals worth defending. They suggest that there are times when human rights violations are so vile and intolerable that military action becomes necessary. Others claim that war is less about ideals like freedom, humanity, liberty, than about economic and political gamesmanship. They say that violence is never an appropriate solution, and note that minorities and poor people are most often called upon to risk their lives when powerful politicians cannot resolve their conflicts through peaceful means.

People's opinions about war are influenced by many factors. Religious beliefs, family history, life experiences, political viewpoints, and personal values all play a part in determining how people feel about war. Some students know have had first-hand experience: they may have parents or other relatives who fought in a war, or have taken an active role in protesting their country's involvement in a war.

After discussing these ideas with your students, find out where they stand on the issue of war by having them respond to the questions in Box 2. Since their responses reflect their opinions about a very personal issue, there are obviously no "right" or "wrong" answers here, but remind them that their responses should demonstrate thoughtful consideration of the issues.

#### During Reading Activities

##### Suggested Response Journal Topics

In *Young Adult Literature & the New Literary Theories*, Anna Soter expresses concern about how YA novels are often approached in classroom contexts:

"They are mostly taught with the same kind of focus that classical works receive (and) are often accompanied by questions that test comprehension rather than questions that encourage interpretive exploration and push stu-

#### Box 2 Where Do YOU Stand on the Issue of War?

1. How do you think your life would change if the United States were to become involved in a war today? What things might you worry about that you don't worry about now? What things might seem less important to you?
2. What kinds of opinions do the people closest to you have about war? How do you know? How do their opinions or experiences influence you?
3. Do you think you would ever be called upon to fight in a war? How does this knowledge impact your feelings about war?
4. Imagine that the U.S.A. is engaged in a war. In front of the White House, thousands of people have gathered, carrying protest signs and chanting anti-war slogans. One man yells at the protesters, "How dare you protest while others are fighting and dying for you? You are a disgrace to this country. You are un-American. If our forefathers hadn't been willing to risk their lives fighting to establish this country in 1776, then you wouldn't have the freedom to protest." A protester responds, saying, "Protesting my country's involvement in this terrible, unjustifiable war is the most patriotic thing I can do. I love my country, and this is how I show it. If people don't protest, more people will die for no good reason." Regardless of your personal feelings about their positions, continue their dialogue by writing what you think each person might say next.
5. Are there any ideals or principles you would be willing to fight for? If so, what are they? If not, explain why you would not fight, no matter what the cause.

dents to consider the books from a perspective different from the one that influenced their first response to them" (2).

*The Year of Impossible Goodbyes* has much to offer middle level students who are in the process of becoming thoughtful readers responding to literature and developing a critical appreciation of literary works. The "starters" in Box 3 can be assigned as response journal writing and then used to spark class discussion:

#### Box 3

#### Journal/Discussion Prompts

- Sookan writes, "Because I was a girl, I was supposed to stay with the women. I wasn't supposed to disturb Grandfather after my morning lesson. How I wished I could be with them" (10). Sookan and her grandfather were close, so why didn't he understand what she wanted, and invite her to join them? Why didn't Sookan just ask to be included with the boys? Do you think it is ever fair to exclude someone because of gender? Explain.
- Sookan admits, "I don't want to hear what Mother and Aunt Tiger talked about and I was sorry I had asked any questions" (10). Have you ever regretted having asked an adult a question? Describe your experience, and compare it to Sookan's.
- Sookan describes climbing on to Kisa's stand and looking at the factory from his vantage point: "Everything looked different from where he stood" (12). What do you think Sookan meant? Consider how your perception of

a situation might change if you were to see it from someone else's view. Describe a situation you would like to see from a different vantage point and discuss how that change might alter your perception.

— Sookan mentions that her mother had been "a beauty in her hometown" (13) and admits that it is difficult for her to picture her mother as having been beautiful or young. Do you have the same difficulty picturing the adults in your life as young people? Imagine that you and Sookan are talking about this. What might you say to each other?

— Sookan says: "Stroking his mustache, Captain Narita paced around the table where we remained seated. The best thing to do when he came over was to lower one's eyes and wait. I had heard that many times from the sock girls, but I had to look at him. Except for

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**Box 4****Quotations Discussion Activity**

1. "It has been 36 years since I have meditated in the warmth of a spring sun. Today, the Japanese soldiers will not keep me inside. I am too old to be afraid any more."
2. "Well, your God is silent and sleeping while the Japanese are busy killing us Koreans. We are as helpless as flies and it is getting worse as the war goes on."
3. "For over 30 years I've been working for the Japanese. Lately they don't even pay the little money they used to. For the last three weeks we have all worked without any pay. If they don't pay us soon with money or rice, we will all go hungry."
4. "Because I was a girl I was supposed to stay with the women. I wasn't supposed to disturb Grandfather after my morning lesson. How I wished I could be with them."
5. "When will you stupid Koreans understand that you are all subjects and there is nothing we, the Imperial Police of the Heavenly Race do not know about you and your activities. There is nothing we cannot do."
6. "I shall never come out again. Throw away my shoes."
7. "I'm warning you, this is the last time you'll hear me speak Korean. We'll get in trouble if Narita Sensei hears us. You never know if someone will tattle to the teacher. Anyway, you'd better move to the front of the line where all the midgets are."
8. "I thought of the chuckling Buddha that I had seen when I was at Grandfather's bedside; the little Buddha had

made me feel happier when I had been so worried about Grandfather. I needed to see this happy little Buddha again, and so I closed my eyes and rubbed them hard."

9. "How good you are. Your mother taught you well. You are patient, respectful, and wise beyond your years."
10. "Let us rehearse. When the alarm rings, your teacher will tell you where to stand and then you must all grab what is in front of you and throw it over the fence."
11. "All these years you were my strength. You were the ones always helping me. I came to you as a bitter and spiteful woman whose only remaining objective was to get revenge on the Japanese for killing my parents and my babies and taking my home and my husband from me. But thanks to you, look at me. I now have many people whom I love and most of all, I am able to help many people. I've found a new purpose in life."
12. "The guards know me because I live in the neighborhood and pass through often. They know I have many children. They'll probably think you are mine."
13. "Nuna, you can't cry like this. Big sisters don't cry."
14. "He was a kind man and had put himself at great risk to help us. It was then I smelled the sweetness of the rice cakes from the package he had given me. I was ashamed I never thanked him for his kindness."
15. "I was sick of this school. I was mad that I was born Korean... I was angry at everyone."

**Quotations Discussion Activity**

Write the quotations in Box 4, from *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, on transparencies. Distribute one quote to each

**Box 5****Essay Topics**

1. It is often said that war makes children grow up too soon. Was this true for Sookan? Use examples from the book to support your opinion.
2. What is the significance of the tree in the first three chapters of the book? What did it symbolize to Sookan, to her family, and to her grandfather? Explain what happened to the tree at the end of the book, and what that represents.
3. Describe Haiwon's birthday party. Discuss how the party functioned as a pivotal event in the story. Use specific details from the story to support your explanation.
4. Sookan writes: "Darkness and light, peace and joy, evil and good. All these tensions and conflicts were necessary in the struggle for perfect harmony." Explain what you think she means by this statement, whether you agree or disagree with her, and why. Make sure your response demonstrates your knowledge of the characters and events in the book.
5. Despite the pain and ugliness that were depicted in the novel, there were also examples of kindness and goodness. Describe one situation in the book that illustrated this for you.

group of students. Ask them to A.) Identify the character who made each of the following statements; B.) Describe the context in which he or she made the statement, and C.) Explain what the statement tells you about the character and his or her situation.

**After Reading Activities****Essay Topics**

Have students consider the five essay topics in Box 5. Remind them to be sure to cite specific examples from the book to support their statements.

**Respond Using Non-traditional Media**

— Sookan's mother presents family history through photographs. Have students create a display of their own family stories through photographs, drawings, or pictures from magazines.

— Several important symbols are presented in the book: a silver hair clip, a tree, a lunch box, traditional silk clothing. Have students gather and present their own cultural symbols and explain their significance.

— Have students create their own geographically accurate game boards and develop complete written instructions for a game involving escape from North Korea.

**Other Teaching Ideas****Use a Thematic Approach**

— Consider including *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* as part of a larger integrated thematic unit on World War II, Asia, or Communism. For further ideas on interdisciplinary thematic curriculum planning see Stover (1996), Mitchell and Young

(1997), and Tchudi and Lafer (1996).

—Offer students an opportunity to select one of several books that share an adolescent's perspective of World War II. Consider *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* translated by B.M. Mooyaart, *Anne Frank: Beyond the Diary—A Photographic Remembrance* by Ruud Van Der Rol, et al., *Nisei Daughter* by Monica Itoi Sone, *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* by Yoko Kawashima Watkins, *Under the Blood Red Sun* by Graham Salisbury, and *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry as possibilities for "pairings."

#### Study a Culture

—Invite a guest speaker in to share information about Korea. Students' understanding of the work will be enhanced if they can pronounce the names of the characters and cities, locate the geographical areas mentioned, visualize the way the Korean language is written, and understand some norms of Korean culture.

—Sookan explains the meaning of Korean names in chapter one. Create an assignment on 'naming.' Have students explore the meaning of their own names by researching their origins and asking family members about family traditions related to naming.

#### Discuss Propaganda

—Propaganda is any organized, widespread attempt to influence people's thinking or behavior. Common techniques of propaganda include: name-calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, card-stacking, bandwagon, half-truths, loaded words, picture-perfect, and self-appeal. Explore the book's presentation of various techniques intended to inspire patriotism, promote loyalty, or encourage hatred. Extend the discussion to an analysis of contemporary propaganda in advertising and in politics.

—Use the poem "Apology" by Emanuel (1991) to initiate discussion of how our perceptions about victims and enemies depend upon our perspective.

#### Conclusion

These, then, are just a few ideas for introducing *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* to middle level students. An ALA Children's Notable Book, ALA Best Book for Young Adults, *American Bookseller* Pick of the Lists, and *A Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* Blue Ribbon Book, Nyul Choi's YA novel has been widely praised

#### BOX 1 (CONTINUED)

How do people greet one another in Korea? Bow? Shake hands? Embrace? How do they part?

What is the traditional and modern dress of Korean men, women, and children? Do clothes for special occasions differ? How?

What might a "typical" Korean breakfast, lunch, and dinner consist of? What utensils do Koreans use to eat their meals?

How many years do Korean students attend school? Are the schools there public or private? What subjects are studied?

What is the standard of living in Korea? Is it considered a wealthy or an impoverished country? What kinds of disparities exist between rich and poor?

What are the most common occupations in Korea? What kind of unemployment does the country have? What are the major products manufactured in Korea?

Do most Koreans live in urban or rural areas? Do they dwell in houses or apartments? How many people typically live in a Korean household? What is the size of their typical living space? Would you be likely to have your own bedroom as a Korean child?

How do people get from one place to another in Korea? How far do most Koreans travel to work? To school? Do children ride school buses? How old do you have to be to drive in Korea?

by critics as "powerful and moving," offering "a glimpse into a young girl's mind and into a nation's heart" (Shapiro, 1991, in *New York Times Book Review*). As a reviewer for *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* put it, readers of *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* "will

#### BOX 3 (CONTINUED)

#### Journal/Discussion Prompts

"Grandfather's and mine, everyone's eyes were lowered in silence" (26-27). Why do you think that Sookan didn't lower her eyes? Were her reasons the same as her Grandfather's? Explain. Have you ever felt compelled to do something that you knew wasn't safe? Compare your situation to Sookan's. What motivated you? Did you consider yourself to be brave or foolish?

—Sookan says: "Grandfather looked angry and humiliated. I had never seen him look like this before. I didn't know what to do" (28). Have you ever seen someone you love and admire hurt or upset? How did it make you feel? Compare your feelings and reactions to Sookan's.

—Sookan's mother says to her: "You are a little girl, and there is nothing for you to worry about. Just do as you are told. Soon all will be well. God is watching over us" (32). Was her mother right? How do you feel, when given similar advice by adults? What do you think motivates grown ups to say things like this to children? Compare Sookan's

mother's advice to the advice given to you by an adult in your life.

—Sookan describes going to the Japanese school and reports that the role of the school was to ensure that she learned "to be a loyal and obedient subject and (worked) to bring victory to the war" (64). What do you think of Sookan's school promoting these values? In what ways does your school instill and promote values, such as citizenship and patriotism?

—Sookan admits: "I didn't know how to change these awful feelings" (81). Have you ever experienced feelings that were different than what you assumed you were "supposed" to feel? What did you do? Compare your reactions to Sookan's.

—Sookan describes fleeing her home without being able to take any of her possessions. She admits: "It was strange to leave everything I loved" (131). If you had to make a sudden escape like Sookan did, what things would you miss most, and why?

find themselves moved back in time and forward in spirit" (Kauffman, 1991). We think your students will enjoy this book, which bears witness to the plight of a people and provides an uplifting account of the triumph of the human spirit against great adversity.

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