

DRIFTING HOUSE



KRYS LEE

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An unflinching portrayal of the Korean immigrant experience from an extraordinary new talent in fiction.

Spanning Korea and the United States, from the postwar era to contemporary times, Krys Lee's stunning fiction debut, *Drifting House*, illuminates a people torn between the traumas of their collective past and the indignities and sorrows of their present.

In the title story, children escaping famine in North Korea are forced to make unthinkable sacrifices to survive. The tales set in America reveal the immigrants' unmoored existence, playing out in cramped apartments and Koreatown strip malls. A makeshift family is fractured when a shaman from the old country moves in next door. An abandoned wife enters into a fake marriage in order to find her kidnapped daughter.

In the tradition of Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Drifting House* is an unforgettable work by a gifted new writer.

Drifting House Details

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From Reader Review *Drifting House* for online ebook

Jill says

The *Drifting House* – the debut collection of Krys Lee – contains many good stories and some truly exceptional ones. And like all short story compilations, readers are bound to gravitate to their own favorites.

For me, a few of them really sang. In the first, *A Temporary Marriage*, Mrs. Shin has been forced to endure an abusive relationship and enters a sham marriage with another Korean named Mr. Rhee. As a result of her divorce, she loses custody of her daughter, whom she is determined to see again. But has she courted her own abuse? Phrases such as “her wounded body continued its ancient song” sum up, in a few sparse words, what the theme of the story is really about.

Then there’s *The Goose Father* – the traditional name for a father who faithfully sends money to his family overseas. The father – a one-time poet – takes in a young boarder who carries an actual goose with a wounded wing. In powerful prose, the father – Gilho – must come to terms with his true inclinations and his lifetime loneliness and alienation.

The Salaryman is stunning in its understated, naturalistic prose. In this story – told in second person – we watch a solid Korean businessman lose his job, his family, his confidence, and ultimately, his very humanity. It’s like watching a train wreck; it’s hard to look away.

There are many other good ones as well – the eponymous *Drifting House*, the most surreal of the lot, where two brothers and their very young sister try to escape North Korea’s countryside famine by fleeing to China. Yet they cannot escape their ghosts. And in *The Believer*, a mentally deranged Korean American woman commits a heinous crime; her daughter tries to comfort her father by performing an unspeakable act.

Ms. Lee is a young writer who is willing to take risks as she focuses her talent on those who are damaged, lonely, yearning. It’s not uplifting – marriages fail, men lose their sense of masculinity, women lose their sense of value, and most everyone feels displaced. Yet it offers amazing insights into the hopelessness and frustration that define a Korea that’s been through war, financial draught, and instabilities.

Jaime Boler says

We Are All Drifting Houses

Drifting House by Krys Lee (Viking Adult; 224 pages; \$25.95.)

I typically do not read short story collections. Novels are my book of choice for a variety of reasons. I enjoy rich, memorable characters, ones who stay with me long after I finish a book. I love a great setting, one in which I am transported to a different time and place so unlike my own and one in which I can lose myself. Plot is also important to me, but it has to be plausible and interesting. I detest badly written novels; thus, a book must have good prose to capture and sustain my attention.

Most short stories tend to lack that certain something I'm seeking in a book. Short story collections should have the above elements I have previously described, but many simply do not. In the hands of a mediocre writer, character development, plot, and setting can suffer due to the length of a short story. Since most are about the length of a chapter, it can be difficult to produce a great short story, especially when page numbers are an issue.

It takes a skilled writer to come up with a great short story. I am happy to say I found a short story collection that is nothing short of magical. I found Krys Lee's *Drifting House*.

The release of *Drifting House* is timely considering the December death of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il. Lee's stories matter and she cares deeply about her subjects. Born in Seoul, South Korea, Lee was raised in California and Washington. She was awarded special mention in the Pushcart Prize Anthology 2012, was a finalist for Best New American Voices in 2006, and has published in *The Kenyon Review*, *Narrative Magazine*, *California Quarterly*, and *Asia Weekly*.

Lee's *Drifting House* is a powerful, intimate, and affecting debut collection. She writes with elegance and grace as she takes us from Korea to the United States. What struck me most in the stories were the Korean immigrants struggling to assimilate into American culture. At times, *Drifting House* is difficult to read, not because the book is poorly written but because she brings the reader into the action and into the struggles of the characters. The reader becomes a participant in the story and has an intense reaction to what goes on. Never have I experienced such torment and such anguish as a reader. This is deliberate. Lee wants us to feel this way as she takes on themes such as family, love, abandonment, and loss.

In a story entitled "A Temporary Marriage," a mother leaves Korea after being abandoned by her husband. Not only did he leave her but he also kidnapped their daughter. The mother immigrates to the United States and marries a man only so she can be close to her child. The marriage is a sham but it serves her purpose. My favorite story is the title story, "Drifting House," in which a young boy must make a life or death decision as he leads his siblings to freedom. The choice he makes haunts him and made me cry.

I had the opportunity to interview Lee and am very happy with the results. I hope you will, too. Lee and *Drifting House* deserve your attention.

Interview with Krys Lee,
Author of *Drifting House*

Jaime Boler: Thank you, Krys, for doing this interview. I am very excited about *Drifting House*! *Drifting House* is a short story collection. What made you want to write short stories?

Krys Lee: I started writing poetry long ago but found that the stories that were beginning to well up in me and wanted to be told no longer fit in a poem. That's when I began considering another form. Stories appealed to me at the time because the shapes of what I was trying to write seemed appropriate for the length of a story.

JB: Did you always want to be an author?

KL: Yes. I've had my nose buried in a book since I can remember. All my books were smudged with toothpaste and stained with beef jerky because I read in nearly every waking moment. Books were an escape and respite from a fairly grim reality, and, like many who love to read, this desire traveled to writing itself.

But I wrote primarily poetry until I began this collection.

JB: My favorite stories in your collection are the title story, "Drifting House," and "The Goose Father." Do you have a favorite?

KL: My favorite story is probably "A Temporary Marriage." I felt so much sadness for Mrs. Shin and Mr. Rhee while writing it, and the story's evolution surprised and shocked me. It was one of those moments when you realize how powerful the subconscious can be.

JB: What gave you the ideas for your stories?

KL: Each story was inspired by something personal, though they're generally not autobiographical. I love South Korea, and I'm personally invested in its problems, which is evident in stories such as "The Salaryman" that arose after seeing a man I dated devoured by the Hyundai conglomerate. The story "Drifting House" also arose from my friendships with the activist and North Korean defector community in Seoul; the more you know, the more outraged you become at the tyranny of North Korea.

JB: What was the most difficult part about writing *Drifting House*? And what would you say was the most rewarding?

KL: The most difficult part was facing my own lack of faith, but still returning to the writing. I told myself constantly that I wouldn't be able to sell *Drifting House* but quitting was like carrying a baby in the womb but not undergoing labor. It was my baby, and I was going to give birth to it. The most rewarding and difficult aspect of writing is seeing more of yourself in the work than you'd ever wished to expose—all my obsessions, fears, and wounds arose in the stories, though I'd persisted in avoiding directly autobiographical stories. But to create from the personal something larger than the self was a process I value, and I'm grateful for the experience.

JB: When did you begin working on *Drifting House*?

KL: My first story began over five years before *Drifting House* was bought at auction, but that doesn't mean I was writing for those entire five years. I took several months off at the time from the book, both for personal reasons as well as out of a fear of commitment. I was afraid of failure, a fear that many writers experience when starting out.

JB: What is your favorite book? Which authors do you consider your favorites?

KL: The list is exhaustive, but a few constants are *The Gambler* by Fyodor Dostoevsky; *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf; *Beloved* by Toni Morrison; *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez; *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie; *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka; *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller; *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, the poems of Elizabeth Bishop, W.S. Merwin, and John Ashberry; *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekov; the plays of Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, Martin McDonagh, and Martin Crimp, and the short stories of Charles D'Ambrosio and Lorrie Moore.

JB: Please tell me a little about your writing style. Do you write in long-hand first or do you simply go to your computer or laptop and begin writing? Do you go somewhere in particular to write? Do you listen to music or do you prefer silence?

KL: I write anywhere it happens for me, from a campground, a subway, to a library. I'm a restless person, so as long as I'm writing most days of the week, I accept my irregular patterns rather than fight them. Depending on the scene I'm working on, music or silence will accompany my writing.

JB: If you were not writing, what would you most likely be doing?

KL: I'd be a human rights activist or a park ranger. Activists inspire me for acting on what they believe is right, and for their courage and sacrifice. A park ranger is attractive to me because I like the unpretentious nature and daily beauty and drudgery of their lives. There's a restlessness for meaning that keeps my mind moving, and both professions, in different ways, is a search for meaning.

JB: Time plays a significant role throughout your stories. Can you tell us about that?

KL: I'm obsessed with time. My parents died young, so time has haunted me since I was in my early twenties. I questioned what it meant to live on this earth, and what actually mattered to me in my finite amount of time here. Historical time and geographical time also interest me tremendously, as I'm but a moment on this planet.

JB: Things that really stood out for me while reading your stories were identity, home, and the immigrant experience. What do you want readers to take with them after reading *Drifting House*?

KL: My characters happen to be of Korean ethnicity because I understand that culture best, but their stories are universal. I think of all of us as a kind of drifting house, especially readers and writers. The force of society and our personal circumstances acts on all of us in different ways, and people are never quite at ease with their surroundings as they seem. Like my characters in "The Goose Father" or "A Small Sorrow", in the end, we all seek a place of belonging.

JB: One thing that captured my attention in your stories was the acts of violence in almost every one. What made you use this in your storytelling?

KL: Violence shaped the person I am, and it has clearly affected my sensibility. I thought this was in my past, but the past becomes a part of you and I carried that violence into my fiction, to my surprise. But as Harriett Gilbert from BBC's *The Strand* noted, my aesthetic is informed by humor, fantasy, and violence. Darkness is balanced by light, just as in life.

JB: When will your book be released? Will there be a book tour? If so, which cities will you visit?

KL: *Drifting House* will be released on Feb 2, 2012. The book tour will take me to New York City, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and literary festivals in Tempe, Arizona, and Dallas. There will also be an additional event in Honolulu, which will be fun.

JB: What was it like when you saw the cover of your book for the first time?

KL: I realized how lucky I was to have a publishing team that worked so hard on my behalf. My experience with Viking/Penguin has been collaborative, from the editing to the selection of the front cover, thanks to a group of editors, publicists, and designers who love reading as much as I do. The excitement and the faith of this enormous publishing house for a story collection—reportedly an uncommon phenomenon these days—culminated in the moment I received a finished copy of *Drifting House*.

JB: What's next for Krys Lee? Is there a novel in your future?

KL: I actually finished a novel draft last year and am in the middle of revisions. The novel as a form gives you a lot of room to explore, which I've enjoyed. Hopefully, you'll be seeing it soon!

JB: Thank you, Krys, for doing this interview. I am very excited about *Drifting House*, and I know readers will be, too.

Geoff Greene says

* 75% of marriages to your dead wife's best friend end up in suicide. Fact. Wow, I'm going to hell for this joke.

* Come on, don't have sex with your father..

* Is anyone from Korea happy?

Not sure how I feel about these short stories. They were good but at the same time, didn't leave me moved as evident by my lack of notes. Certainly the stories were troubling and at times disturbing but still.

Jess says

This collection of short stories gave me all the feels. If you liked Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* or you're looking for something to read after *Pachinko*, this is a great book to pick up.

Sharon L. Sherman says

Krys Lee's portrayal of North Korean women and their children is an important read, especially in light of recent events surrounding Kim Jong-il's passing. Following several stories that alternate between different children's and parents' views of life in Korea versus the U.S., an "American" reader is invited to come to terms with the immigrant experience of war refugees and the longing for a place to belong.

Lee has published some of these short stories separately, but this collection proves insightful because what is familiar anywhere in the U.S. suddenly appears out of place--whether in Seoul, or in Koreatown, CA.--because it imposes on another way of life. Kudos to the author for developing a range of voices to tell stories that need to be heard.

J says

There were many different characters introduced at different points in time...some were post-war, some modern Korean Americans, and although all of their identity stories were quite different, they are all presented with incredible difficulties and heartache. Several of these stories were very well written, but at the

end when something "big" transpires it almost seems as the ending does not belong to the same narrative thread.

Character development is something Lee is very good at creating both archetypes (patriarchal male, subservient wife, dutiful children), and she has also created some rebels (the wife in the drifting house; the shaman family in *At the End of the World*). I truly cared about many of these characters, particularly the children.

My personal favorite was the Salaryman for the gut-wrenching nature of money lost is having in our current society, although I was thrown by Lee's narrative decision to have the story told in the second person. It made this story stick out like a sore thumb.

I wanted to love this book and hoped that it would be a true exploration of Korean-American culture. While I did find some of that here I also found sensationalistic endings that brought the stories far beyond what their limits should have been. I think alienation could have been handled just as hauntingly without including incest or murder. For this reason I could not remain glued to this book and I found it very difficult to finish. That said, I have rated this complete work a three but there were some five star stories in here most notably, *A Temporary Marriage* and *At the Edge of the World*. I am looking forward to hearing more from Krys Lee.

Disclaimer: I received this book for free through the GoodReads First Reads giveaway.

Susie Spizzirro says

Drifting house was a difficult book for me to read. I gave it 4 stars because the writer has done an excellent job putting the reader in the same room as her tortured souls.

As I said before it is terrible what these families have suffered through. Yes, I know this book is fictional, but I also know what happens to families & esp. the little ones.

As I think of the little girl who turns away from her mother after her mother has given her all to find her child. The husband who takes his child to visit her mother in an asylum. The daughter who willingly climbs in to her father's bed. These are all horrible stories but we daily close our eyes to them.

One of the most touching was the little boy on the ice encouraging his little brother to keep running. The boy that killed his sick little sister. So sad.

Drifting House is a book of fiction but Krys Lee has done an excellent job of bringing her stars to life. I recommend this book.

Susie Spizzirro

Deanna says

“How ludicrous were all attempts at defining the self.”

I am not a lover of short stories. They tend to end abruptly, and leave me wondering “what just happened?” I am typically left unsatisfied. *Drifting House* showed me the beauty in a good collection of short stories that allow the reader to quickly plunge into a story, sink into the characters' lives, and then complete the story all

in one relatively short sitting.

In every single story there is a sense of loneliness, loss, and trying to find one's way. This connects the vastly different stories. The differences between the stories is what strikes me as impressive; the author was able to take characters and develop their different stories to give a taste of cultural nuances along with showing the various ways of struggle, and the different truths that people live. Each story weaves complexities to illustrate how lives vary yet are the same; each life is unique, as is their story, yet all struggle and, at times, experience tenderness, forgiveness, and grace.

Drifting House gave me a sense of accomplishment, finality, and satisfaction with each story read.

Kim says

This collection of stories is about the struggle that Koreans/ American Koreans have faced. Each story is sadder than the previous. Some stories are a bit confusing but that may just be a culture difference on my part. This was a very interesting read, but again I say, it was quite sad. The stories were written well but I feel some of the stories were a bit rushed to complete. Some of these stories could have been a novel on their own. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn the difficulties of a different culture.

Jason Lundberg says

An astonishing collection, beautifully written, even as it describes incredible pain and sadness. Several of these stories broke my heart.

Shirley says

This collection of moving stories focusing on both Koreas (and on Koreans in America) blew me away from start to finish. The writing is exquisite, haunting, precise, surreal, magical, dark, funny. The stories are fully realized and, although often focusing on the darkest thoughts and actions, have heart and humanity at center. You care about what the characters will do and what will happen to them, even as you flinch because they are in such desperate circumstances. One of the best short story collections I have read in some time.

Isabella M says

Couldn't even finish the book

Shari J says

A harrowing & important anthology of Korean short stories set in either Korea or America, revolving around

recent changes in history, from postwar to modern times. Lee's talent in storytelling is undeniable. That said, I don't think there's even one happy story in this collection and its grimness sits heavy on the stomach. These stories on Korean identity are insightful, interesting and sometimes even darkly mystical ("The Goose Father"). In terms of tone, I feel like Lee could afford to be less melodramatic just because her stories are powerful enough to stand on their own, minus all the excessive frillings. The characters in the stories are rich, varied and extremely flawed human beings but this is also what makes it so hard to look away or stop reading. Human frailty is a central theme in each piece and its endings offer little solace so I wouldn't recommend this anthology for readers who aren't in a very good mental headspace. One story, in particular, turned me off because it chose to veer into incest, a decision which I didn't feel was necessary. It turned me off so much, I almost wanted to stop reading and for this, I took away one star from this review.

Hesper says

Rating this more on tone than content. The stories are beautifully, impeccably crafted, even when they veer into (what to me felt like) melodrama (looking at you, The Salaryman); they're bleak and brutal as well, so maybe not recommended for one sitting.

Kristen says

Much of what is categorized as "literary" is actually pretentious and annoying. Krys Lee's stories are neither. They were outside my comfort zone, but told with such straight-forwardness and luminosity that the book, once opened, was hard to put down.

The title story in particular came back to my thoughts again and again - two boys, abandoned by their mother, attempting to flee famine in North Korea to China.

I won this book through the firstreads program, and it's not the admittedly escapist fiction I prefer - fiction with insight, grace, and historical realism; yet fiction firmly in the Hollywood tradition of happy endings. Lee's stories are slices of life so real that a reader longs to drop into the story and put things right. Just as a slice of your life doesn't have an ending - happy or unhappy - so Lee's characters don't have happy or unhappy endings. They rather dissolve into the human condition, full of sin and longing and either focusing on survival or, when survival isn't at stake, misdirecting their energy towards the ephemeral, feeling the wrong feeling and thus saying the wrong thing. There is a magical kind of sorrow here, and also surreal humor, all of it adding up to a glimpse of the drifting house that is the life of the expatriate, or the life at home when home has fallen apart. Worthwhile reading.
