



Year of Impossible Goodbyes

Sook Nyul Choi

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It is 1945, and courageous ten-year-old Sookan and her family must endure the cruelties of the Japanese military occupying Korea. Police captain Narita does his best to destroy everything of value to the family, but he cannot break their spirit. Sookan's father is with the resistance movement in Manchuria and her older brothers have been sent away to labor camps. Her mother is forced to supervise a sock factory and Sookan herself must wear a uniform and attend a Japanese school.

Then the war ends. Out come the colorful Korean silks and bags of white rice. But Communist Russian troops have taken control of North Korea and once again the family is suppressed. Sookan and her family know their only hope for freedom lies in a dangerous escape to Americancontrolled South Korea.

Here is the incredible story of one family's love for each other and their determination to risk everything to find freedom.

Year of Impossible Goodbyes Details

Date : Published September 13th 1991 by HMH Books for Young Readers (first published January 1st 1991)

ISBN :

Author : Sook Nyul Choi

Format : Kindle Edition 178 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Young Adult, Fiction, War

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From Reader Review Year of Impossible Goodbyes for online ebook

Irene McHugh says

If I could give this novel more than five stars, I would! I can't believe how long it has taken me to read this distressing, but uplifting piece of historical fiction that reminds me of how precious freedom is.

Years ago, students had enthusiastically recommended this book to me. Middle school students. Enthused about historical fiction. I took note. I remember the students telling me that they couldn't tell me too much without ruining the story and I remember writing the book title down.

Now this occurred around the year 2000. Before I was on Goodreads. I had a binder system of book lists, articles, notes, post-its. A fine collection of paper napkins covered with ink-smeared writing of book titles and author names. A truly official and highly organized system of chaos.

When I started cataloguing online all of my reading, I was so relieved. My one mistake was glancing through my "to-be-read" binder too quickly. I overlooked and dismissed too many books.

The group of children who were such fans of this Korean's family struggle at the end of WWII happen to be among some of my favorite children I've taught over the years. They liked reading, but were particular about what books they would recommend whole-heartedly. I never forgot how passionately they talked about this story.

Several years ago I heard about *Escape from Camp 14* on one of my favorite podcasts Books on the Nightstand. I listened to that audiobook and my memory of this historical fiction recommendation was jarred. The problem was that I could not remember the title except for the words *impossible* and *goodbye*.

Luckily, those key words lead me to Sook Nyul Choi's beautifully crafted story. Once I purchased a copy of the book, it sat on my bookshelf for a few years. At 170 pages, I felt like I could read this novel in a weekend...easily. And I finally have.

The story opens in Korea as WWII is winding down. Sookan and several members of her family live outside of Pyongyang in fear of the Japanese. The first half of the book records their constant fear in managing the sock factory for Captain Narita, the Japanese officer who represents the Japanese Empire and Our Heavenly Emperor.

Any wrong word could cause the family to be separated. Special punishments would be devised to break their spirit. Food rations would disappear. Food distributed might be a bag of rice half-filled with sand.

One of the most heart-breaking scenes is one of the first impossible goodbyes. Sookan and her cousin Kisa have special bonds with the sock girls, the girls who work in the factory Sookan's mother manages. Captain Narita arrives to take the sock girls away to the front lines where they will be comfort women who will give the soldiers special spirit to fight. Stomach-turning.

When Japan surrenders, the Russians arrive in Northern Korea, and they know just how to indoctrinate the terrified Koreans. Mother and Aunt Tiger are rightfully skeptical, but Sookan reacts positively to the friendly Russians with their festivities, songs, and huge meals.

Not until she experiences the daily labor of a proletariat does Sookan realize that her country has traded one captor for another. Her family learns of the 38th Parallel too late. If they are to plan an escape to the South, they will need to be extra careful.

The last third of the book chronicles how the family faces the decisions about whether or not to try to flee. The resolution gives a solid account of what happens to every character, a decision by the author that would endear her to middle school students who are not fond of ambiguous endings. While there are numerous impossible goodbyes in this story, the overall message about the perseverance of the human spirit is worthwhile and uplifting.

Roxanne Coopchiak says

I think this book, is pretty emotional, I know the author wants to share how her childhood was and it's history but while I was reading this book I kept asking "Why? why? why?". This book is way to sad, but I really love interesting stories like this. I also wonder why the Russians, Japanese and Chinese love having war in Korea. It's getting to much for them to keep struggling for food and drinks.

Brian Ham says

Well, that was a bummer.

Woojae says

This book is about a family's life in Korea during the Korean War (Known as the 6.25 war in Korea) The family lives through the Japanese occupation to the Korean war and during the occupation they live in a village in the part of North Korea. Sookan the sister of the family is brave and protects her younger brother. There father is in Manchuria for Japanese-resistant movement and there three older brothers are camped in the labor camp of Japan.

After the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan surrenders and the Pacific war ends. The family now is happy and dreams a better life. However, there dream is suppressed by the communist Russia controlling North Korea.

There only hope is there escape to American-controlled South Korea. Sookan, bravely take cares of her brother and successfully escapes to South Korea.

In 25 of June 4 AM, North Korea invades South Korea.

Blythie Colvin says

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Eddie Hahm says

It wasn't the best book because the action in the story happened too fast like the author just dumped all the events together. So the tension was there but there wasn't a lot of tension. But it had an interesting setting and plot that caught my attention.

Seungmyoung says

Relieved to see Inchun and Sookan escaping North Korea and arriving at the Red Cross medical center, I finished reading this wonderful book that shows the tragedy of Koreans in the time of Koreans under Japanese rule like a short movie. It was so detailed and easy to understand that I could draw images of every scenes in my brain and felt like all of the characters are really moving and talking in my head. I have learned from Elementary school history class that Japanese rules and their leaders made Koreans suffer a lot but it wasn't as shocking as I felt after I read this book. As a student, I felt so mad when Japanese teachers forced Koreans to sing Japanese songs, not speak Korean, and even not to share their food with others at school. I can know how much brave Sookan and Inchun is even though they are much younger than I am by looking at their process of escaping-they relied on each other and were brave even though they lost their guide and mom. If I was in that situation, I would just go back to my home or just give up escaping with the sorrow that I lost my mom, who is the most of my life. When Sookan and Inchun bravely decided to cross the wire fence and ran only with the belief that their mom will be waiting for them made my tears fall down and to regret

fighting with my brother and not obeying my mom's messages. I highly recommend every teen in Korea to read this book since it is not just about learning history; it is about reflecting yourself and learning how to be thankful for now.

Hannah ? says

Amazing book but not as emotional as many other Korean War memoirs I've read before.

Rachel says

For me personally, I respect this book for introducing an oft-overlooked portion of World War II and the years beyond- Korea's occupation by Japan and ultimately America and Russia splitting the country in two. After a dreary existence under the Japanese, young protagonist Sookan falls under the influence of the communist Russians and must escape with her family to the south. Underneath all of the specifics is a formula story about escaping oppression and coming of age, but it was told so beautifully. I was captivated.

Victoria says

It was...

Parker M. says

this was a very good story about the koren war and what a tipical family went through. although the torture is bad and i hate it!!!

Jason Kim says

I just didn't really like it

David says

Eh... A short, good, rather historical fiction type of story, because this had happened to many people, including the author, Sook Nyul Choi. I enjoyed the story, but I really didn't like how Sookan always cries, (but I probably would too, given if I were in that situation.) :)

P.S. Sookan looks just a little bit like Albert, don't you guys think so?

Heesung Tae says

There was a time when all the Koreans had to suffer. There was time when all the Koreans had to go through harsh lives. Crises threatened them on two separated occasions, and this is what happened during last 100 years. We live without a big conflict in our lives. Everything is prepared for us-we're attending a good school, which provides us a good education, we eat, wear and live without problem and we have rights and privileges. But during Japanese colonial era, which continued for about 35 years, Koreans' rights were stolen by the Japanese-absolutely. Koreans were forced to work and work for Japanese, but there was nothing coming back for them. People who desperately longed for their freedom joined in the Korean independence movement. But if they were found by Japanese, most of them were cruelly killed and the others were arrested to be tortured.

When the Koreans finally escaped from this horrible period of time, the second problem came for them just after few years. Korea was divided into the North and South, by 38th Parallel. Communist Russia took over North Korea and Capitalist America controlled South. Some families were torn apart, and many North Koreans escaped to South.

This book, "Year of Impossible Goodbyes" by Sook Nyul Choi, is a story of a girl named Sookan who went through this hard time in the perspective of a 10 year-old kid. She had 3 older brothers, 1 oldest sister and 1 younger brother. The oldest child, Theresa, became a nun and couldn't be seen often because Japanese forced people to only worship the Heavenly Emperor. The other 3 older brothers were sent to the labor camps.

When I discussed about why this book's title is "Year of Impossible Goodbyes" with my older sister who already read this book before me, she said "Well, they surely lost many things during those few years, didn't they?" And that one sentence made me realize how heartbreaking this whole story was. Japanese took Sookan's grandfather, his beloved pine tree, the girls who worked in mother's sock factory (the Japanese took them as "Comfort Women"... one of Korea's painful historical issues.), their brasswares, and most of all, their freedom.

When I read about half of the book, the Japanese colonial era finally ended. I was sure that no one could and will be able to describe Koreans' joy when our own Korean flag was held up instead of Japanese flag. Soon Russia took over North Korea and people were brainwashed to believe that communism is the best. When I watched the news and read newspapers, North Korean government was saying nonsense to the people and I wondered how could people believe those lies. But as I read that part of the book, I couldn't help being surprised at how gradually and cleverly they tricked people. Even I was hard to decide whether I should believe them or not.

Later in the book, Sookan, Inchun(little brother) and their mother try to escape North Korea. Kisa (Sookan's cousin) and Aunt Tiger prepare everything for them to safely cross over 38th Parallel and decide to stay. When I read that they were shot dead in the epilogue, it was so hard for me to hold my tears back. They risked everything for their family and sacrificed themselves!

Thanking for their help, the 3 of them(Sookan, mother, Inchun) leave their precious house and start on the journey. But their journey isn't like what they hoped it to be. The guide they hired was not a reliable man, and mother gets separated with Sookan and Inchun. Without their mother, children who are even younger than us risk their lives to find their family. With others' help, they succeeded at escaping. Reading their journey, I was ashamed that Sookan, 10-year-old young girl and little Inchun had more courage than I had.

The kids who should have been childish, already had adult's mind and thoughts. What made them to be so mature? I strongly think that it's the influence of their environment. The adults and social characteristics didn't let kids to be "kids". How sad is that?

If you're Korean, you have to read this book. If you're Korean and don't know what happened during Japanese colonial era and Korean war, you must read this book. The way this book is written is easy and short. The only problem is that the topic and story it's telling about is hard for little children to understand. I recommend people more than 10 years old to try this book, and I truly hope they learn something throughout the story.

Hafee says

Bello Hafeez
Douglas .T
Eng 2D1
May 30,2017

Goodreads review: Year of Impossible Goodbyes

The novel years of impossible goodbyes took place in Korea in 1945. During the Korean War (Known as the 6.25 war in Korea). There is a particular family whose life is devastating during the war because of the fact that her father is one of the soldiers who fought with the Resistance Movement in Manchuria. In this movement, the Japanese military took over Korea.

This is how my social justice issue, Colonization is related to my book. Colonization is the action or process of higher setting among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area. The Japanese, Russian and Korean military were fighting for the colonization of each other's country's/government. Sookan's family started to split apart because her father took part in the war, her brothers went to labour camps and she and her mother were working in factory that produces socks. Meanwhile Korea was able to win the war of colonization between the Japanese military, not a short amount of time Korea was taken over by the communist Russian .

Her name is Sookan and is regarded to be the main character of the novel. Sookan currently lives with her mother at the young age of 10 while World War 2 is going on. She also has 3 brothers, who split apart because of the war, Sookan's world began to tear apart.

I think this novel is a good novel because it teaches us what it feels like to be taken over by a different country and to live by their strict rules and regulations. This is also a story that happened many years ago and was linked to world war 2. I regard this book to be read by young kids, why? Because they are the one who could make change in this world (young generation).
