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Reader's Guide for Chang-rae Lee's *The Surrendered*

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Reader's Guide for Chang-rae Lee's *The Surrendered* (Dayton Literary Peace Prize Winner, 2011)

Debra Moreno Blouch, Jessica Shankland, Jacob Smith, Deborah Rocheleau

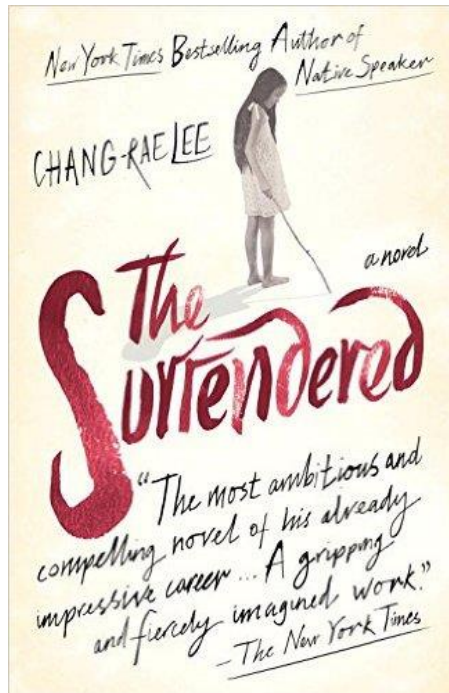


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Historical Context

The Korean War

Throughout *The Surrendered*, Chang-rae Lee incorporates a number of flashback moments in order to give context and better flesh out his characters. “Mr. Lee chronicles these cruel, heartbreaking events of war with harrowing, cinematic immediacy, making palpable the excruciating violence and the huge footprint it leaves on people’s lives” (Kakutani). A large majority of his characters have all experienced severe violence and the effects of said violence can be seen in all of them. Arguably the most important and impactful event of violence was the Korean conflict/war and the events that led up to and followed the war. Lee takes great care to accurately represent the atrocities of the war thus further conveying the consequences of such violence to the reader with great effect.

Although the conflict itself was a significantly destructive affair which thousands dead and more homeless or displaced, the violence itself began years before an actual declaration of war. In *The Surrendered* we see Sylvie, who was living in Manchuria at the time, undergo a considerable amount of violence due to the death of her parents at the hands of the Japanese. Years before the start of World War 2, Japan was seeking to assert dominance in Asia. To do this, the Japanese military began invading neighboring countries. The Philippines, Korea (which was a single country at the time), and Northern China were all victims of the Japanese invasion and the following years of oppression. Although the Japanese military very modern technologically, their tactics to maintain were ruthless and included massive amounts of civilian killings, torture, and rape. “Although rape had been prohibited by modern codes of military conduct before World War II (Chinkin, 1994), rape was not recognized internationally as a war crime until the end of World War II” (Hwahng 1769). Popular examples include the Japanese occupation of Korea and the infamous Nanking Massacre. During Japan’s occupation of Korea, it has been documented that there was an active sex slave system in place. In the Nanking massacre alone there were a recorded 300,000 casualties. “The Nanjing Massacre refers to an exceedingly horrible massacre of civilians by the Japanese army during a six-week period from December 1937 to January 1938 after its occupation of Nanjing, then the capital of the Republic of China. In flagrant violation of international conventions and fundamental moral codes, the Japanese invaders stopped at nothing in committing atrocities in the form of slaughter, rape, plunder, arson and destruction” (Tsao 1).

Shortly after the end of World War 2 and the formation of the 38th parallel, the North Korean People’s Army invaded the South with a force of at least 75,000 soldiers and was the first major military action of the Cold War. By the end of the war, nearly 5 million people—half of them being civilians—have died, and tens of thousands of American soldiers were killed and wounded (History.com). As shown by the sheer number of casualties, Korean non-combatants experienced a severe amount of violence, both from the American and Korean soldiers. Lee demonstrated this in great detail in *The Surrendered*. At one point in the novel, June’s sister and mother are both caught in the crossfire of a U.S. bombing on a North Korean convoy. In the actual war, the American Air Force maintained a dominance of the air from the early days of the war. While the Air Force usually would carry out missions in close proximity to the U.S. ground forces, there were a number of instances that recorded a high amount of civilian casualties: “(1) the North Korean Army’s attack and the U.S. Army’s counterattack during July-

September 1950; and (2) the march of the North Korean Army and the Chinese Army to the South immediately after the UN forces' retreat southward from 4 January 1951" (Hee-Kyung 573-4). There also was a large amount of discomobulation on both sides of the war. The Air Force was especially disorganized, and that led to a larger number of bombings on civilians. And while there were also guidelines and specific targets set up initially to prevent civilian casualties, orders eventually changed to allow bombers to strike civilian homes and structures in fear of hidden guerilla fighters.

Korean Orphans

Following the war, there were a number of children orphaned and the country was thrown into economic turmoil. The plight of thousands of homeless Korean children appealed to U.S. sympathizers and led to a large influx of Korean immigrants to the United States. So much so, that the process of determining suitable Korean adoptions became an extremely systematic one (Oh). There was also a large amount of missionaries that went overseas to help with the relief effort—as illustrated by Lee's depiction of the reverends at the June's orphanage. "In the context of post-war Korea, as Min Kyeung-Bae describes, people were desperately looking for a way to meet their material needs as well as 'seeking the eternal kingdom' in the reality of the present situation.³ There was a rapid increase in revival meetings and the messages preached were to meet peoples' immediate needs of material blessing and healing" (Kim 1). In other words, the aftermath of the Korean War left many Koreans with little in the way of physical possessions, and many of them sought comfort in the form of some sort of spiritual salvation. This can be seen in modern South Korean division of religions; while a large number of South Koreans don't claim a religion, nearly 30% of them claim to be some form of Christian.



Japanese troops with Chinese captives, Manchuria 1931

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Themes in *The Surrendered****Sharing Experiences***

When writing the first chapter of *The Surrendered*, Chang-rae Lee drew inspiration from his father's stories of experiences during the Korean War. In an interview, Lee remarks "I knew what happened to my father, but actually having to throw myself into it [created] an emotional connection." For Lee, the process of writing his father's experiences helped him connect with a past which he otherwise would never have been able to understand. In the same way, *The Surrendered* provides readers with a way to connect with and understand experiences much different than their own.

The novel's multi-viewpoint form exposes readers to a broad range of human experience, as well as illustrates the failure of human beings to understand each others' experiences. The three main characters come from diverse backgrounds: pastor's wife Sylvie Tanner, who endured unbearable trauma during her childhood in 1930s Manchuria; Hector, a commitment-challenged American soldier from rural New York; and June Han, a stubborn, volatile war orphan who's seen more than her fair share of violence. While the novel allows readers, through frequent flashbacks, to live each characters' experiences, the characters themselves lack such an opportunity to connect with each others' past, leading to misunderstanding. Hector assumes Sylvie knows nothing of the violence which she so frequently reads about in her copy of *Memories of Solferino*, and so condemns her interest in the violent book. This assumption illustrates his ignorance of the violence which we, as readers, know Sylvie was in fact exposed to during her childhood. June, too, misjudges Sylvie, seeing in the caring pastor's wife a chance at a stable home, despite the drug-addicted mess that is Sylvie's life. Only through flashbacks do we readers understand the extent of Sylvie's addiction, a habit she developed during the sexually unstable aftermath of her violent childhood. Sylvie herself is not immune to misjudging others, as evinced by her idealistic hope that she can transform the volatile June with a little kindness, despite her husband's perhaps more realistic observation

that June is “not a nice girl. Maybe she was once but she’s not anymore” (Lee 165). In fact, the violence of June’s past (a past we readers experience within the first chapter of the novel) has transformed her from a loving—if stubborn—girl into the manipulative character she is at the orphanage.

Writing *The Surrendered* may have allowed Lee to connect with his father’s experiences. Its stories help readers, too, to understand the experiences of not one but three traumatized, broken, and ultimately resilient characters. For those characters themselves, however, their ignorance of each other’s past—all equally violent and traumatic—tragically prevents them from understanding each other.

Pain and Violence

Many critics have commented on the violence in *The Surrendered*. As Terrence Rafferty observes, “The body count is high [in *The Surrendered*]: Lee invents an extraordinary number of vivid characters, many of whom prove to be just passing through on their way to violent, senseless ends.” Lee certainly makes no attempts to aestheticize violence, and in fact manages to make almost all bodily experiences in the novel unpleasant. Sex, torture, pain, all are disturbingly connected in the world of *The Surrendered*, as inescapable as they are graphic. Readers experience this unbearable violence in much the same way as the perpetually sober Hector, who, despite his constant drinking, remains ever alert to the pain of his war-shattered life. In the same way, readers are forced to endure the onslaught of pain and violence without the anesthetizing effects of enchantment, the view that violence, despite the pain involved, proves an ultimately transformative and worthwhile experience (Cole 1633). Instead, we encounter a world where soldiers maliciously torture and kill, freak car accidents shatter lives, and even those who manage to survive the horrors of war ultimately meet their end at the hands of devastating diseases. While the novel may seem removed from the politics of war, providing readers with few scenes from the actual battlefield, its detailed portrayals of violence graphically illustrate the “human cost of war” (Wood), the lives it permanently scars, and the irredeemable damage caused by violence.

Politics

The novel’s setting at an orphanage inextricably connects it to the Korean War. While many of the novel’s themes regarding violence, trauma, and survival could apply to all wars, its focus on the life of orphan protagonist June Han necessarily concerns it with the particular politics of the Korean War Era. During the Korean War, the number of orphans in the country increased dramatically, going from 8,000 to 55,000 (*New York Times*). In the aftermath of such loss, the American media embraced Korean orphan as the face of the war effort, the innocent victims which American soldiers (like the novel’s character Hector Brennen) were fighting to protect (Oh 171). Politicians as well latched onto the idea of adoption as the way for the United States to cobble a victory out of an otherwise failed war, as if bettering the lives of orphans would make the violence worthwhile.

The Surrendered, however, presents a more nuanced picture of American involvement in Korea through its American characters, Hector and Sylvie, as well as its Korean orphan protagonist, June Han. In the Korea of *The Surrendered*, American soldiers are as likely to torture Korean children as fight to protect them. Other Americans, such as Sylvie Tanner,

genuinely seek to better orphans' lives through the orphanage she runs with her husband. Despite her good intentions, however, Sylvie's kindness causes as much harm as good, as it fills orphans Min and June with false hope of adoption. For her part, June proves unwilling to accept adoption by an American couple, instead choosing to forge her own path to America, a striking portrayal of an assertive Korean orphan which contradicts the media's vision of orphans as the oppressed victims of communism, patiently waiting for salvation through American war efforts.

The Surrendered, with its adept observations about violence and trauma, can very well be read without knowledge of the historical context. In light of that context, however, against a backdrop of political propaganda and historical misconceptions, the novel illustrates the power of literature to contradict the stereotypes of the media.



The Korean War forced American soldiers and Korean civilians to live side by side.

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Reader's Guide Discussion Questions w/ Suggested Answers

*How does the title *The Surrendered* reflect within the lives of the characters?*

June and Sylvie have each surrendered to something in one way or another. June is forced not only to surrender to Hector when he picks her up on the side of the road at the end of the war, but also to the cancer that has taken over her body twenty to thirty years later. Sylvie surrenders to the pain and trauma associated with her past and uses morphine addictively for years afterwards. Hector does not, in fact, surrender to anything, but helps each woman during their struggles. Hector fights surrendering both literally and figuratively as if to let himself feel the pain in a way to punish himself.

*In what ways does *The Surrendered* portray the atrocities associated with war?*

The novel begins with June and her younger siblings traveling by foot towards refuge. They are covered in lice and starving. They see mutilated corpses along the side of the road. After spending a night cramped into a farmhouse with other refugees, violence breaks out over the hidden barrel of food.

We also get a look at the atrocities via Hector during his time serving in the military. The young Korean who fights with the Chinese, likely not by choice, is beaten to a pulp. Hector wants to save the boy, but the boy, already wishing he were dead, decides to blow himself up with a grenade in a cave. There is also a copious amount of ashen faced corpses that Hector takes care of during his duty.

*How are violence and addiction represented throughout *The Surrendered*?*

Focusing on Sylvie, at a young age she watched multiple people she was close to die in front of her in Manchuria. As she got older and lived in Washington she met a man that introduced her to morphine. After she met the man she was about to marry (Ames), she bathed herself, and out of fear, nervousness, being tired, she cut herself on her legs, watching the blood flow into the water. Ames saved her. Years after they were married, and after multiple miscarriages, in South Korea at the orphanage, Sylvie once again took up her morphine addiction, often shutting herself away from the outside world.

Sylvie's example is one that transmits the idea of addiction in *The Surrendered*, as being viewed as a coping mechanism; an escape from violence and violent memories.

How would the novel be different if the chapters were not ordered as they are?

During a Color Magazine interview, Lee says, re: the first chapter that consists of June losing her family, "I wrote that first chapter, not as the first chapter. I wrote that probably in sequence probably fourth or fifth or sixth chapter. I wrote a lot before that, which you never saw. The second chapter when June is cleaning her apartment was actually going to be the first chapter."

First off, it would probably be harder to make the relationship connections between the characters. It would also be less easy to distinguish and remember who was where and what they were doing. By making every couple chapters based on one character, you're able to see how their lives weave into one another's.

Secondly, Lee goes back and forth in time: from the 50s to the 80s to the 50s to the 30s to the 50s, and so on. Not every chapter is violent. And by setting it up so that we don't have to read five chapters of violence and then five chapters of peacetime, we are able to get reprieve in-between chapters, and a sense of a larger picture understanding that there can be peacetime within wartime.

In another interview Lee is asked again about the opening scene/chapter of the novel and its historical context, to which he replies, "Right before the war, just in the first days, there were difficult things happening throughout the country, particularly in the North. There were a lot of killings." Therefore, it makes sense to open the novel with such violence as that is how the Korean War began.

Why does Lee include Sylvie's book on The Battle of Solferino called A Memory of Solferino, written by Henri Dunant?

The Battle of Solferino was the battle fought in Northern Italy between the Austrians and the French-Italian alliance. The battlefield, where tens of thousands of people were left wounded, was what birthed the Red Cross. Sylvie, coming from missionary/humanitarian background, contrasts with Genevan Calvinist, and Red Cross founder, Henri Dunant.

Sylvie, growing up with the humanitarian influence, and then later marrying a missionary man and working in an orphanage, conveys the charitable work that needs to be done during times of crises.

Another contrast that deals with Italy and Solferino and Korea, is the chapel that Hector builds on the orphanage grounds reminds Sylvie of the church in Solferino. Hector's chapel is totally white and grey in color, comparing it to the bones that make up the walls of Solferino's Chapel-Ossuary – decorated from the bones of those who died on the battlefield.

Why do you think Lee chose to have the actual history of the Korean War play such a small part of the novel?

The novel is all about experience. Since the novel portrays the aftermath of the violence experienced during the times, the actual historical content of the war itself is not pertinent. What matters is that the war changed things – new counties were formed, many people were killed, families were torn apart, and Korean orphanages and adoption became popular. These changes, along with the violence that accompanied them, affected individuals too. A lot of times, when reading a history book, the reader doesn't think about the people involved on a

personal level. Lee is able to give the readers a chance to *experience* the atrocities of war, by making it possible to live vicariously through his characters with his details, instead of just reading about the atrocities happening to unnamed people.

Summary of Reviews for *The Surrendered*

Many critics in various magazines, newspapers, and journals have reviewed the novel *The Surrendered*, by Chang-Rae Lee. In the seven reviews being summarized, there are two opposing viewpoints expressed by the writers, one negative, and one positive in regards to Lee's prose. Although most of the critics praised Lee's narrative, Donna Rifkind, whose review was featured in *The Washington Post*, thought that *The Surrendered* was much bleaker than his earlier works. While Rifkind believes June to be a compelling character, she asserts that June's power is dimmed by the lack of dimensionality of the characters Hector Brennan and Sylvie Tanner. Rifkind claims that the reader may be willing to go along with the plot presented in the novel, but it is harder to accept from Lee, who is well known for his paramount characters, how both Sylvie and Hector are hollow and vaporous at the same time. Sylvie's post-traumatic behavior is believable after her childhood ordeal in Manchuria, but as an adult becomes somewhat of a cliché. Hector's supernatural qualities of self-healing, and his guilty Greek-tragic certainty that everyone he loves is doomed to die is hard for the reader to swallow and rather clumsily symbolic. Rifkind writes that readers have little choice but to agree with Hector when he is at yet another low point and does not care whether he is dead or alive.

Michiko Kakutani, whose review was in *The New York Times*, agrees that the novel has it flaws, but argues that *The Surrendered* is a gripping and fiercely imagined work, nevertheless. Kakutani was not alone with his praise. Six out of the seven critics assert that Lee's novel is a powerful book, ambitious and complicated with story lines traveling the time span of sixty years and three continents. They argue that Lee slips effortlessly from one narrative thread to another circling his characters and sizing them up; shifting the points of view frequently in order to give the reader relief from the terrible things that happen accidentally and deliberately. The critics believe that at the core of the novel is a deep undercurrent for war and what it buys the victors. The novel shows violence and the devastating after effects of the Korean War in both Korea and The United States bringing about the horrors of war and the sorrows of survival. Also what concerns Lee is the way people interpret their own lives and the accommodations they make in order to live with all they have seen and done.

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Amfreville, Marc. "The Burning Book." *Journal Of Literature And Trauma Studies* 2. 1-2 (2013): 1-13. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 19 Mar. 2015. Marc Amfreville's article depicts the book that Sylvie's mother gives her, an account of the terrible nineteenth-century battle of Solferino, as a powerful entity throughout the novel. The book is first given to Sylvie during the 1931 Japanese-occupied Manchuria. It then travels with Sylvie to a Korean orphanage in the early 1950's following the Korean War. The book has special meaning to Sylvie, Hector, and June, all who feel connected to one another because of the unspoken understanding of the horrific atrocities contained in the book. The book is then burned by June who is feeling abandoned by the Tanners, who are killed in the fire. Fast-forward to 1986 and June is trying to locate her son, who has stolen the book. She reconnects with Hector and the two of them retrieve the book and travel to Solferino in order for June to die where they feel they belong. Amfreville demonstrates that the traumatic experiences in the novel promotes an awareness and ethical openness with the violence witnessed by Sylvie, Hector, June, and the readers of the burning book.

Cavendish, Richard. "The Founding of the Red Cross." *History Today* 63.10 (2013): 8. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 13 Apr. 2015. The article gives an overview of the Battle of Solferino and its outcome, leaving tens of thousands of wounded men on the battlefield. It tells of the Swiss man named Henri Dunant, who came across the battlefield and in turn gathered people from nearby villages to help treat and aid the wounded. It then goes on to tell about Dunant's background as a Genevan Calvinist and how the formation of the The Red Cross was mainly upheld by Dunant and Gustave Moynier in 1863.

Cumings, Bruce. *The Korean War: A History*. New York: Modern Library, 2010. Print. Cumings, chair of the Department of History at the University of Chicago, has written a non-fictional historical novel about the Korean War. The novel covers in-depth accounts of the war: the repression and culture it created within the Koreas, the victims of both Korea and the U.S., the issues of memory via the war, and the re-building of nations following the war. Cumings has included an extensive chronology, archive glossary, and researcher notes.

Hsu, Stephanie. "The Ontology Of Disability In Chang-Rae Lee's *The Surrendered*." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 1 (2013): *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 19 Mar 2015.

Stephanie Hsu's article depicts the differences between the ontology of race, and the ontology of disability that intersect Asian American studies and disability studies. Hsu argues that the co-articulation of race and disability can fully explore the disability rights issues seen with Chang-Rae Lee's characters. The disabilities in the novel include cancer, substance addiction, old age, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Hsu further argues that Lee fails to support the observation made by disability studies that tend to assimilate disability into broader social or philosophical contexts. According to Hsu, Lee

depicts wartime carnage and mundane suffering but neglects the issue that race, class difference, and gender can also be conceived as a disability.

Kim, Joosil. "Secularization of Religious Education in Korea: State Confucianism, Missionary Schools, and Religious Freedom." *International Journal Of Religion & Spirituality In Society* 3.3 (2014): 77-87. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 13 Apr. 2015. The journal outlines the separation of church and state as well as the religious education throughout Korea brought over by Western Christians, overthrowing their Confucianism. The journal's ideas expand across nations and focus on Western concepts and their effects on other countries.

Lee, Chang-rae. "Why Novel-Writing Is Like Spelunking: An Interview with Chang-rae Lee." By Joe Fassler. *The Atlantic*, 2011. Web. 18 March 2015.

Joe Fassler interviews Lee with questions pertaining to the historical context in relation to the novel *The Surrendered* as well as in relation to his personal life and the idea of the way refugees live in today's world; the novel's Greek references, specifically pertaining to the Iliad; Lee's thoughts on the power of the written word; and even his writing practices.

Wood, James. "Keeping It Real." *The New Yorker* 10 (2010). *ProQuest*. Web. 20 Mar 2015.

James Woods argues in his article that literature cannot progress any more than electricity can progress, being that they are both natural resources awaiting different forms of activation. He asserts that certain conventions in novels become more conventional, losing their original power. However, he believes that Lee's novel *The Surrendered* while rather conventional, is powerfully moving and extremely well written. Further, the novel is careful to be sensitive to historical tragedy and is filled with brilliance of prose, and violent disclosures. He claims that with Lee's attention to storytelling, the historical facts seem as though they are made for the novel rather than the novel being written surrounding the events of history.