

Brother's Keeper

By JULIE LEE

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Reviewed by Mary Connor



Prior to reading Julie Lee's *Brother's Keeper*, I had read many of the most respected accounts of the Korean War. However, the author of *Brother's Keeper* is a gifted new writer. Inspired by her mother's wartime recollections of the war, the author focuses on one family, but the reader also becomes aware of the overall civilian experience in wartime and the particular plight of refugees. The author informs her readers about essential information preceding the war and basic facts during the war, and as she tells the story of the family, we experience it.

This recently published book will ultimately be recognized as one of the best books for middle and high school students on the Korean War, and a captivating and inspiring read for people of all ages.

Brother's Keeper is notable for its historical accuracy, dramatic storytelling, and the beauty of the author's writing. The author is meticulous in her effort to be accurate and provides essential background about Japanese occupation, the division of Korea, and the harshness of life in Communist North Korea. The reader learns that during occupation (1910–1945) Japan banned their language, treated Koreans as an inferior race, confiscated almost everyone's land, and ordered all Koreans to take Japanese names. Many girls were kidnapped and families mourned, but some Japanese who knew these girls mourned too. With the defeat of Japan in 1945, Korea was finally liberated, but not for long. Suddenly, Korea was divided after being unified for nearly 1,300 years. Koreans in the North would now suffer under Communism.

The author introduces readers to the Pak family and vividly describes their home, the countryside, and the difficulties of life in Communist North Korea. The father (Abahji) and mother (Omahni) live with their children Sora (twelve) and Youngsoo (eight) in a small village fifty miles north of Pyongyang. When another child (Jisoo) is born, Sora must give up school to care for her brothers and help with household tasks. Since her parents are farmers, they need her assistance. Sora's mother is a constant critic, claiming that her daughter cannot cook, hates housework, and will never find a husband. Sora happens to be very bright and hopes to attend a university; however, it seems unlikely that this would ever be an option. She resents the fact that she can no longer attend school, but her brother can. Since Youngsoo has the privilege of being the eldest son, he will be the one to receive a university education.

Sora is well aware of the impact of Communism on her family and neighbors. She knows that teachers must tell students to believe that North Korea is a socialist paradise. Parents know if they complain about the government, their children might report them, as they have been given incentives to do so. Attendance is required at Communist Party meetings, but church attendance is forbidden. They know that the police can break into

their homes at any time. The police came to their home and took a relative. No one ever saw him again.

On June 25, 1950, North Korean troops open fire and launch a well-planned attack against South Korea. Equipped with Soviet tanks and fighter planes, North Koreans capture Seoul and overrun most of the Korean peninsula in three days, except for Busan, located on the lower tip of the Korean peninsula. Since the majority of Koreans in the North are Christians, they believe that the war might provide an opportunity to escape Communism and to practice their faith without being persecuted.

Abahji wants his family to escape, but Omahni believes that there is no point to risking their lives when the Communists have taken over most of the peninsula. They hear that all able-bodied men are being drafted in the army. To protect Abahji, they dig a hole where he will hide. When there is a knock on their door, it is a man from the People's Army coming for Abahji, but Omahni happens to be away from home with Youngsoo. Sora is alone caring for Jisoo. Since most of the family does not appear to be home, they leave without Abahji.

In September 1950, the Paks learn that an American general named MacArthur launched a surprise attack on Incheon, defeated the North Korean army, and recaptured Seoul. In October, they hear that the Americans with the support of United Nations troops may have captured Pyongyang; however, in November, Chinese units join the North Korean army and drive the United States and UN forces back again. Abahji decides that they must leave that very night as the American troops are leaving and says, "Once they are gone, we will be trapped forever." Omahni disagrees and fears that they could freeze to death or be shot by soldiers on the border. Sora supports her father, so it is two against one. They quickly pack, taking only the most essential items for their journey through war zones for nearly 300 miles. Sora says that "Omahni would be giving me the evil eye for the rest of my life."

As they travel south with other refugees, the group becomes a target of a bomb. Sora and Youngsoo become separated from their parents. She cannot find them and has no idea if they are still alive. Without any supplies, she must find her way walking through battlefields in the deadly cold of winter. She only has a world map and an address of relatives in Busan. She loves her brother and knows that it is her duty to protect him, but her affection for Youngsoo is mixed with resentment at his revered status as a son.

The children cross icy rivers and find food whenever they can. Sora says, "All I cared about in those days was food and shelter—no better than an animal, no better than a wolf." Youngsoo becomes sick with a bad cough, and now Sora must carry him on her back.

In spite of being told by kind travelers that they would have to cross more rivers, bridges were destroyed, and North Korean soldiers were coming fast, Sora notices that "the sky dimmed perfectly, turning deep orange and pink, more beautiful than I would've thought possible during war. Sometimes, we were granted these small gifts, perhaps as reminders that the sun would still rise and set on this world—even if it had gone crazy."

Sora represents the many thousands of Korean War refugees who strove with courage and hope for freedom and a better future. In these challenging times, twelve-year-old Sora could be an inspiration for secondary students that they can survive their challenges too. *Brother's Keeper* is definitely an empowering story for middle school girls.

Reading *Brother's Keeper* will not take much time. The book is 314 pages in length, and chapters are short. A map and a glossary of Korean words are provided. The author includes family photographs that will remind us that this story really happened and a timeline with historical information.¹ In the final section, Julie Lee provides information about her extensive research.

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RESOURCES

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Every page of *Brother's Keeper* is carefully crafted. I could visualize virtually every part of the story and even found myself dreaming about it. I became totally absorbed in their harrowing journey. I felt the cold, their hunger, fear, and sadness. I visualized Korean mountains and valleys in black and white. I became a witness to death and the tragedy of war.

Brother's Keeper is described as a middle school book, but it is definitely a suitable and valuable book for both middle and high school students. As someone who taught on the secondary level for a period of forty years, I envision many opportunities for both middle and high school educators to teach *Brother's Keeper* collaboratively or independently in English and history classes.

I retired from classroom teaching fifteen years ago; however, for the first time, I regretted that I was no longer a classroom teacher. I would love to teach *Brother's Keeper*, as it has so much potential for meaningful classroom discussions and writing experiences.

We would examine Julie Lee's ability to get the reader emotionally involved in the story. Students would study the beauty of the author's writing by examining passages that describe the family's home, the landscape as they travel south, the dangers they experience, their grief and moments of joy. Everyone would be required to reread the first and last chapter to study how effective beginnings and endings can add to the sheer power and meaning of a story.

We would explore Sora's difficult relationship with her mother. What were the cultural and generational reasons for their difficulties? Since secondary students have studied Confucianism, they could become engaged in a lesson where they would explore their own "home culture." If they adopted Confucian principles in their everyday language, family dynamics, and activities in their home, what might family life be like? This lesson was enlightening for my students. It would also deepen their understanding of their reading and their contemporaries who are Asian.² Some students will express interest in discussing issues that they are experiencing with family members.

After completing our study of *Brother's Keeper*, I would provide students with a copy of the Bill of Rights. I would ask two questions: Do North Koreans have any of these rights? Why are they still living under authoritarian rule? The discussion should lead to a deeper understanding of the words on the Korean War Memorial in Washington, DC ("freedom is never free").

In terms of writing assignments, I believe there are many options that will be interesting to middle and high school students. They could use Julie Lee's narrative model to write a creative story that includes factual information. Since students will be studying history, they will have an opportunity to build on what they have studied or are currently studying in their classes. Teachers will need to provide suggestions on topics students might explore and how to locate accurate historical information that will enhance their stories. To encourage intergenerational communication, ask the students if they have access to grandparents or others of that generation. If so, generate together interview questions they might ask of these people, and share highlights and surprises during class in what was learned. *Sijo*, a Korean poetic form, could be introduced and used as a medium for students to express their personal ways of relating to Sora's story and possibly to something in their own lives.³

The author writes that "there is a great need to share the stories of refugee survivors as they have been largely untold." Right now, there are more refugees in the world than at any time since World War II. Some students may wish to interview refugees and tell their stories. Others may wish to research refugees from different parts of the world. They should find out what drove them into becoming refugees, what their situations

are now, and what organizations and governments are doing to help them or hurt them.⁴ This effort could lead to an article in the school newspaper and ideally become the basis for a school service project. □

NOTES

1. PowerPoint lectures ("Japanese Occupation," "The Korean War," and "Inside North Korea") are available to download on the National Korean Studies seminar website at www.koreanseminar.org. Photographs of the Korean War can be found on the following websites: from *The New York Times* at <https://tinyurl.com/aw5tdd8m> and via a Google search at <https://tinyurl.com/y85s47ae>.
2. A lesson about Confucianism may be found on pages 222–226 in the *Teaching East Asia: Korea* e-book located on the National Korean Studies seminar website.
3. Information about teaching *sijo* is located on the Sejong Cultural Society website: www.sejongculturalsociety.org (see resources, which include excellent videos that explain *sijo* and how to teach this poetic form). The website also provides information about an annual *sijo* poetry competition that includes generous awards for both teachers and students.
4. Information is available on numerous sites, such as the United Nations Refugee Agency.

MARY CONNOR taught United States history and Asian studies for thirty-five years. She is the Author of *The Koreas (Asia in Focus)* (2009) and the recipient of the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award, the Prime Minister's Award from the Republic of Korea, and the Daekyo Enopi Award. She is the Cofounder of the Korea Academy for Educators and the National Korean Studies Seminar. Both organizations are dedicated to informing educators about Korean history and culture.

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