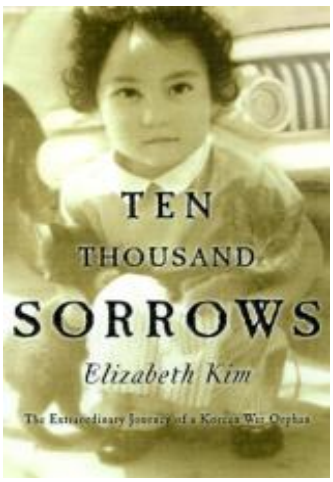
Ten Thousand Sorrows: The Extraordinary Journey of a Korean War Orphan

by Elizabeth Kim



About the Book

> *Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment, and especially on their children, than the unlived life of the parents.*
> --Carl Jung, from **Paracelsus**

Elizabeth Kim knows little of the Korean village where she was born, or the "official" facts of her birth such as its day, month, or year. She knows even less of her father, an American soldier in Korea who deserted her mother, her Omma. But in the four or five or six years that Kim lived in her mother's warm embrace and sheltering shadow, she came to know much about the woman whose love and sorrow, strength and resilience, rebellion and pride, and brutal murder loom large in her life.

A veil of sorrow, slowly parted, is a thing of beauty, an act of faith. And in her memoir, **Ten Thousand Sorrows: The Extraordinary Journey of a Korean War Orphan**, author Elizabeth Kim shows us how she lifted that veil, and learned to see clearly the sorrows and joys that are the stepping-stones of her life.

> *Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be.*
> --Jane Austen, from **Emma**

As if witnessing her grandfather and uncle murdering her mother were not trauma enough, Kim is then abandoned at a Korean orphanage where she is a virtual prisoner with little physical or emotional comfort. Months later, Kim's adoption by an American couple puts an end to the physical deprivation and begins a different kind of hardship. Her Fundamentalist adoptive parents may mean well, but they are ill-equipped to give her more than food and shelter, and it

is difficult to read their actions as anything but cruel. Kim continues her life having endured more direct trauma by age seventeen than most people have witnessed by age seventy.

> *It is seldom indeed that one parts on good terms, because if one were on good terms, one would not part.*
> --Marcel Proust, from **Remembrance of Things Past**

Kim's tale continues with her arranged marriage to a Fundamentalist deacon who beats, humiliates, and hates her. She returns that last favor. She also has the strength (and as she admits, weakness) to become pregnant by purposely not practicing birth control, something her husband had insisted upon. Ultimately it is her daughter, Leigh, who gives Kim the strength to leave her brutal husband. Like her Omma, Kim is devoted to protecting and nurturing her daughter. Unlike her, Kim is able to take her daughter and flee.

> *A young child knows Mother as a smelled skin, a halo of light, a strength in the arms, a voice that trembles with feeling.*
> --Annie Dillard, from **An American Childhood**

At this point, we see Kim gathering her meager resources and shouldering on to give Leigh what her Omma gave her: a childhood with little money but with her a loving presence. And Kim works hard to make a better life for them both along the way. She takes college classes, and finds reporting jobs, first at small newspapers, and then at bigger ones. She scrapes and scraps and struggles, always with her daughter in mind, and always with an eye out for others who, like her, have been brutalized and ill-used by those who are more powerful. She gives everything she can to her daughter, including the truth.

> *My religion is loving-kindness.*
> --Dalai Lama

Once Leigh is in her early teens, Kim begins the journey to her own emotional and spiritual health and healing, which she had, for the most part, disregarded while concentrating on survival. During these years, Kim fights valiantly to reclaim her mother, her dreams, and the child that she was--the child that everyone, even Kim herself, had pushed away. Kim's epiphany of practicing loving-kindness toward herself did not take place in a year or a month or a week or a moment. Instead it was earned and learned over a lifetime of sorrows that she now recognizes travel alongside great joys.

Discussion Guide

1. The author tells her story in basic chronological order except for the opening, which flashes forward. How does this opening scene inform the rest of the book? Would it have had the same effect if it had come later in the book?

2. Talk about the author's use of her own poems in the book and the influence of other poets, especially Millay, on her life.

3. There is an overlay of sadness in this memoir. Discuss its various forms and rhythms in different chapters and sections

of the book. Where does sadness drape thickly? Where does it intrude sharply? Does it ever abate?

4. This memoir suggests that geography imprints a person's soul. Talk about this in relation to the author's feelings about the desert and the mountains.

5. Compare and contrast the different mothers in this memoir--their power and their weakness. For instance, Kim is not sold into slavery in Korea only because the family that was willing to buy her demanded her mother's approval.

6. The author's earliest memories center on the ritual that her mother made of meals, however meager those meals were. Discuss the role of food in this book.

7. The author portrays her Fundamentalist father as a study in contrasts. Publicly, he is kind, caring, and devoted to his congregation. Privately, Kim says he is deeply caring too, but harsh and judgmental in his manner. Talk about these contradictions and about the Fundamentalist faith in which the author was steeped as a girl.

8. Fear plays a big role in Kim's life once she is brought to the United States. Talk about the different ways fear had an impact on her life, from the Bosch painting that hung over her bed to her abusive husband.

9. At which points in Kim's life did somebody from outside her family give her hope, and assure Kim that it was her parents, not she, who were crazy? Could her story have been different had there been more such people or had they taken a more active role?

10. When her grandmother comes to live with them, the author's life changes again. Discuss Kim's relationship with her grandmother and what she comes to understand about her grandmother and her mother.

11. What is the role of dreams in this book?

12. The author's daughter, Leigh, has a voice in this memoir. Twice Leigh offers her view of her mother and of the way they've lived. Discuss the author's choice to include this other voice and the perspective it gives.

13. The author chooses a profession that enables her to give a voice to those that have none. Talk about this choice.Why do you think she chose this job?

14. As the author works her way out of depression, she quotes Blake about those who are without hope, and she explores the meaning of suffering. Talk about the journey she takes to get to the point where she recognizes the ten thousand joys in life and not only the ten thousand sorrows.

Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

Author Bio

They called it an "honor killing," but to Elizabeth Kim, the night she watched her grandfather and uncle hang her mother from the wooden rafter in the corner of their small Korean hut, it was cold-blooded murder. Her Omma had committed the sin of lying with an American soldier, and producing not just a bastard, but a *honhyol*, a mixed-race child considered worth less than nothing. After spending time in a prisonlike orphanage, Kim was adopted by a childless Fundamentalist pastor and his wife in the United States. From here, her story continues as she struggles in a culture that judges her and her Asian features as inferior.

After escaping her adoptive parents' home, only to find herself in an abusive and controlling marriage, Kim finally made a break for herself by having a daughter and running away with her to a safer haven--something her Omma could not do for her.

Unflinching in her narration, Kim tells of her sorrow with a steady and riveting voice, and ultimately transcends it by laying claim to all the joys to which she is entitled.

Elizabeth Kim is a journalist in California.

Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

Ten Thousand Sorrows: The Extraordinary Journey of a Korean War Orphan

by Elizabeth Kim

Publication Date: September 14, 2012
Hardcover: 240 pages
Publisher: Doubleday
ISBN-10: 0385496338
ISBN-13: 9780385496339