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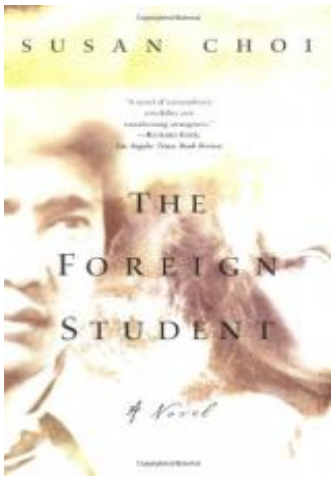
The Foreign Student

by Susan Choi



About the Book

Susan Choi's story of improbable love brings together a displaced Korean student and a rebellious young American woman, two outsiders who seek solace and escape from the afflictions of their pasts. Chang Ahn has experienced first-hand the horrors, political turmoil, and betrayals of the Korean war. Hoping to leave behind his nightmarish memories, Chang escapes from his war-torn country and arrives at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, in August 1955. Unprepared for the totally different world of Sewanee, Chang--nicknamed Chuck--takes pride in his carefully guarded "compact self-sufficiency," practicing his English with the charismatic Professor Charles Addison and deciphering the rules of college life, where he does not quite fit. Then he meets Katherine Monroe, who quickly becomes the unsettling center of his attention.

The brilliant and impetuous twenty-eight-year-old Katherine is something of a figure in Sewanee. The daughter of a well-to-do Southern family, she has rebelled since childhood against the conventions of family and society, settling in her family's old summer house in Sewanee and into an obsessive affair with Charles Addison, who seduced her when she was fourteen. Estranged from her mother and unhappy with Addison, Katherine is as much a loner and outsider as is Chang. As Katherine and Chang struggle with their respective histories and move toward love and mutual understanding, alternating chapters reveal the details of their pasts. Harrowing accounts of Chang's experiences in Korea are juxtaposed with troubling revelations of Katherine's childhood and young adult years; both contribute to our understanding of who they are and where they may be going between the autumn of 1955 and the summer of 1956. And as their stories unfold, we gradually come to understand both the seemingly impassable differences and the surprising affinities between them as well.

Discussion Guide

1. How are Katherine and Chang similar in terms of family, education, social class, and other factors? What kinds of

experience and influences do they have in common? In what way is each a refugee?

2. What losses do Chang, Katherine, and other characters suffer? How does each deal with his or her losses? How do their losses affect their subsequent lives and expectations?

3. Choi writes that it was his past "against which Joe [Monroe] defined himself, and which in Katherine's family set the standard for everything." (pg. 24) To what extent is this also true of Katherine, herself, of Chang, of Addison, and of other characters? How does it relate to Chang's being "used to the constant pressure of the future"? (pg. 41) At what point do Katherine and Chang, in fact, permit the present and possible futures to provide the standards for their thoughts, feelings, and behavior?

4. In what ways are Katherine and Chang independent? In what ways are their lives constricted or determined by society, other people, and other outside forces? What does each learn about independence and dependency?

5. Through his work as a translator, Chang learns that "you wanted one thing to equal another, to slide neatly into its place, but somehow this very desire made the project impossible. In the end there was always a third thing, that hadn't existed before." (pg. 67) To what extent does this also apply to cultural and personal issues confronted by both Chang and Katherine? To what extent are Chang and Katherine each "the third thing . . . Translation's unnatural byproduct"? (pg. 84)

6.Katherine tells Chang, "In my family you never could move a muscle without it being a declaration of loyalty to somebody and war to somebody else." (pg. 150) What loyalties and betrayals, actual and imagined, are important in Katherine's and Chang's lives? What is the impact of each? To what extent does a fear of betraying and of being betrayed hinder each of them in their relationships?

7. What borders and boundaries--for example: geographical, emotional, cultural--are crossed or transgressed? What are the consequences of each crossing or transgression?

8. To what extent is the "total, irresolvable uncertainty" that Chang carries with him after his release from torture characteristic of life itself? How do Chang, Katherine, Addison and others deal with the "total, irresolvable uncertainty" of life?

9. What are Chang and Katherine each looking for that each finds in the other?

10. What are the implications of Choi's setting her story of an interracial love in the American South of the mid-1950s? Why do you think she makes only muted and indirect references to racial prejudice and condescension?

Author Bio

Susan Choi is the author of TRUST EXERCISE, which received the National Book Award for fiction, as well as the novels THE FOREIGN STUDENT, AMERICAN WOMAN, A PERSON OF INTEREST, MY EDUCATION and FLASHLIGHT. She is a recipient of the Asian-American Literary Award for fiction, the PEN/W. G. Sebald Award, a

Lambda Literary award, the *Sunday Times* Audible Short Story Award, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. She teaches in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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