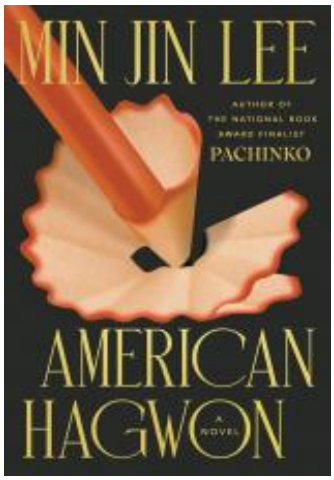
American Hagwon

by Min Jin Lee



About the Book

The National Book Award finalist and *New York Times* bestselling author of PACHINKO returns with a breathtaking contemporary epic: a masterpiece by turns sweeping and intimate that reckons with ambition and moderation, lust and loyalty, personal dreams and familial duty.

In schools and churches, hotel rooms and nail salons, law firms and fried-fish shops; in cramped, dingy apartments and luxury, gated communities, the men, women and children in AMERICAN HAGWON struggle to find satisfaction and meaning in a world that seems to grow less forgiving with each passing year. Once comfortably middle class in Korea, John and Helen Koh and their three children --- Bo, DH and Mido --- find their lives upended, first by a shocking betrayal by John?s oldest friend, then by the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Desperately striving to regain their footing, they leave Seoul for Sydney and eventually settle in Southern California --- where new vistas of opportunity open up for the children as their parents, strangers in a strange land, must adjust to a new life in which their experience and education mean little, and they set their sights on whatever it takes to provide for their children?s futures. The Kohs, their friends, relatives and even their foes move in and out of each other?s lives as they navigate new courses across the years, always nursing the almost all-consuming faith that education will lead the next generation to success and security.

In AMERICAN HAGWON, Min Jin Lee has crafted an unforgettable, panoramic novel where the smallest of gestures can have enormous repercussions, where the bonds of family and of memory twist and fray but rarely break, and where willful self-sacrifice --- for the benefit of loved ones and even strangers --- is a kind of prayer.

Discussion Guide

Please note that the following questions may contain spoilers for their section. We recommend you read only after you?ve finished that section.

Book I: March 1992 - January 1995

1. The opening line of AMERICAN HAGWON --- ?The rules of engagement have changed already? --- serves as a thesis statement for the novel. What does the line mean to you, and how does it set the tone for the story?

2. Mido, the youngest of the Koh siblings, is very shy. How do the adults in her life respond to her shyness? As she moves between the US, Australia and Korea, is her shyness valued differently?

3. How would you describe John and Taehun?s friendship? Looking at the transactional nature of their working relationship, would you say the mutual benefits of sticking together are balanced?

4. In ?Shimcheong,? the pastor recalls the folk tale of Shimcheong, about a daughter who sacrifices her life for her father?s health. In his sermon, he also implores, ?For what do we give up everything? What do you love more than your child?? Did you draw parallels between the sermon and the story, and what effect did the sermon have on you as a reader?

5. How would you describe hagwons? Can you identify hagwon-like programs from your own experience, and how are they similar to hagwons in Korea? How are they different?

6. What are Helen and John?s views on hagwons? Why is it important to them that their children receive a good education? What responsibilities do Helen and John have to their children?

7. DH goes on to attend boarding school in New England, and he?s set up to attend university in the US, too. What are the advantages for Korean children like DH who seek education outside of Korea? What are the costs?

8. How does Mido and Yun?s friendship shape their lives? Does it differ from the ways in which DH and Peter?s friendship shapes theirs?

9. John acquiesces to Taehun?s order to fire Danbi, which backfires. Did you sympathize more with John or with Danbi? Did you agree with John?s decision?

Book II: November 1996 - March 1999

1. How does the suneung compare to the university entrance testing where you?re from? Do you agree with Bo?s decision to retake it?

2. After Bo fails the suneung a second time, Sonya tells him, ?We don?t believe in the Korean education system.? What do you think she means by this? Why do you think Bo is so determined to attend university in Korea?

3. How does this section portray the ramifications of the Asian Financial Crisis, across Korea, Australia and the US?

4. Mido weighs leaving Australia for the US, joining her parents and leaving Tek behind. Yun wants to stay in the US --- even with her father?s exit and her mother?s desire to leave --- and marrying Lion would simplify her road to citizenship. What roles do geography and citizenship play in these and other relationships in the novel?

5. In a letter to Mido, Yun writes: ?I used to think my parents knew everything, but I don?t think they do. I used to think they were so wise. How do you live a wise life, I wonder.? Did you relate to Yun?s line of questioning?

6. After arriving in the US, John and Helen Koh have very different experiences than those of their children. What do those differences say about immigration? Do you see historic parallels, either in the stories of your own family or those you may have read about?

7. In a letter to Tek, Mido experiences doubts about finishing her degree. How would you weigh your options in her situation?

8. What was your reaction to Ginny?s situation with the homestay guardian? Who did you empathize with --- Ginny, her parents and/or the homestay guardian? As a child, were you ever similarly caught up in the problems of adults?

9. What role does community play as the Kohs and other characters immigrate to the US?

Book III: October 1999 - January 2001

1. What connections does Bo make between Maslow?s hierarchy of needs and his own needs? How does Bo adjust to Cal State Fullerton, in light of his attempts to attend Yonsei University?

2. What was your reaction to Sonya and Danbi?s confrontation at the church?

3. DH finally learns that Peter?s mom paid for his high school tuition and is paying for college, too. In his situation, how would you respond to such a revelation?

4. Mido and Tek get into an argument when he visits her in Orange County. Did you understand where they both were coming from? Who did you agree with?

5. How did Tek leave a bad impression on Mido?s brothers?

6. What was your reaction to Tek?s proposal?

7. Taehun extends an olive branch to John after Helen is diagnosed with cancer. How would you respond in John?s situation?

8. What did you think of Mido?s advice to her rebellious student, Susie?

9. What are the effects of class on the Kohs? and Ginny?s pursuit of education? What are the effects of class on college

admissions where you are today?

10. Lion?s first hagwon is named Exodus to represent his own freedom. When he expands his business, he names his second hagwon Fortress. Why do you think he chooses this name?

Book IV: January 2003 - December 2005

1. What do the Koh siblings learn and reflect upon as they clean up their mother?s belongings?

2. Mr. Shim is a hagwon instructor who gets fired for using illegal copies of SAT tests. Did you understand Mr. Shim?s rationale for doing so? Why do Mido and Peter think hagwon instructors have a bad reputation?

3. What frustrations do the hagwon instructors have about US college admissions? What is the thought behind the hagwon-led college tour?

4. How do Peter and Tek view Mido?s life path? In what way are their viewpoints similar, and how do they differ?

5. What do students and parents expect to get out of Lion?s hagwon? Do their expectations match Lion?s objectives for his hagwon?

6. What point is Lion trying to make by telling the story of Hong Gildong? Do you agree with him?

7. How do students and parents respond to Lion?s lectures? What did you think of their rebuttals?

Book V: January 2006 - May 2007

1. When Mido meets Peter?s mother, Renee, how does Renee surprise her?

2. What is the rationale behind opening an American hagwon in Korea?

3. After Taehun?s death, what did you think of John?s visit to Danbi in jail? How did you react to Danbi?s ultimate downfall?

4. Compare the marriages between Helen and John, Danbi and Taehun, and Sonya and Yong-gil.

5. What are Mido?s views on marriage?

6. Sonya remarks, ?A mother is a child?s first teacher.? Throughout the novel, how do parents take on the role of teachers and vice versa?

7. When Sung isn?t admitted to Eagle Academy/Fortress Seoul, how do he and his parents fight the result? Peter ends the conversation by saying, ?It?s like a disease, I think. This constant battle between greedy ambition versus moderation.? What did you think of the whole exchange?

8. What played into Mido?s final decision, and do you think she made the right one?

9. What did you think of the ending? What does John?s act signify, and how does it relate to the story as a whole?

10. Recall Yun?s words in her letter to Mido: ?How do you live a wise life, I wonder.? What answers does AMERICAN HAGWON provide to this question?

11. Who were your favorite characters?

Author Bio

Min Jin Lee is the author of the novels FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES; PACHINKO, a finalist for the National Book Award, runner-up for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and a *New York Times* ?100 Best Books of the Century?; and AMERICAN HAGWON.

She serves as the New York State Author Laureate from 2025 through 2027. She is the 2024 recipient of The Fitzgerald Prize for Literary Excellence. Lee has received the Manhae Grand Prize for Literature, the Bucheon Diaspora Literary Award, and the Samsung Happiness for Tomorrow Award for Creativity from South Korea. She is the recipient of fellowships in Fiction from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Lee is an inductee of the New York Foundation for the Arts Hall of Fame and the New York State Writers Hall of Fame. She lives in Harlem with her family.

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