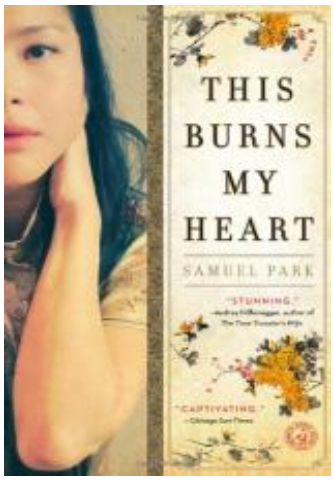
This Burns My Heart: A Novel

by Samuel Park



About the Book

On the eve of her marriage, beautiful and strong-willed Soo-Ja Choi receives a passionate proposal from a young medical student. But caught up in her desire to pursue a career in Seoul, she turns him away, having impetuously chosen another man who she believes will let her fulfill her dreams. Instead, she finds herself tightly bound by tradition and trapped in a suffocating marriage, her ambition reduced to carving out a successful future for her only daughter. Through it all, she longs for the man she truly loves, whose path she seems destined to cross again and again. In **This Burns My Heart**, Samuel Parks has crafted a transcendent love story that vibrantly captures 1960s South Korea and brings to life an unforgettable heroine.

Discussion Guide

1. Early in their courtship, Soo-Ja thinks of Min as weak: ?But what she realized was that she wouldn?t mind that --- being the strong one. She?d like to swoop in and care for Min, who seemed like such a lost soul sometimes? He was the opposite of Yul, who seemed to need nothing and no one.? (p. 51-52) Is Soo-Ja?s perception accurate? Does Min change throughout the book, or has he just masked himself during their courtship? Is Soo-Ja naïve to want such an unbalanced (and untraditional) relationship?

2. Soo-Ja is angry that she was tricked by Min, but her objective was to trick him as well: ?She thought she was the one using him, when the opposite had been true.? (p. 81) Is she getting what she deserved? Who had better motivation? Do their motivations matter?

3. Why do Soo-Ja and Yul have such a strong connection, even though they rarely see each other?

4. Discuss Soo-Ja?s relationship with her parents. Which parent is she closer to? Which parent understands her better?

5. Compare Soo-Ja?s relationship with her parents with that of Min and his parents. Do you see any similarities?

6. After hearing about Soo-Ja?s ordeal when Hana was lost, her father tells her, ?When you let me be your father and let me worry about you, care for you, and even suffer for you, you?re not doing a favor to yourself, you?re doing a favor to me. When you need me, I am alive.? (p. 177) Discuss the significance of this statement. How is this true in his life and in Soo-Ja?s? Do you think this statement applies to all parents?

7. Min asks Soo-Ja, ?If you had to choose, would you rather be yourself or Eun-Mee?? (p. 291) in an attempt to elicit empathy from her. Soo-Ja realizes, ?The thing about capturing a prize fish is that everyone admires the fish, and soon forgets about the fisherman.? (p. 292) Do you think Soo-Ja feels pity for Min? Do you? Why or why not?

8. When Hana tells Soo-Ja she should have done something about her unhappiness, Soo-Ja realizes, ?She had never lived for herself, and in that, she found her greatest mistake and her greatest glory. Her selflessness had not been entirely chosen, but rather forced out of her, by her family? (p. 332), and then tells Hana that it is indeed her own fault. Do you agree? What could Soo-Ja have done differently? What would you have done in her place? What forces were working against her?

9. Why does Min finally agree to let Soo-Ja and Hana go? What causes his change of heart, and why did it take him so long?

10. The title of the novel is This Burns My Heart, which is how Soo-Ja and Yul feel about their forced separation. Discuss the meaning of the title, and how Soo-Ja and Yul deal with their pain. What else does the title capture in the novel?

11. Throughout the novel, Soo-Ja regrets saying ?No? to Yul?s proposal back when she was 22. ?We?re only given one life, and it?s the one we live, she had thought; how painful now, to realize that wasn?t true, that you would have different lives, depending on how brave you were, and how ready.? (p. 285) How does this statement compare with her revelation that ?The life she had was in fact the one she?d been supposed to have? (p. 352). Reread both passages. Which do you agree with, or do you have a different philosophy? In your own life, can you see one monumental decision that changed the course of your life, even if you didn?t know it at the time?

12. Discuss the role of women in the novel. How does their position in society shift during Soo-Ja?s lifetime? Think about the increasing opportunities for Soo-Ja?s mother, herself, and her daughter Hana.

13. The changing society of South Korea after the Korean War provides the backdrop for the story, and one of the themes of this novel is the balance of traditional family roles with an increasingly modern society. Discuss examples of this conflict that stood out to you in the novel. How do you see the growth of the country evidenced throughout the novel?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Learn more about the time period of This Burns My Heart and the struggles between North and South Korea. Read about Korean customs and history at http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm#history and check out maps and photos at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ks.html.

2. Try some Korean food at your book club meeting, such as kimchi (a vegetable side dish), bulgogi (Korean barbecue), or bibimbab (vegetables and rice). Find recipes and information about Korean dining customs at http://www.lifeinkorea.com/food/index.cfm. If you want to avoid dishes, try holding your meeting at a Korean restaurant instead!

3. The girls who stay at Soo-Ja?s hotel are fans of the Korean band the Pearl Sisters. Check out the video for one of the band?s most popular songs at the author?s website, http://samuelpark.com/clips.

Author Bio

Samuel Park was an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago. He graduated from Stanford University and the University of Southern California, where he earned his doctorate. He is the author of the novella SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS and the writer-director of a short film of the same name, which was an official selection of numerous domestic and international film festivals. He is also the author of the novels THIS BURNS MY HEART and THE CAREGIVER. His nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*. Born in Brazil and raised in Los Angeles, he split his time between Chicago and Los Angeles. In April 2017, Samuel Park died of stomach cancer at the age of 41 shortly after finishing THE CAREGIVER.

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