Finding My Voice Study Guide

Finding My Voice by Marie G. Lee

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Finding My Voice (1992) is a familiar American coming-of-age story from an unfamiliar perspective. In her debut novel, author Marie G. Lee, the American child of Korean immigrants, explores questions of belonging, pressure (from both parents and peers), and racism for a girl like herself in modern small-town America. Through her protagonist, Ellen Sung, Lee examines what it feels like to be an outsider and how the assimilation process started by immigrant parents is completed by their children. In this novel, Ellen must navigate the expectations of friends and family while trying to figure out who she is.

Finding My Voice reflects Lee's own experiences as a high school student and a member of the only Korean family, indeed the only family of color, in the small Minnesota town in which she was born and raised. The author admits to including autobiographical elements to the story but says the primary character, Ellen Sung, is fictional. In an autobiographical sketch published in the *Eighth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*, Lee explained:

It wasn't me, but someone very much like me. Perhaps James Baldwin was right when he said that novelists always write their first novel about their own lives because they have years of accumulated gunk to get off their chest. Well, that's exactly what I did: I wrote my heart out.

The inspiration for *Finding My Voice* came from a time Lee drove with her father through a number of small towns in Minnesota on the way to go skiing. In one particular community, Lee observed two football players in their letterman jackets walking down the street, and she thought it would be interesting to write about such communities and the importance of the letter jacket.

In the story, Ellen's father wants her to go to Harvard, like her older sister, and become a doctor—his American dream of success. Throughout the novel, Ellen works on understanding her parents while defining herself and what success means to her, getting a boyfriend, and dealing with racism. Ellen shudders at the racist comments directed at her throughout the story, but she does next to nothing until the novel's end.

When cheerleader/star gymnast Marsha Randall's racial taunts lead to violence, Ellen finally stands up for herself. Over the course of the novel, Ellen becomes more self-confident and sure of some of the choices she is making as an individual. She does not let the physical scars from Marsha's attack deter her from leaving her Minnesota hometown, seeing the larger world, and going to Harvard.

Kirkus Reviews endorsed the book, finding that *Finding My Voice* "is filled with searing truths about day-to-day racism…. Honestly rendered, and never didactic, the story allows readers first to flinch in recognition, and then to look into their own hearts."

Finding My Voice won the Best Book Award from the Friends of American Writers. The young adult novel also received several other honors such as being named the Best Book for Reluctant Readers by the American Library Association in 1992 and a Children's Choice citation by the International Reading Association in 1994.

Author Biography

Marie G. Lee

Marie G. Lee was born in April 25, 1964, in Hibbing, Minnesota. Her parents were immigrants from Korea who came to the United States a decade earlier. Like the Sungs in *Finding My Voice*, her family was the only Korean family in town and her father worked as a doctor. Lee liked to dream and read as a child, often more than she enjoyed making friends. She was drawn to books with alienated characters, such as S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967). Lee also began writing when she was quite young, though she did not share her stories and poems with anyone until she was much older.

Entering Brown University to become a doctor, Lee changed her academic focus and earned a degree in economics in 1986. To please her family, she then pursued a professional career, first as a consultant at Standard and Poor's, then as an editor at Goldman Sachs. Because Lee still felt drawn to writing, she began working on books, including her debut *Finding My Voice* (1992), in her spare time. By the early 1990s, Lee was focusing on writing full time. She drew on her own experiences as a Korean American to create characters who are outsiders because of their race in a number of novels for young adults and younger readers. She has published several other novels, including *If It Hadn't Been for Yoon Jun* (1993), *Necessary Roughness* (1996), *F Is for Fabuloso* (1999), and *Somebody's Daughter* (2005). As of 2006, she is a visiting lecturer at Brown University.

As Ellen boards the school bus, a popular boy named Brad Whitlock pushes her and says, "Hey chink, move over." No one says anything, and Ellen becomes upset by the comment. She arrives at school and meets up with her best friend Jessie. Jessie can tell something is wrong, but Ellen does not share the incident.

In chemistry class, Ellen sits with her friend Beth. Ellen also notices that Tomper, a popular jock, is in the class. He greets Ellen and later tells her he will go to her first gymnastics meet. Ellen also has Tomper and Beth in her last class of the day, English composition. In this class, Ellen has to partner with Mike Anderson, a rather unintelligent but popular hockey player, for a vocabulary project. She helps him while noting the reaction he gets in class because of his popularity.

Chapter 2

At dinner that night, Ellen feels the pressure created by the success of her older sister, Michelle. Michelle was an excellent student in high school and now attends Harvard. Ellen's parents ask her about school. She is tempted to tell them what happened on the bus and daydreams about how they would react: "With all this stress I think Ellen should worry less about grades and more about having a fun senior year and making friends," she imagines her mother saying. But she does not tell her parents about the incident.

Ellen's father always eats Korean food and Ellen and her mother always eat American food.

Chapter 3

At school, Jessie wants Ellen to go to a keg party. Though Ellen thinks it will be hard to get permission to stay out late that Friday, she agrees to go. In chemistry class on Friday, Tomper asks if Ellen will be at the party. That night after dinner, Ellen gets permission to go to a movie with Jessie.

Many high school students are at the party. Tomper fills Ellen's and Jessie's cups from the keg. Jessie notes that Marsha Randall, a cheerleader and captain of the gymnastics team, and her friends are drinking V-8 juice instead of beer because of their participation in sports: "'What a bunch of showoffs, those cheerleaders,' Jessie says, probably loud enough that Marsha and her friends can hear." Ellen says that she "admire[s] how Jessie says exactly what's on her mind." When Ellen goes with Jessie to get another beer, Ellen notices that Marsha is putting beer in her V-8 can. Tomper starts talking to Ellen and guides her to a dark spot where they can see the stars. He kisses her—her first kiss, she admits—but Ellen soon has to go home.

Chapter 4

In chemistry class on Monday, Tomper leaves before she can talk to him. He is also elusive around English class. Tomper works with Marsha on a class assignment, and Ellen notices that the two seem very friendly. In the locker room before gymnastics practice, Ellen overhears Marsha tell others that she is pursuing Tomper. "When I watch her during practice—her beautiful hair and long strong body—I can't see how Tomper could possibly like me if he can have *her*," Ellen thinks.

Chapter 5

Working in the chemistry lab, Ellen accidentally breaks a pipette. When Ellen offers to pay for it, the teacher, Mr. Borgland, tells her, "You Orientals are always trying to save money." Learning she is Korean, Borgland adds, "You Koreans WOK your dogs!" and laughs. Ellen is mortified by him and what he has said. Ellen cries as she prepares to leave school, and Jessie insists that Ellen come home with her. Learning what happened, Jessie is outraged by Borgland's racist remarks. She believes Ellen should tell the principal. Ellen will not because she believes it will not change anything. Ellen also does not want to deal with her parents' reaction.

Chapter 6

Ellen responds to Borgland's comments by studying harder and glaring at him occasionally. Ellen and Jessie are unhappy that Brad and Marsha have been selected as candidates for homecoming king and queen, but during gymnastics practice, Ellen congratulates Marsha on her nomination. The gymnastics coach, Barbara, tells Ellen

that she will be competing in junior varsity in two events at the meet the next day. At the meet, Tomper and Jessie are there to show support for Ellen. She does well on the balance beam and floor events, winning the former and placing second in the latter. Ellen stays to cheer for Beth and the rest of the varsity squad. They are impressed that Marsha can perform a difficult move called a "Valdez" on the beam. After the meet, Tomper speaks to Ellen, but he leaves holding hands with Marsha. Ellen realizes that she has feelings for him. She thinks, "Books, Tomper, letter jackets, parties, friends. Where do I fit into this mess?"

Chapter 7

Mrs. Klasten, the English teacher, announces in class that Ellen has set a record: "She's gotten a perfect score on the weekly vocab tests to date—six weeks!" After class, Tomper finds Ellen and congratulates her. At home that night, Ellen shares her triumph with her parents. Her father only cares that the achievement will matter to colleges. Her parents also want to know what colleges she will visit and interview with, besides Harvard. "Father seems to be living in a universe made up of only a few neat and orderly images: books, Harvard, good grades, being a doctor or lawyer," Ellen observes. "I think of my head and its chaotic crush of ideas, worries, joys, and I wonder how I came to be so different from my father."

Chapter 8

At gymnastics practice, Ellen asks her coach to help her learn a Valdez on the low beam. After practice, Marsha walks by Ellen and says, "Hey ching-ching-a-ling. Ah-so." Ellen again feels horrible and starts to cry. Beth leaves with her. As they pass Marsha and her friend Diane again, Marsha says, "Ching chong Chinaman." Beth stands up for Ellen, but Marsha makes another racist remark. Ellen does not understand why she is being picked on and starts to feel ill.

At home, Ellen's parents are gone for the weekend. She thinks about Marsha, remembering that she heard that her tormentor is unintelligent. Ellen thinks that leaving Arkin, her hometown, will help, and she decides to apply to Harvard, Brown, and Wellesley. The next morning, Ellen snoops around her father's study. As she wonders about why their family lives in Arkin, she finds two small scrapbooks with articles about her father. She learns that her father came to America after the Korean War and had an internship in California. She also finds pictures of her father's relatives and her mother in her wedding dress as well as many letters in Korean, a language she does not read.

Chapter 9

Ellen and her mother fly east to visit the colleges. Ellen first goes to Wellesley, a women's college. While her mother stays in town, Ellen stays overnight with a student named Caitlin. Ellen observes at dinner that students focus on social lives, not classes. Ellen's mother next drives them to Boston, and Ellen goes to her interview at Harvard. During the interview, she tells her interviewer, Jeff Rose, that she is looking for a more

diverse environment and that she has suffered from racial taunting. Later, Michelle gives her advice and the sisters study together in the library. Finally, Ellen and her mother drive to Rhode Island to visit Brown. This interview also goes well, and Ellen stays overnight with a student-athlete named Betsy. Flying home with her mother, Ellen is unsure which college is right for her. She thinks, "is the question where would I be happiest going or where would Mom and Father be happiest sending me?"

Chapter 10

In calculus class, Ellen realizes that she is not doing well on a test. She hopes to distract herself from her worries in gymnastics practice, but Marsha again taunts her with a racial slur. Ellen decides to say something to her coach. Ellen tells Barbara she is thinking of quitting because of what has been said to her. Barbara dismisses Ellen's concerns, saying, "I don't know what you're talking about—and you don't have to name names—but I'm sure they don't mean it." Then Barbara tells her that she might be used as an alternate on varsity in an event soon, and that she does not want her to quit. Ellen decides to stay with the team.

At home that night, Ellen is doing calculus homework when Tomper calls. She is surprised by his call, which is ostensibly about an English assignment. They talk for a few minutes and she feels happy about the attention. The next day at school, Ellen gets her calculus test back. Her grade is a D-plus, the worst grade she has ever received. She then has to give a book report in English class on *The Bell Jar*, which receives praise from both the teacher and classmates including Tomper and Mike. That night, her father asks about her calculus grade. She tells him it was a B-minus, and he tells her she will not be allowed to do gymnastics or go out until her grade is an A.

Chapter 11

At school, Ellen asks her calculus teacher for tutoring help and the sessions clarify what is unclear to her. Barbara is unhappy with Ellen's leave of absence from gymnastics. She will not guarantee a place on the team for Ellen. Though Jessie wants Ellen to go to the hockey game on Friday night, Ellen tells Jessie that her parents want her to focus on her studies. At home that night, Ellen's father wants to read her college applications before they are sent, though Ellen has already asked her English teacher for assistance. She agrees to accept his help, "because there is no other answer."

Chapter 12

Mrs. Klasten is especially impressed with the epigraph in Ellen's essay:

Like Homer's Odysseus, my parents set sail from home to a new land. Maybe like Odysseus, one day they'll return home. But where will I go? Born on the journey, I'm not sure where I belong.

Mrs. Klasten tells Ellen that she has the talent to be a writer. Ellen insists that she wants to be a doctor. She submits the applications in December after her father reads them. He only notes that they are mistake free.

Though Ellen's parents are gone for the weekend, Ellen tells Jessie she cannot go out but has to stay home and study. Just as she starts, Tomper calls and asks if he can come over. She agrees. He finds kimchi in the refrigerator and asks if he can try it. He is impressed by the taste of the Korean dish, and he encourages Ellen to try it for the first time. She asks him about his dating Marsha, and he tells her they only went on a few dates. Tomper kisses Ellen, who tells him, "You can't just come over out of the blue and expect me to be glad you want to kiss me." He responds, "It's just so much simpler here, where it's just you and me."

Chapter 13

On Monday, Ellen has another calculus test, which she aces. That Friday, she gets permission to go out with Jessie. They get dropped off at the Pizza Palace, where they see Rocky Jukich. Jessie suggests that Rocky give them a ride to Erie, a nearby town. Rocky, the girls, and his friends meet up at a bar that they know serves underage drinkers. Playing foosball, Jessie flirts with a guy Ellen dubs "Ickyteeth." His friend Mitch becomes partners with Ellen in the game. Ellen soon wants to leave, so Ickyteeth and his friend give them a ride back to Arkin. Mitch forces a kiss on Ellen when they drop her off at her house. When Ickyteeth laughs at the situation, Jessie slugs him and gets out of the car as well.

Jessie spends the night at Ellen's house. They talk about what happened. Jessie admits to Ellen that the trip to Erie was a bad idea. Ellen thinks, "If I'm going to go to college next year, I'm thinking, I'm going to have to quit acting like such an immature little kid. If I didn't like being with those guys, I should have said something."

Chapter 14

Ellen's father allows her to return to the gymnastics team. Though Ellen competes on varsity, she does not earn a letter. Though she does not like conflict, she asks Barbara why she was not given one. Barbara tells Ellen it was because she failed to take part in enough meets and informs her that her general dedication to the team was a criterion. Ellen wonders how much more she could have done and remembers that she worked hard on school so her parents would allow her to participate in the first place. She remembers her sister's advice that good grades would make everything else all right, but she thinks, "Getting all A's didn't get me the letter jacket I wanted so badly, and it didn't protect me from some bad men in a bar…. I think of how all my life Mother and Father have treated good grades like the answer to life. They aren't." At home, Ellen throws away her pictures of gymnasts, hoping that her parents are right.

Chapter 15

At school, Ellen earns a 4.0 grade point average on her first semester report card. Tomper offers to help her carry her belongings home after school, then asks her on a date for Friday. Though she considers asking her parents for permission to go, Ellen chooses to lie instead. On Friday, Ellen goes to Jessie's house before the date, and Jessie helps her get ready. Tomper takes her to a movie and the Pizza Palace. When Brad sees Ellen and Tomper together, he stares at the couple "as if Tomper is bringing in his pet tarantula." Tomper kisses her at the end of the date, and says, "I don't know what took me so long, El. I must be really stupid."

Chapter 16

Ellen and Tomper continue dating. One day, Ellen's happiness is tempered because Tomper wants to talk to Ellen after school. When they meet, Tomper asks her why she is hiding him from her parents. Ellen tells him it is because Michelle did not date in high school and she does not want to risk their saying no. Tomper wants her to be honest with them. He says he will pick her up at her house on Friday for a party.

Chapter 17

Ellen waits until she's eating dinner with her parents on Friday night to tell them about Tomper. Her parents question her desire to date. Ellen says she wants to go and points out that she has earned all A's. When Tomper arrives, he is polite to Ellen's parents, but Ellen's father will not shake his hand. The parents allow them to leave together, and they go to a party for his hockey team. As Tomper and Ellen leave the party, Brad bumps into her and she thinks he makes another racist comment. At home, Ellen's parents are waiting for her and she thanks them for the opportunity. She is hurt by her father's silence, but she reminds herself that she has not done anything improper.

Chapter 18

Ellen is nervous about her college applications in the spring. She learns that she was accepted to Harvard and Wellesley, but put on a waiting list for Brown. A few weeks later, her father asks her why Ellen has not sent in her acceptance to Harvard. Ellen is unsure if she wants to go to Harvard or Wellesley. When Ellen thinks about the decision herself, she thinks about regrets over what happened during the school year with the racist remarks and decides to go to Harvard. Lee writes, "*One day*, I think to myself, *I will figure out how to please my parents without silencing my own voice*."

Chapter 19

At high school graduation, Beth is the valedictorian. When Ellen's name is called, a male voice among the seniors utters a racial slur. Ellen feels horrible for her parents and believes it was Brad. Her parents do not act any differently when they allow her to go to

Mike's graduation party. When Ellen returns home, her father is waiting for her. He heard the comment and he tells her about the racism he and Ellen's mother experienced when they first came to the United States. Ellen's father also shares information about his own past and what made him want to come to America. Ellen comes to understand why he puts so much emphasis on grades and education. Although he graduated from Seoul National University, he tells Ellen, "soon I realized that no matter how well a person is educated in another country, an immigrant must fight for work, especially if his skin is not white."

Chapter 20

During the summer, Ellen spends much of her time with Tomper, Jessie, and Mike. One day, the four go to a drive-in movie before heading to Jessie's cabin. Ellen learns that Mike and Tomper are no longer friends with Brad because of his problem with Ellen being Asian. The four then spend the night at Jessie's cabin. Tomper and Ellen sleep in the same bed. In the morning, Ellen and Jessie talk about Jessie's future. Jessie wants to believe there is more to life than parties, marrying, and having kids.

Chapter 21

Two weeks before Ellen is set to go to Harvard, she goes to a party at Mike's cabin with Tomper and Jessie. During the party, Marsha comes up to Ellen, pushes her, and spews more racist comments. Marsha also tells her that she is not worthy of Tomper. Ellen shouts back, "You're so ignorant! You are a racist idiot!" Marsha scrapes Ellen's face with her fingernails, and Ellen punches her in the mouth. Marsha falls and then attacks Ellen with a beer bottle. Ellen does not know what happened, but finds herself on the ground. When Ellen regains consciousness, she is with her parents at the hospital the next day. Ellen has stitches all over her face from Marsha's attack. Ellen's father credits Tomper with helping manage Ellen's injuries. Ellen sees her face and is appalled by her appearance.

Chapter 22

A few days later, Ellen is back at home and her mother tells her they have to go to the police station. Ellen gives her statement, but she declines to press charges against Marsha. She tells the officer, "It's not going to change things." After Ellen's stitches are removed, she begins to pack for college. Though her parents believe she could wait a semester to enter Harvard, Ellen wants to go in the fall as planned. Her mother seems proud of her decision. A few days before her departure, Ellen says goodbye to Tomper with a date at the Sand Pits. He sheds a tear as they end their relationship. The last night before she leaves, Ellen spends time with Jessie. Jessie gives her a poem about friendship.

Chapter 23

Ellen leaves for Harvard. Her parents, Jessie, Tomper, Beth, and Mike all see her off at the airport. She waves from the plane to all of them, and she imagines them waving back as her plane rises in the sky. "After all that's happened to me this year, the pain was worth it," she thinks as she leaves Arkin.

Plot Summary

As *Finding My Voice* opens, Korean American Ellen Sung is getting ready for her first day of her last year of high school. Ellen is unhappy that her mother has included litchi nuts in her lunch. Though Ellen does not want to be different, she is grateful her mother prepared the lunch. On the way to the bus stop, however, Ellen dumps the nuts in a garbage can.

Themes

Assimilation

One concept explored in *Finding My Voice* is the idea of assimilation. Assimilation is the process by which one group, in this case Ellen and her family, takes on traits of and becomes part of the larger culture. Ellen's parents are natives of Korea, while their daughters were born and raised in the United States. Ellen knows little of her Korean heritage, and she cannot speak or read the language. Her parents have told her little about their past. They are the only Koreans in a town that is primarily Scandinavian in extraction, leaving them somewhat culturally and socially isolated.

Ellen's parents have assimilated less than their daughters, though Mrs. Sung is more assimilated than her husband. Ellen's father, a local doctor, insists on eating Korean food. Ellen explains, "I know that sometimes he likes to sample 'American' things, but when he does, he takes exactly one bite, one package, or whatever, because by and large he finds American food very weird." Ellen's mother prepares American-style meals for herself and Ellen, while her husband eats Korean dishes.

Ellen's mother also seems more open to new experiences, as shown when Ellen allows Tomper to pick her up for a date. Mr. Sung does not understand why his daughter would want to date in high school. He will not even shake Tomper's hand, nor will he talk to him when he picks up Ellen. Mrs. Sung also questions Ellen's desire to date, but she is more open and welcoming to Tomper. Ellen later reveals that her mother compliments Tomper's appearance.

Ellen is the most assimilated of the three, but she also faces the most difficulties in the story. She finds it hard to fit in both at home and at school, and not just because of her parents and their different values. Ellen has become American in the sense that she does place value on participating in gymnastics and having a social life when her parents do not and cannot understand why it is important to her. But she also values hard work and is proud of her academic achievements, despite her parents' uncompromising strictness related to her academic success.

Striving for Success

Success is an important theme in *Finding My Voice*, and an important part of the American dream for Mr. Sung. Both of Ellen's parents, but especially her father, want Ellen to be academically superior, earn all A's, go to Harvard, and become a doctor. They want her to follow in the esteemed footsteps of her sister, Michelle, who is a pre-med student at Harvard, and her father, who works as a doctor in town. For much of the book, Mr. Sung only speaks to Ellen in reference to her grades, college applications, and decisions about which university to attend. Ellen does not understand why her father is so focused on her academic success.

When Ellen initially decides to go to Harvard, she is unsure if she is going for them or for herself, though she eventually embraces her attendance there as a symbol of her success. Ellen has a revelation about the matter while talking to her father after graduation. He opens up about the struggles he faced coming to the United States and having his prestigious degree from Seoul National University mean less because it is not American. He tells her, "So now you and your sister can do more than I or your mother ever could: you will graduate with degrees from Harvard, and nobody can say anything to you, because everyone knows Harvard."

Ellen explains her epiphany: "All this time I thought I was getting those grades for him and Mom. And Mom and Father just wanted to set me up for a better life." Such understanding and learning more about her parents' past from her father makes Ellen appreciate her success all the more. These feelings of self-worth come into play when she finally confronts the racism she has faced throughout the book.

Racism

If the American dream is that anyone can succeed, its dark shadow is that some people will always try to hold others down. That ugly truth reveals itself in the racist remarks directed at Ellen throughout the novel. While she is an American and the United States is the only country she has ever known, her classmates and even a few educators remind her that she is racially different from them, as the only Asian in a school full of white students. All the racist remarks made by students like Brad and Marsha, as well as the chemistry teacher, refer to Ellen's Asian heritage, though most are derogatory terms for natives of China, not Korea.

Ellen is confused by the racist comments and nearly always reacts to them by shutting down. Jessie and Beth stand up for her when an incident happens in front of them, but it is not until Ellen has experienced personal growth in the book that she stands up to a tormentor herself. When Ellen does take Marsha on shortly before she is to leave for Harvard, she finds herself in a physical fight. At its end, Marsha injures Ellen by breaking a bottle on her head, which leaves Ellen with outward scars showing the inner pain she has suffered. Ellen does not let Marsha's attack limit her or change her decision to go to Harvard in the fall, nor does she press charges against Marsha because she does not think it will transform Marsha or the racist thoughts of others. The racism Ellen experiences makes her more determined to succeed and ultimately more sure of who she is.

Historical Context

The first significant numbers of Koreans came to the United States in 1903, with about eight thousand Koreans going to work on Hawaiian sugar plantations between 1903 and 1905. Immigration numbers had an early peak during and after the Korean War in the early 1950s, when many students, orphans left parentless by the war, and wives of servicemen were allowed to immigrate to the United States.

More Koreans, and Asians in general, began moving to America in large numbers when immigration policies were reformed with the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The number of immigrants from North and South Korea continued to increase in the 1970s through the 1990s, and often included entire families due to the changes in immigration law. By the 1990 census, nearly 800,000 Korean Americans were living in the United States, with about 73 percent born in Korea. About one-tenth of these people were also adoptees primarily raised by white families and without Korean names.

The greatest concentration of Americans with a Korean heritage could be found in several major cities including Los Angeles and Anaheim, California; New York City; Washington, D.C.; and Chicago, Illinois. Significant numbers of Korean Americans also lived in New Jersey, Texas, and Maryland. Some of the bigger cities had Korean-focused communities or neighborhoods, so-called "Koreatowns." Because these "Koreatowns" were often in depressed parts of these cities, Korean American businesses and consumers often helped rejuvenate such neighborhoods.

Many Koreans came to the United States looking for personal freedom and better economic opportunities for themselves and their children. Because Koreans often immigrated as whole families in the late twentieth century, there were often different rates of assimilation within families. Korean-born parents often were slower to adopt the American culture, and they continued to embrace Korean values and speak their native language. Their children were often more Americanized and used English as their primary language. Such a dichotomy sometimes lead to intergenerational conflicts within families about cultural identity.

By the early 1990s, Korean Americans were making an impact on American culture in small, but significant, ways. In 1992, the first Korean American was elected to Congress when Chang-Jun "Jay" Kim was elected to represent the state of California. He was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1939, and came to the United States in 1961. Kim previously served on the city council and as mayor of Diamond Bar, California. Two years later, comedian Margaret Cho became the first Korean American to star in her own television series, the short-lived situation comedy *All-American Girl*. In 1995, Chang-rae Lee became the first Korean American writer to receive the PEN/Hemingway Award.

Critical Overview

Like many of Lee's novels, *Finding My Voice* was generally well received when it was published in 1992. It has been praised for being one of the first such books to represent the experience of an Asian American young adult. Writing in *Kliatt*, Barbara Shepp calls the book "well-written" and "believable." She concludes, "It has a mature and sensitive presentation of many teen issues, a likable main character, and a satisfying resolution that does not rely on pat answers."

A number of critics were moved by the depiction of Ellen, as well as the relationship between Ellen and her parents. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer comments, "If Lee's story line is somewhat familiar, her portrayal of her heroine is unusually well-balanced." While Libby K. White of *School Library Journal* calls Ellen a "likable, gentle teen," she is one critic who finds that "The portrayal of her parents is not as satisfying." However, White does commend the way Lee depicts their evolution in the face of Ellen's social and personal growth.

The themes of *Finding My Voice* and Lee's handling of them also garnered critical acclaim. Writing in the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, Betsy Hearne notes that "Lee has detailed the strain of ethnic 'difference' … and the insecurity it breeds." Penny Blubaugh of *Voice of Youth Advocates* says, "This is a sensitive coming-of-age story that should provoke anger and thought."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Petruso is a freelance writer who has degrees in history and screenwriting. In this essay, Petruso argues that most of the white characters in Finding My Voice *are profoundly undeveloped and presented with an element of reverse racism*.

Marie G. Lee's *Finding My Voice* resonates with readers who have been hurt by racism, but it is less likely to spark any recognition or enlightenment among readers who may have inflicted those injuries. In Melinda L. de Jesús's article "Mixed Blessings: Korean American Identity and Interracial Interactions in the Young Adult Novels of Marie G. Lee," she analyzes four of Lee's young adult books, including *Finding My Voice*. De Jesús praises Lee's depiction of Korean Americans and their identity through the filter of teen drama. However, de Jesús also notes a flaw in Lee's books, claiming "While her Asian American readers will most likely find much to identify with in her novels, non-Asian American readers of color cannot help but notice how her non-Asian characters remain largely undeveloped." Later in the same article, the critic comments, "Asian American children will be empowered by these novels—but what will they learn about non-Asian teens of color from Lee's works?"

These exact critiques do not seem to apply to *Finding My Voice* because there are no nonwhite characters depicted therein save Ellen Sung and her family. However, de Jesús's observed flaw of Lee's books applies to *Finding My Voice* as well because Lee's white characters are extremely flat and undeveloped. They often act without motivation and Lee does not give any sense of their background. Because the novel is told from Ellen's first-person point of view, the development of the other characters is necessarily sifted through her perspective. But as an author, Lee does not work in much detail about any character except Ellen. Even Ellen's parents are portrayed nearly as superficially as Ellen's friends, fellow students, educators, and tormentors.

One element of the story weakened by Lee's shallow characterizations is the racism Ellen experiences. In an article published in the *ALAN Review*, Lee writes,

I wrote *Finding My Voice* with the hope that it would be interesting not only to the teen who has ever felt different and/or been a victim of harassment, but also the teen who might potentially be the harasser. I want readers to know, through the character of Ellen, that behind every racial slur there's a person.

Readers of *Finding My Voice* know almost nothing about why the harassers pick on Ellen, other than because of her different race. Though behind every speaker of racist remarks there is also a person, readers would not know this fact from the way Lee depicts them in her book.

There is no explanation for the motivation of one of the adults who says racial slurs to Ellen. At the beginning of chapter 5, Mr. Borglund, Ellen's chemistry teacher, makes remarks about "Orientals," the way they handle money, and Koreans "woking" dogs to her after she breaks a pipette and offers to pay for it. This incidence of racism comes

out of nowhere because readers have no knowledge of who Mr. Borglund is other than a high school chemistry teacher. Is he just ignorant? Having a bad day? Reacting to some ancient hurt of his own? He is never shown saying anything racist again, and it is hard to understand what his motivation is for speaking that way to her. While Lee accomplishes her goal in showing readers how stunned Ellen is by spoken racial slights, Borglund is merely a caricature of a casual racist, not a fully formed character.

Among Ellen's peers, there are two fellow students who use racial slurs to and about her. Brad Whitlock is depicted in much the same way as Borglund. Brad is a popular high school senior who suddenly starts calling Ellen "chink" on the bus the first day of school. Ellen admits she is befuddled by Brad's remark, thinking of the comment and who said it: "And why Brad Whitlock, the popular guy who had never before even bothered to acknowledge my existence all these years at Arkin High?" Readers are left to wonder as well.

Brad repeats his racist phrase several times, including at their high school graduation. At the beginning of chapter 16, he is depicted confronting Tomper about dating Ellen. Tomper's friend and Jessie's boyfriend Mike tells Ellen in chapter 20 that Brad told Tomper that he should not date Ellen because of her race. Mike admits he initially rationalized Brad's behavior. After believing that his long-time hockey buddy was "just playing around," Mike tells Ellen he had an epiphany: "After I got to know you, Ellen, and saw what a nice girl you are, I started realizing that Brad really did mean a lot of what he said, that he really did hate."

These scenes are the sum of Lee's depiction of Brad and his racism. Readers have no idea why Brad feels this way or what his motivation is for abruptly starting to pick on Ellen. There is no information on his background or the pressures and insecurities he might feel because of her. Arkin is depicted as a homogenous community, yet readers have no idea where Brad fits in in terms of social class, parental influence, academic and emotional intelligence, and the like. Lee depicts him like a dog who has suddenly gone mad and picked one target, Ellen, on the first day of school.

The reasons for Marsha's racist remarks and negative attitude toward Ellen may be a bit clearer than Mr. Borglund's and Brad's. Marsha is a talented gymnast, cheerleader, and homecoming-queen candidate. The first instance of Marsha's racism against Ellen occurs in chapter 8 after gymnastics practice. Ellen has started learning a difficult move called a "Valdez," which Marsha had been the only gymnast on the team to perform until then. After Ellen has some success with Marsha's prized move, Marsha insults her with several remarks related to Ellen's race. Marsha later cuts Ellen down with racist remarks after another gymnastics practice when Ellen stands in her way.

In addition being threatened about competition from Ellen in gymnastics, Marsha is jealous of Ellen over Tomper's attention. After learning that Tomper kissed Ellen at the party in chapter 3, Marsha begins pursuing him, and Tomper and Marsha date briefly. Marsha's racial taunts turn to physical violence after Tomper and Ellen become romantically involved, in a violent fight with Ellen at the book's climax in chapter 21. While painful to Ellen, Marsha's racism is at least framed more realistically than anyone

else's in the book. Marsha is a girl who acts out against Ellen because of resentment, insecurity, and jealousy.

Lee's depiction of Marsha's racism touches on another issue in *Finding My Voice*: Ellen's own jealousy. Ellen finds Marsha pretty, and often comments on Marsha's perfectly beautiful appearance while putting herself down in comparison. Ellen is jealous of Marsha's appearance as well as her athletic talent. One reason for Marsha's success in gymnastics, Ellen reveals at the beginning of chapter 8, is that Marsha has been doing gymnastics since she was a kindergartener, while Ellen's parents did not allow her to start gymnastics until the ninth grade. Ellen clearly finds plenty to admire about her nemesis.

In other ways, Ellen feel superior to Marsha, and indeed to their fellow students. At the party in chapter 3, Jessie tells Ellen that Marsha could not complete basic math problems like dividing fractions. Later, Lee reveals that Marsha wanted to study to be a dental hygienist but could not get into a program. Most of the white characters are depicted as lazy, stupid, and/or directionless. With the exception of Beth, none of Ellen's peers is academically motivated or regarded as intelligent. Throughout *Finding My Voice*, Lee implies no white student is interested in going to college other than hockey players going on to pursue their sport, and Beth, the only person regarded as Ellen's academic and intellectual equal. Beth is the only other girl in Ellen's calculus class and a whiz at the subject. Beth is also Ellen's lab partner in chemistry, her friend on the gymnastics team, and the class valedictorian.

Ellen's best friend Jessie is a talented pianist, but she plans to go to business college instead of pursuing music as a career. Ellen sees Mike Anderson as a hockey player with no brains, and she judges him for it: "*He might be popular*, I'm thinking, *but he's sure not much to look at in the I.Q. department*." Mike is redeemed somewhat by dating Jessie, revealing he regrets the incident on the bus with Brad, and by no longer being friends with Brad. Mike and Jessie talk of getting married, and Ellen knows their lack of ambition for anything beyond small-town will end their friendship soon.

Other than Beth, Jessie, and Mike—none of whom has ambitions as grand as Ellen's dreams of being a Harvard-educated doctor—it seems that no one in Ellen's class is going to college. Tomper, Ellen's boyfriend, plans to join the army like his father did. While Arkin might be a simple small town, it is hard to believe that there are not children who are interested in discovering and fulfilling their potential. Not to mention others who are motivated for their children to have a better life through a college education. Such depictions make the novel unbelievable, and while perhaps intended to increase sympathy for Ellen, they make her isolation seem more self-imposed than a cruel twist of fate.

Lee also depicts Ellen and her family as academic and social superiors. No other parents mentioned in the book—and only a few parents are mentioned at all—support their children or encourage them in any way. For example, Jessie gets access to liquor after she graduates and is never depicted as being supervised. Her mother was killed by a teenage drunk driver some time earlier, and Jessie's father does not seem to play

an active role in her life. Tomper's parents allow him to smoke as his older brothers did, tell him only to stay out of jail, and do not encourage any kind of academic success. When Tomper comes over to Ellen's home in chapter 12, he reports having to make Rice-a-roni by himself at the age of five.

Lee is obviously trying to highlight cultural differences between the Sung family and the white people in town, but there is no balance to her portrayal. There are success-oriented white parents everywhere, although some value other measures of success besides academics and prestigious colleges. This depiction of white parents as disengaged is highlighted by the conspicuous absence of Beth's parents in the novel, even though she is an academic achiever and a friend of Ellen's. Ellen says that her parents do not value her participation in gymnastics at all because they do not understand how it fits into her getting into Harvard. Do Beth's parents support her at gymnastics meets or her academic triumphs? Do they encourage her and support her? Adding such details would have added balance to the depiction of white parents in Lee's novel.

The bigger point in *Finding My Voice* is that Ellen cannot know or understand others until she comes to know herself, finds her voice, and accepts its power. Yet readers are taken on this journey of self-discovery without a road map of understanding the white people in Arkin who live around Ellen and her family. Lee could have shown that being an American is more than being white and popular and perfect in the backdrop of the novel. Lee also had a chance to show that even the popular people who are white and seem perfect face the same kinds of challenges Ellen does.

Ellen learns to stand up for herself to her parents and to Marsha, yet readers have no framework to understand why Marsha and Brad emerge as racist cowards. It is satisfying that in the end Ellen embraces Harvard and becoming a doctor as her own dream, a dream whose seed was planted by her parents, whom she comes to appreciate. Perhaps Lee hints at why she draws such superficial characterizations of everyone else through the words of Mrs. Klasten, the English teacher who encourages Ellen to write: "books … give you only the words; you have to use your imagination for the rest."

Source: A. Petruso, Critical Essay on *Finding My Voice*, in *Literary Themes for Students: American Dream*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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