

# **Native Speaker Study Guide**

## **Native Speaker by Chang-Rae Lee**

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# Plot Summary

Native Speaker is a novel told from the perspective of Henry Park who is a first generation Korean American. Henry has reached a point when he has begun to reconsider everything of significance in his life, including thoughts on his parents' way of life, his career, and his worth as a spouse. The novel opens when Henry's wife is leaving on a vacation. This is her vacation away from Henry.

At the airport before boarding her plane, Henry's wife, Leila, gives him a list to read after she is gone. It is a list of traits and behaviors of Henry that she has compiled over time. Nothing on the list is flattering and much of it is insulting. Henry reads the list over and over while she is away.

Henry's professional life is also suffering. He has begun to question the morality of what he does for a living. Henry is a spy but he is not in the employment of the government. He works for a company that will gather information on anyone for a price. Henry's particular company specializes in gathering information on immigrants and they do this by employing people of many different races. Henry's area of specialty includes people from Asian cultures. Previously a model employee, Henry currently experiences difficulty at work because he performed poorly on his last assignment and caused his company to lose a large amount of revenue.

Throughout Henry's journeys in life, he always weighs events and ideas against the ideals of his father. Henry's father died years before the opening of the novel, but he plays such an important part in Henry's perception of events that he is real and feels very much like a main character. Henry and his father did not have a relationship free of troubles however. Henry's mother died when Henry was only ten years old and Henry who knew nothing of Korean culture beyond what he learned from his parents, often clashed with his father's more traditional ideas. As Henry ages and acquires more wisdom, he begins to reevaluate his estimation of his father.

Henry must balance the calamity in his personal life with a new and challenging assignment at work. He is assigned to gather information on John Kwang, a rising Korean American politician. Henry finds that he has a personal affinity for Kwang and a deep admiration of Kwang's goals. This leads to Henry questioning whether he is making a living by betraying his own people. Soon he finds that he is keeping secrets not only from his wife and the politician he is sent to investigate, but he is also withholding information from his employer. Somehow Henry must find a way to satisfy all parties.

Throughout the novel, Henry struggles with questions that we all face regardless of age, race, or gender. Henry wonders about personal identity. His job requires him to adopt many different identities, but in time Henry comes to recognize that we all have multiple identities, and Henry is not sure which one is the true Henry. He cannot be sure which of his many identities is his true self and he cannot be certain which of the many identities others present to him are legitimate people. Henry must find these answers

while he struggles to repair his marriage and put to rest some old misguided grievances against his father.



# Chapters 1 & 2 (pages 1-16)

## Chapters 1 & 2 (pages 1-16) Summary

Henry Park is the son of Korean immigrants. Though he was born in the United States, he has never felt completely American and he has never felt completely Korean. Henry struggles with issues of personal identity at a time when he is having difficulty in his career and in his marriage.

The narrator, Henry, thinks about the day his wife Leila left him. The day she leaves him she gives him a list of traits she believes make up who he is. At the airport, Henry notices that while Leila has packed many things, she takes nothing that he ever gave her. She gives Henry the list and asks that he wait until he returns to the car to read it. Henry reads the list twice and he notices that she must have worked on it over a long period of time. The paper is wrinkled and the list is written with several different writing instruments. While the list might appear spiteful or cruel to anyone who read it, Henry does not get angry.

Henry believed that he managed to keep his job secret from Leila. He thought she believed he worked in corporate security. One evening at dinner before his wife left him, she said something that showed that she knew his true profession.

In Chapter 2, Henry thinks back to when he first met Leila. He was in El Paso for a work assignment and attended a friend's party. After being introduced to Leila, they talked all night. Leila asked if "Park" was a Korean name, and Henry answered yes. Leila said she worked for a relief organization helping the poor and Henry invented a story about his profession and the reason he was in El Paso. Henry and Leila went for a walk and kissed. Henry was supposed to leave the following day but he stayed in El Paso for an additional week.

During the two months that his wife is away in Europe, Henry walks the streets of New York thinking about Leila. Henry drinks too much in a bar and shows Leila's list to strangers. At work, Henry asks Jack Kalantzakos for marital advice. Jack advises Henry to go find Leila. Another co-worker, Pete Ichibata, says that Henry is not the type to chase after his wife. As narrator, Henry introduces the other characters in the office. Each employee has a specific area of specialty coinciding with a geographic region and an ethnic group.

Henry explains that he and his coworkers are special types of spies. They gather information on immigrant business and political figures for any business or government willing to pay for the information.



## Chapters 1 & 2 (pages 1-16) Analysis

Henry's thoughts are revealed in his narration tell us much about his personality. The list his wife gives him is critical of him, particularly describing as emotionless. The fact that he does not get angry about the list might initially lead us to believe that Leila is correct in her assessment of Henry. Henry also says that he prefers photocopies to original or "versions of things." This again implies a sort of distant person.

Henry has made multiple references to his profession but by the end of the first chapter, we still do not know what Henry's job entails.

In Chapter 2, we learn through dialogue that Henry is Korean. Later we learn that Henry is not entirely cold and uncaring in reference to his wife's departure. In fact, he seems quite troubled. He seeks comfort from strangers and coworkers. Rather than Henry being uncaring, it could be that Henry does not understand how to express caring or could be afraid to express his true feelings.

Henry's description of his type of spying is not at all the "cloak and dagger" activity that we think of when we hear the word spy. For this reason Henry's type of spying seems even more deplorable. His company does not spy for the benefit of a nation at odds with other forces but rather they do it for money only. Their targets are private citizens trying to get ahead in a new country.



## Chapter 3 (pages 17-42)

### Chapter 3 (pages 17-42) Summary

Leila returns from Europe but she has not returned to Henry.

Dennis Hoagland, Henry's boss, has a habit of calling Henry in the middle of the night to discuss work. He calls and wakes Henry at 4:15 a.m. to discuss Henry's upcoming assignment involving a local politician named John Kwang. Dennis says that he heard that Leila had returned from Europe and Dennis tells Henry he needs him to come into the office more often rather than working from home.

After Dennis's telephone call, Henry is unable to return to sleep. He thinks about how he nearly ruined his last assignment that required him to interact with a Filipino psychoanalyst. Henry thinks about his upcoming assignment and the man involved. John Kwang is Korean and a popular city councilman who may be a future candidate for city mayor. His coworkers assure Henry that this assignment will be easier than the last one. All Henry must do is compile a report on Kwang, and it may not even require Henry speaking directly to Kwang.

Henry roams the apartment and thinks about happier times. He thinks about how he and Leila had difficulty adjusting to the layout of the apartment but how their son Mitt loved the place. He loved being able to run on the open loft-like floors, and he especially loved the oversized bathtub. Henry remembers the time when Mitt slipped on wet tile and hit his head. Henry and Leila rushed the boy to the hospital but the next day Mitt was perfectly fine.

Henry wonders if Leila will come by the apartment now that she is back in the United States. She stays with her friend, Molly, and Henry often spends time in a café across the street from Molly's apartment building.

Henry drives to his place of work. He hopes to talk with Jack. Jack's wife Sophie died from cancer five years ago, and Jack tried to retire. Hoagland once told Henry that Jack used to work as a government spy but Henry wonders if he can believe anything Hoagland says. The offices Henry goes to are on the top floor of a building with many other businesses. Henry's company is called Glimmer & Company. If anyone asks any of Henry's coworkers about the nature of Glimmer & Company, they say that the company provides lighting to military facilities.

Henry and Jack have lunch and during their lunch, they talk about Sophie, Jack's wife that died, and they make fun of Hoagland. After lunch, Henry and Jack read newspaper articles about Kwang and his wife. Hoagland arrives and says that Henry's cover will be as an employee in public relations working for a woman named Sherrie Chin-Watt. Hoagland asks to speak to Henry alone. He asks about Henry's marriage and Henry is able to dodge giving direct answers. Hoagland refers to the failure of Henry's last





assignment and says that this assignment will be much easier. At the conclusion of the conversation, Hoagland warns Henry not to make mistakes this time. Henry reacts angrily.

## **Chapter 3 (pages 17-42) Analysis**

Henry has a great deal of respect for Jack, but seems to have little regard for Hoagland. Henry relies on Jack for marital advice but he believes Hoagland might be mentally unbalanced or at least an incredibly unlikable person.

Henry thinks he and his coworkers have several identities and he wonders if they know which of the many identities is real. The amount of personal information Henry's company is able to discover about individuals is shocking. They know that Sherrie Chin-Watt has had a personal illness and treatment and they may have even spoken to her doctor.

When Henry speaks to Hoagland alone, it seems at first that Hoagland is offering encouragement to Henry. Soon however, it becomes apparent that Hoagland is using references to Henry's past failure as a means to criticize Henry and warn and even threaten him against future failure. This explains Henry's angry verbal response to Hoagland. Henry's angry response is notable because it is the first sign of emotion that we have seen in Henry.



# Chapters 4 & 5 (pages 43-75)

## Chapters 4 & 5 (pages 43-75) Summary

Henry thinks about his father's work ethic and what his father would have thought of Henry's profession. Henry's father died a year after Henry's son, Mitt, died. In his father's last days, Henry took care of him.

Henry remembers that part of what helped his father's business early on was his father's membership in a "ggeh," a money club where members make regular contributions. On a rotating basis, one member receives the money.

Henry wonders why his family always feels the need to keep a low profile. He remembers working at one of his father's stores in a wealthy neighborhood and hearing the patrons make negative racial comments about the Korean employees. Memories of the many arguments Henry and his father had during Henry's teenage years remind him of the time his mother once told Henry that his father was an educated man in Korea but sold fruit in America. Henry later learns that his father was an industrial engineer in Korea. This leads Henry to remember the time that his father came home beaten and bruised after being assaulted by some black men who robbed the store.

Henry's father did not understand Henry's job, but he genuinely liked his wife Leila and that always surprised Henry. Henry's mother died when he was ten years old and Henry believed his father showed no grief.

In Chapter 5, Henry recalls the day his father called and told him he would be late coming home because he was going to the JFK International Airport after work. Henry did not think much of the news because he was used to guests from Korea visiting while in the United States. Late in the evening, his father arrived home carrying two suitcases and told Henry to go outside and help with carrying more items. When Henry went outside, he saw a woman standing beside his father's car. Henry's father spoke to him privately and explained that the woman had come to be a housekeeper. Henry's father also said that he bought a new and larger house in a wealthier neighborhood.

The young Henry found the woman mysterious. She appeared to have no hobbies and no interests other than cleaning the house.

Years later after he had married and had a child, he, Leila, and Mitt spent summers at his father's house. They stayed in an apartment over the garage. It had been so many years since the woman had joined his father's household but Henry still did not know her name. He called her "Ahjuhma," which means literally "aunt" but is also a way of addressing an unrelated Korean woman. Leila found this disturbing and tried on multiple occasions to speak with the woman. The woman would not speak to Leila and seemed to disapprove of the interracial marriage.



Henry had many arguments with his father in his high school years. Once he came home drunk and vomited in front of his father. His father helped him to bed and the following morning Henry's father poured a glass of whiskey and told Henry to drink. When the whiskey again made Henry sick, his father took away the glass and in a kind manner told Henry to help the cleaning woman with the windows.

Henry had been resentful when the cleaning woman first came, and they soon learned to stay out of each others' way. One night while Henry was home from college, he saw the cleaning woman go to his father's room during the night. The woman died from pneumonia not long before Henry's father died.

## **Chapters 4 & 5 (pages 43-75) Analysis**

Chapter 4 takes place entirely in Henry's memories. It is unclear if Henry still feels the same way about his father as he did in his descriptions of their many arguments over the years. At times in Henry's recollections it seems that age and experience have given him a kinder, or at least less critical, view of his father. However it is interesting that one of Henry's chief criticisms of his father is that his father was too stoic and that he did not show enough emotion. This is also Leila's main source of frustration with Henry.

Henry makes multiple references to the ethnic conflict between Korean Americans and African Americans. Henry has also made repeated references to his son's death yet we still do not know how his son died.

Chapter 5 also takes place entirely in the past, entirely in Henry's memories. Leila's astonishment that Henry never learned the cleaning woman's name could be seen as evidence of Henry's lack of concern for others, but it probably says more about his culture and Leila's lack of effort in understanding Korean culture. This lack of effort on her part is surprising considering her professional background. She has worked with minorities and immigrants in the past. However in the case of Henry and his family, she does not seem to be able to attribute things she finds out of the ordinary to being customary in another culture.



## Chapter 6 (pages 76-92)

### Chapter 6 (pages 76-92) Summary

Henry takes the subway to the neighborhood of Flushing where he will work in John Kwang's staff. Once in Flushing, Henry sees evidence everywhere of how much the residents admire their city councilman. In many businesses, he sees how the merchants place framed photos of Kwang next to the photos of their own children. The mayoral election is still two years away but Kwang's campaign is running at full force.

Henry has worked for the campaign for two weeks, but he has still not gotten near Kwang. His position among the staff changes after Henry successfully ends a protest by Peruvian immigrants and turns the situation into a positive public relations event for Kwang. Those supervising the campaign see that Henry is valuable and competent and they reassign him to be part of a media advance team. Part of Henry's responsibilities involve going along with Janice and Eduardo to check physical locations where Kwang will be making public appearances.

At lunch Janice asks Henry what he does for a living and Henry answers that he is a freelance writer. Janice assumes that Henry performs small freelance jobs for money but has aspirations of being a novelist. Henry allows Janice to continue thinking whatever she likes and Janice even jokingly offers the plot of a crime novel that involves Kwang and his entire staff as characters. After lunch, Henry and Janice return to planning Kwang's future public appearances. They drive around Queens and Janice tells Henry much of her personal history.

During one stop, Janice speaks to some local people and learns that the current mayor is having an affair with a local woman. Once back in the car, Janice makes notes about what she has learned. She says that she will not tell Kwang because she does not want Kwang to be involved in case she later decides to use the information to harm the current mayor's reputation. Henry observes how much Kwang trusts those that work for his campaign. Henry also states that he will betray that trust.

### Chapter 6 (pages 76-92) Analysis

Henry's insight into Janice's failed relationship is noteworthy. He recognizes that her Korean boyfriend's inability to display emotion caused problems in the relationship but he cannot seem to understand that the same behavior caused his current marital crisis. Perhaps Henry recognizes the issue but does not believe the best solution is to adopt a different way of displaying emotions.

During Henry's lunchtime conversation with Janice, the reader becomes aware of how he maintains a false identity and the nature of lying as those in Henry's profession see it. Henry does not do anything to make Janice believe things about him. Instead, Henry allows Janice to draw her own conclusions and he lends support to those conclusions

without ever overtly confirming them. When given the opportunity, Henry does not lie. He lets people create their own misinterpretations.

Henry's brief observation about the trust Kwang places in his staff seems ominous.



## Chapter 7 (pages 93-121)

### Chapter 7 (pages 93-121) Summary

Mitt was seven years old when he died. Henry thinks back to summers at his father's house. Mitt adored his grandfather and enjoyed those summers. The first summer was difficult for Mitt. The neighborhood boys taunted him in a racial manner and even once beat him. Henry and his father went around to the parents' houses to discuss the issue. At one house Henry spoke to the mother in a calm rational manner, but Henry's father uncharacteristically lost his composure and shouted an angry tirade. Mitt became close friends with the neighborhood boys over the course of several summers.

One day Henry arrived home from the store and saw some boys in his father's yard running around and behaving in a panicked manner. In the center of the group of boys Leila held Mitt. Mitt was dead. The boys cried and said that they had been playing and piling on top of each other. Mitt had been at the bottom of the pile and died. In another uncharacteristic loss of composure, Henry's father had collapsed on the lawn after calling an ambulance.

Henry remembers a time before Mitt died when he, Leila, and Mitt were at a park. Mitt played with other children while Henry and Leila discussed having another child. Henry wanted to wait a few more years but Leila says if they waited they would have to adopt because she believed she was approaching the age when she could not have more children. Henry refused to consider adoption. He believed that there was something intangible but very real and important about having a child that is a biological relative.

Henry calls Leila at her friend Molly's apartment and asks to borrow some audiotapes of Mitt. Leila agrees to leave them with the building supervisor because she does not want to see Henry prior to the meeting they have arranged. Henry listens to the tapes at home.

After listening to the tapes, Henry talks a walk in the evening. He has had no direct contact with Leila since she came back from Europe, but he has spoken to her on the telephone. Henry walks to Molly's apartment and shouts up toward the second floor. Leila opens the window and looks out. She invites Henry in. Though Leila says that she is not unhappy that Henry came over despite their agreement to wait until their arranged meeting, she seems genuinely annoyed. Almost all of the statements she makes to Henry are full of accusations and almost all of his replies seem calm and neutral but they are left open-ended enough that some deeper meaning could be implied. This frustrates Leila even further.

On the topic of the tapes Henry borrowed, Leila explains that she is still angry that Henry seemed to cope with Mitt's death in a solemn and dignified manner when she felt suicidal. The topic of family switches first to Leila's mother and then Henry thinks about Leila's father, Stew. In some of Henry's past conversations with Stew, Stew expressed



some admiration for what he believed was an Asian trait of self-restraint and discipline and he also said that he knew what Henry did for a living. He did not criticize Henry but instead praised him. He also said he hoped Henry and Leila had children soon.

Henry and Leila lay on the bed not touching. Leila says she is considering giving up her idea of ever becoming a successful writer. Leila also alludes to an affair she had while in Europe. Though Henry takes the news of the affair in a calm manner, a fight follows. Leila angrily says she has no idea what Henry wants. Henry says he wants Leila but the two continue to argue. Leila changes the topic from criticism of Henry to the pain she still feels after Mitt's death. She cries for a while and they continue to lie on the bed, not touching and not talking.

## Chapter 7 (pages 93-121) Analysis

The tragedy of Mitt's death seems even more intense given that it happened at Henry's father's house, a place where they went for happy summers and a place they chose so Mitt could play in safety.

Although Leila accuses Henry of coming over instead of waiting for their arranged meeting to throw her off balance, this seems unlikely. It is also understandable that Leila might feel this way. She does not know about the countless hours that Henry has spent in the coffee shop across the street hoping to catch a glimpse of her and she does not know that Henry has secretly been talking to Molly. It is far more likely that Henry found his feelings of missing Leila unbearable, especially after listening to the tapes of their son.

During their discussion and argument, it seems that Leila truly does not understand that showing emotion and feeling emotion are two completely different things. She seems to judge Henry by the same harsh standard that he judges his father. Her admission of an affair and Henry's reaction to the news is confusing. It seems that Leila expects that Henry should not react negatively to the news whereas previously she had always been upset that Henry did not show emotion. Henry's reaction is typically cryptic. In some ways it seems that he is upset, but he also seems able to drop the topic much easier than one would expect.

In the discussion between Henry and Leila's father, we learn that Leila, like Henry, is an only child.



# Chapters 8 through 10 (pages 122-159)

## Chapters 8 through 10 (pages 122-159) Summary

A week after the location scouting with Janice and Eduardo, Henry meets John Kwang. Everyone's attention focuses on Kwang. Henry thinks how youthful Kwang looks and how this contrasts with the way he will look after his political career is ruined. Kwang is always impeccably dressed and Henry thinks how his own father would have admired Kwang.

Henry thinks how originally the assignment called for only a surface examination and not deep investigation into the character or actions of Kwang. Yet, Henry soon discovers something unexpected, something that will occupy his thoughts for the rest of his life.

In Chapter 9, the people on Kwang's staff have been taught a few words of Korean because of the large numbers of Korean visitors to Kwang's office. To help ensure that the staff members do not say their few Korean words to just any Asian person who visits, Henry often positions himself near the entrance where he can be the first to greet visitors. Kwang's support is strong among all immigrant groups in Queens. In fact, Kwang's support is strong with all groups except Caucasians and African Americans.

Many of the staff members work extra hours and as a reward, Kwang often takes them to weekend dinners. Henry uses these opportunities to observe Kwang interacting with others. Often Kwang speaks to Henry personally, asking how he is doing and about his wife. However, sometimes Kwang forgets and asks about Henry's children.

Henry sends occasional reports back to his office, but he knows that the reports are not what are required. They contain no usable information and nothing incriminating, scandalous, or even questionable about Kwang.

Henry and Eduardo go to the site where Kwang will meet with a group of black ministers. Mayor De Roos has been making statements to the media that suggest Kwang has used illegal means to register voters. Many who hear those statements believe that they are a feeble attempt on the part of the mayor to divert attention from the recent news that he is having an adulterous affair. Henry wonders if Janice supplied the media with that news but she has said nothing. Henry will not ask her.

Kwang arrives for his scheduled meeting and goes inside the church for a private meeting. After the meeting, Kwang comes outside and gives a speech to the crowd and the television cameras. He mentions the victims of racially motivated violence between the blacks and the Koreans. Kwang reminds the Koreans of the torment they suffered from the Japanese during World War II and he says that Koreans should understand the way blacks feel after enduring many years of prejudice in America.

After his speech is finished, Kwang moves through the crowd, shaking hands. A series of loud popping noises panics the crowd and Eduardo and Henry grab Kwang and push





him through the crowd toward his car. Henry helps put Kwang in the car and then it speeds away.

In Chapter 10, Henry stays in contact with Jack. He telephones Jack often from payphones in Queens. Henry is on his way to meet with Jack at an apartment that the company rents. The apartment has extra security measures, such as a sophisticated electronic lock and blackened windows. The apartment is also equipped with office supplies, such as computers, facsimile machines, telephones, and recording devices. Henry is familiar with the apartment because he used to spend nights there when he and Leila fought.

Remembering the fights with Leila makes Henry remember other things about her. He realizes that what he loves most about Leila is her transparency. Whatever she feels, whether it is positive or negative is immediately revealed in her expressions and behaviors. Henry remembers that he had known Leila only three months when he asked her to marry him.

Jack is already at the company apartment when Henry arrives. Jack asks about Leila and Henry says they are seeing each other more frequently now and that she even spent the night once but slept on the couch. Jack is happy to hear the news and she says that Henry could have done anything he wanted with his life, yet he chose this profession. Henry thinks about the first time he met Hoagland a few years after college and accepted the job, thinking it would be a short-term arrangement. Henry asks how Jack came to be in this line of work and Jack says that he did not have the choices Henry had. As a young man in Athens, he was paid to steal, commit arson, and conduct kidnappings. That eventually led to his present job and his plans to retire in two months.

Henry and Jack talk about the recent situation at Kwang's speech. Lawyers for two eleven-year-old boys who set off smoke bombs say that it was merely a childish prank. Jack does not believe the story and says Henry should be sending more detailed reports at regular intervals. Jack says that he wished that Henry had quit the company after his last assignment, but now that he is on the Kwang assignment, he hopes that Henry finishes it and then moves on. Jack expresses frustration that the reports Henry sends are infrequent and do not contain useful information.

## **Chapters 8 through 10 (pages 122-159) Analysis**

Henry makes reference to a future event, which is the ruin of Kwang's political career.

By now it has become obvious that Henry judges everything in the world according to how his father would have seen it. Despite their surface differences, Henry's father is the single and most significant influence in his life.

Henry closes the chapter by telling us that he is soon to discover something shocking about Kwang and that this is something that will always trouble Henry.



In Chapter 9, it is interesting how little attention Henry gives to Janice releasing the information about Mayor De Roos affair. Like Henry, Janice is a spy of sorts. It is unclear whether Henry recognizes that Janice's goal of finding compromising information about De Roos is similar to Henry's task of finding information about Kwang. The crucial difference in the two is that Janice can readily admit that she supports Kwang and will gladly use information against De Roos. Thus she does not betray anyone who trusts her. Henry, on the other hand, seems to be in the business of betraying everyone.

In Chapter 10, Henry realizes that although he is an expert at reading the people he is assigned to observe, he cannot communicate effectively with the people he cares about. He even realizes that he acts like his father during arguments. Henry says that what he loves most about Leila is her transparency and he seems to understand that what frustrates her most is his lack of transparency or his opacity.

In this chapter, the paternal feelings that Jack has for Henry are more noticeable than usual. Like a father who says he works hard so a son can have a better life, Jack talks about his life as a boy in Athens with no opportunity for advancement and how that led him to his current work. He says Henry could do anything, but Henry chose his present profession. Jack believes that Henry could do other and more positive things with his life.



## Chapter 11 (pages 160-175)

### Chapter 11 (pages 160-175) Summary

Henry remembers years ago working an assignment with Pete Ichibata. Their target was a Chinese graduate student in the United States. The student organized protest rallies in opposition to the Chinese government. Pete befriended the student and gained his confidence. When Pete asked if the student worried that his family back in China might suffer because of his activities in the United States, the student said his family had moved away and is safe. The student did, however, worry about a girlfriend still at a university in China. He stopped writing to her so that the Chinese government would not know that was someone he cared about.

Henry knows that Kwang's campaign staff members are not naive like the graduate student and that he will have to use much more subtle means to gather information. Kwang's campaign routinely collects information on campaign donors and Kwang memorizes the information. One night, Henry prints out the list of new campaign donors for Kwang but Henry also spends some time reading them. Kwang does not seem to notice Henry's attention to the printouts and he invites Henry to dinner.

On the way to dinner, Kwang tells Henry his history of business in America. He started out small like so many other immigrants but worked hard and expanded. He is now very wealthy and owns many businesses and portions of many others.

Kwang and Henry see a Korean merchant arguing with a black man. Kwang stops to see if he can be of assistance. The black man is a regular customer and he has come to return a watch that has stopped working. Originally he wanted an exchange, but since the merchant was rude to him, he decides instead that he wants a full refund. The merchant refuses. Kwang asks to speak to the merchant privately and when they return, the merchant says that he would like to exchange the watch for a nicer one, and he would like to offer some earrings free of charge for the man's wife.

### Chapter 11 (pages 160-175) Analysis

The story of Pete and Henry spying on the Chinese graduate student is chilling. Now the reader cannot believe that much of what Henry does for a living is anything less than diabolical. Surely, even at the time, Henry must have known what would happen to the student back in China.

In listening to Kwang talk about his life and hard work, it is impossible not to like him. We wonder if Henry feels the same way. Kwang's intervention in the dispute between the merchant and the customer is admirable and his influence is impressive. The reader is left to wonder how Henry can go on with his assignment.

While Henry waits for Kwang to speak to the merchant, he makes some important observations about race relations. Much of the conflict is based on simple cultural misunderstanding.



## Chapters 12 & 13 (pages 176-196)

### Chapters 12 & 13 (pages 176-196) Summary

Henry and Kwang go to a Korean restaurant. The restaurant owner is happy to see Kwang. He takes them to a private dining area, brings them liquor, and visits until the first course of food arrives. When they are alone, Henry asks Kwang if he will run for mayor. Kwang answers that the newspapers all say that he will. The two discuss city politics and in particular, race relations.

Henry observes that the liquor is beginning to affect Kwang and Henry thinks about his personal rule to always try to stay twice as sober as his subject. Tonight he is violating that rule and he matches Kwang drink-for-drink. Henry does not push Kwang for information like he knows that he should. Instead he finds that he simply enjoys time spent with Kwang.

Sherrie Chin-Watt arrives. Henry starts to pour her a drink but she says she cannot stand that type of Korean liquor. Sherrie immediately begins talking business and Henry knows that this is an excellent opportunity to gather more information. He knows that he should take part in the conversation but something about Sherrie makes him uncomfortable. He wants to leave.

While Henry tries to think of ways to excuse himself from the table and leave Kwang and Sherrie to talk business, he notices something that surprises him. Kwang has already been sitting very close to Sherrie and acting with a greater degree of familiarity than Henry thought appropriate, but Henry thought perhaps it was due merely to the influence of the liquor. Then Henry notices Kang putting his hand inside Sherrie's clothing. Sherrie acts as if this is not at all unusual.

In Chapter 13, Henry puts more effort into writing his reports but they still contain no useful information. Henry remembers being on the assignment with the Filipino psychoanalyst, Dr. Luzan, when Henry found himself forgetting that the man was his subject. Henry spoke to him as if Henry was really a patient. Henry told him about the imaginary brother he had as a child. Henry also told the doctor about his single act of infidelity during his marriage.

Henry had come to like the doctor, and he planned to warn the doctor. During a session, Henry got up to go get a drink of water, and Jack and two other employees of Henry's company were waiting for him in the hall. They placed a cloth soaked in ether over Henry's face and carried him to a car.

### Chapters 12 & 13 (pages 176-196) Analysis

The restaurant owner provides an example of how highly Korean Americans hold John Kwang. Kwang handles the admiration with grace and Henry finds himself liking Kwang

more and more. Henry knows that he is supposed to gather information, but he cannot make himself stop enjoying his time with Kwang and force himself to focus on his job.

With the arrival of Sherrie Chin-Watt and Kwang's familiar behavior toward her, Henry knows that he might be on the verge of discovering something scandalous in Kwang's character. More significant than Kwang's behavior toward Sherrie is the fact that neither of them feel the need to hide it from Henry. Henry is now trusted and he could use that trust to help him achieve his assigned goal. However, he does nothing.

In Chapter 13, Henry thinks again about the Filipino doctor. Henry has never said it outright but he knows that the information he gathered on the doctor led to the doctor's death. Henry knows that the information he supplies on a subject can mean life or death. It appears that Henry too could be in danger if he performs poorly. Placing a cloth soaked in ether over a man's face and kidnapping him are not the actions of some office clerks who merely gather information. Although earlier Henry said that his company did not deal in dangerous espionage, his later revelations say otherwise, and we have to wonder if Henry might not be in danger.



## Chapter 14 (pages 197-214)

### Chapter 14 (pages 197-214) Summary

Leila meets Henry at the Ardsley train station. At Henry's father's house, Leila makes Henry's lamb stew, which is his favorite food. Leila and Henry were planning to move into Henry's father's house before their marital troubles and Leila's trip to Europe, but they had not done so after Henry's father's death. After dinner, Henry and Leila organize family photos and discuss Henry's similarities to his mother. This leads to a discussion of the traits that children inherit from their parents. Leila mentions that her father likes Henry and believes that all current marital trouble is Leila's fault.

Leila asks Henry how work is going. He says fine but Leila says that Jack seems to think otherwise. He did not say anything in particular to her but he urged her to talk to Henry. After much coaxing, Leila finally gets Henry to talk about work. He says that he has been sending the required reports but they do not contain the right kind of material. Leila asks what sort of material is required and Henry says they want something damning. Leila wants to know why Henry does not simply quit and Henry seems to say that Hoagland might have him harmed. When Leila asks why Henry does not give Hoagland what he wants, Henry says that someone else might be hurt. Leila considers this and says that she wants Henry to give Hoagland what he wants. She wants more than anything for Henry to be safe.

Henry continues to confide in Leila. Later in the night, they are intimate.

### Chapter 14 (pages 197-214) Analysis

Henry's willingness to communicate with Leila seems to have changed. It is difficult for him at first, but once he starts, it seems that he is slowly able to open up. Leila's response to Henry's efforts is warm and supportive. Perhaps this could be a turning point in their relationship. The fact that they are putting the effort into cleaning the house and spending the weekend together shows that they are certainly willing to try. The bulk of the responsibility will rest with Henry and whether he is able to continue an open and honest way of communicating with Leila.



## Chapter 15 (pages 215-232)

### Chapter 15 (pages 215-232) Summary

Henry and Leila live together again in their apartment in New York. They get Henry's father's house in order, but they want to get used to living together in their apartment before they move to the larger house. Leila works at home as a speech therapist. Henry still works for Kwang but only on weekends. During the week, Henry helps Leila with the many students that come to the apartment. Henry answers the telephone and makes appointments for Leila. Henry also makes lunches for Leila and the students.

While Henry watches Leila work with the students, he thinks about how as a child he too had to work with speech therapists. He was assigned to remedial classes in elementary school to help him learn to pronounce difficult English words.

In addition to participating with Leila's classes, Henry meets some of the parents of the students. One parent notices that Henry is Korean and asks Henry what he thinks of Councilman Kwang.

While Henry helps Leila clean the apartment one day, Leila says they should get out and enjoy the day. They talk as they enjoy the afternoon. Henry plans to stay with Kwang only a few more weeks and once the assignment is complete, he will end his association with Hoagland. Leila will return to being a speech therapist for the school district and Henry will stay at home for a while before deciding on a new profession. Henry and Leila ride the Staten Island Ferry. On a whim, they check into a motel and order in food.

After hours of romance, they turn on the television to check the weather and see if perhaps they would like to stay in the motel another day. They see a news broadcast of Kwang's offices burning. The news report says the fire started from suspicious causes. Leila asks if they must return immediately and Henry answers that they will wait until morning.

### Chapter 15 (pages 215-232) Analysis

The most immediately noticeable thing about the narrative in Chapter 15 is that it switches to present tense. All the previous chapters are told in the past tense, but Chapter 15 makes an abrupt change to the present tense. Henry's memories of the past are still offered in past tense, but they become fewer. Whereas in previous chapters Henry's memories of the past made up the majority of the text, now the present action makes up the majority.

The tone of this chapter is dramatically different from all previous chapters. Previous chapters were dark and full of misery and Henry's self-loathing, this chapter is bright,





happy, and hopeful in tone. Henry and Leila are mutually supportive and as their discussion on the ferry reveals, their communication has improved.

Although he does not tell Leila, when she asks him who he believes is responsible for the fire, Henry cannot help but wonder if his own company is not directly involved. This omission of detail is very different from Henry's previous trait of concealing detail from his wife. He fails to tell her everything he is thinking because his ideas at this point are merely speculations and they can only frighten Leila.



# Chapters 16 & 17 (pages 233-257)

## Chapters 16 & 17 (pages 233-257) Summary

When Henry arrives at Kwang's offices, he learns that Helda, the janitor, and Eduardo died in the fire. Reporters are gathered outside Kwang's office because they expect him to arrive. Many other people are outside, including Eduardo's family. Henry goes inside and gathers what he can salvage of Eduardo's belongings and gives them to Eduardo's mother. Sherrie walks through the site with police and has Henry follow taking notes.

Henry tries to call Jack at the office and Hoagland answers. Hoagland says that Jack is dead but this is Hoagland's idea of a joke. After Henry curses Hoagland, Hoagland puts Jack on the telephone. Henry wants to know what Jack knows of the fire. Jack says he knows nothing, but Henry persists. Jack says that Henry is crazy if he believes Glimmer & Company had anything to do with the fire.

Sherrie asks Henry to deliver an envelope to Eduardo's family. When Henry sees Eduardo's mother open the envelope, he sees that it contains a stack of one hundred dollar bills.

In Chapter 17, Sherrie calls all of Kwang's staff to meet at Kwang's house. Kwang is upset and he has made no public appearances. Reporters crowd outside Kwang's house. Rumors run wild among the staff. Staff members speculate who might be to blame for the fire and theories range from North Korean terrorists to Mayor De Roos. Henry thinks that aside from Kwang's wife and two sons, Eduardo was the person whose death could hurt Kwang the most.

The janitor, Helda, was a German immigrant, and she was a close friend of the Kwang family. She was saving money to bring her family to the United States.

Sherrie says that Kwang wants to speak to Henry soon. She urges Henry to do all that he can to help Kwang regain his composure so he can make a statement to the media. Sherrie also tells Henry that she and Kwang want Henry to begin working for the campaign full-time. Henry agrees to speak to Kwang soon and then Henry leaves for home. During the cab ride, Henry sees that the cab driver is nervous and Henry knows that this is because of some recent murders of cab drivers.

When Henry goes to visit Kwang, Henry sees Kwang's son playing at his father's desk. Henry thinks about how he was similar to the boy at that age. Henry and Kwang's son discuss baseball until Kwang arrives. Kwang tells the boy to inform his mother to bring food and drink. Henry mentions what a nice boy Kwang's son is, and Kwang tells a story about how he used to worry that the boy would be bullied because he was sensitive and passive by nature. One day, Kwang witnessed a bully pick on his son but did not intervene or even reveal his presence. Kwang's son beat up the bully but afterwards, the boy was sad and depressed for two days.



Kwang asks about Eduardo's family and he asks if Henry will also go to Eduardo's funeral on his behalf. Kwang becomes angry about the media wanting a statement and he says that all they want is for him to speculate about who to blame. Kwang is in a very negative mood. He gives Henry a stack of printouts with names, addresses, and financial amounts and says he would like for Henry to take over Eduardo's job.

## **Chapters 16 & 17 (pages 233-257) Analysis**

This chapter, as well as the rest of the chapters in the book, continues in the present tense.

This chapter reveals that Hoagland goes beyond having merely bad taste when he jokes that Jack is dead. He says such a thing with the full knowledge that Henry is calling from a location where people he knows have died. This indicates that at worst Hoagland is a sinister and dangerous person and at best, he is mentally unbalanced. This could have much to do with why Henry suspects Glimmer & Company of having something to do with the fire.

The reader must worry about Henry at this point. If Hoagland and Jack doubted Henry's ability to complete the assignment before, they must surely doubt his loyalty after his implied accusations.

In Chapter 17, as revealed by Kwang's care for both Eduardo and Helga while they were alive, he is a truly caring and kind person. Kwang's stories about his son further reveal that he cares deeply for those around him.

With Kwang's assignment of Eduardo's job to Henry, the reader is left to wonder if this is where Henry will find the damnable material.



## Chapter 18 (pages 258-272)

### Chapter 18 (pages 258-272) Summary

Henry is now in charge of the work Eduardo performed. He manages cash contributions and the amounts flood in. Kwang models the program on the Korean ggeh or the money club system much like the one that Henry's father joined years ago. Instead of being a small club made up of business people who personally know each other, thousands join Kwang's money club. Donors are periodically eligible to withdraw many times what they have already contributed.

Henry works with Leila by day and for Kwang by night. Henry and Leila's romantic relationship is revitalized. In fact, they are even considering having another child.

Henry meets Jack for lunch. He tells Jack that he will spend two more weeks gathering information about Kwang and then he is leaving Glimmer and Company. Jack understands and he tells Henry to get the right information over the next two weeks. Hoagland wants more information about the money club. Recently, Jack has seen men he believes to be federal agents speaking with Hoagland.

### Chapter 18 (pages 258-272) Analysis

It seems Henry no longer keeps secrets from Leila and the effect of his new method of communication has a profound impact on their romantic interaction and marriage in general. Leila is an amazingly supportive and understanding person now that Henry confides in her and treats her like an equal. Perhaps the most striking example how their relationship has changed can be found in the subtle references to having another child.

While Kwang certainly has the best of intentions with the ggeh, to outsiders it must appear that he is accepting thousands of dollars from poor immigrants to enrich himself. Even to those that understand how a ggeh operates, there are still many complications and some of them might be illegal. For instance, the people who withdraw money from the ggeh probably do not report it on their income tax statements.



## Chapter 19 (pages 273-290)

### Chapter 19 (pages 273-290) Summary

Henry and Kwang often have late night dinners and Henry notices that Kwang is not the same energetic optimistic man he used to be. Kwang looks older and tired. Kwang finally gives a news conference but it goes badly. He seems to lack the charisma he once had. In the estimation of people like Janice, the news conference is a disaster.

Reporters and others frequently ask how Eduardo, a volunteer and student, could afford an apartment with rent of \$1000 per month. Henry thinks either the apartment was compensation for managing the ggeh or Eduardo was stealing from the ggeh. Henry checks the records and there is nothing to prove that Eduardo was stealing. As Henry works, he thinks that while his process of gathering information did not bring Kwang to his current situation, it will not help him either.

Kwang's popularity starts to decline. The media asks questions about any financial irregularities in Kwang's offices. Henry is the only person to see Kwang regularly. Kwang has sent his wife and sons away and he has come to depend heavily on Henry, both for work-related matters and emotional support.

Kwang is fond of telling Henry old Korean folk stories. During such a discussion, Henry asks about Kwang's wife and sons and Kwang becomes angry. Kwang says that Henry is the only person not to have asked about Eduardo and the apartment. Kwang says he does not know if Henry refrains from asking out of respect or out of fear.

Rumors of financial irregularities abound. The media circulates rumors of Kwang's campaign running pyramid schemes and illegal lotteries. Kwang's staff begs him to go public and deny the rumors but Kwang refuses.

One evening around 4 a.m. when Henry is working on the ggeh paperwork, Kwang approaches him and says he needs Henry to drive him somewhere. Kwang tells Henry to drive to Sherrie's apartment and once they arrive, Henry goes inside and speaks to the doorman who calls Sherrie. Sherrie is severely annoyed and worried that someone might have seen Henry enter her building and believed he is Kwang. She tells him to hurry back outside.

Once Sherrie is in the car, Kwang tells Henry to drive to a Korean nightclub. Kwang, Sherrie, and Henry are shown to a private room in the club. Kwang and Sherrie sit on one couch and Henry sits on another facing them. A young Korean waitress arrives and to Henry, she appears to be merely in her teens. Kwang instructs her to attend to Henry and the young woman begins touching Henry. Henry is clearly uncomfortable and Sherrie shouts at Kwang to tell the young woman to stop. She shouts that Henry is not Eduardo and Henry does not like this activity. Sherrie continues to become angry and



Kwang yells for Henry to take Sherrie home. A physical altercation follows. Kwang strikes Sherrie and Henry has to tackle Kwang to get him to stop.

After Sherrie leaves the room, Kwang curses her and other staff members. He says they were hurting him. Kwang even refers to Eduardo as one that betrayed him. Henry asks if Eduardo was stealing and Kwang says no but that he was doing something just as bad. He says Eduardo was supplying written reports to someone. Kwang says he thinks the reports were being supplied to Mayor De Roos. Kwang says he turned the matter over to a local gang. However, he did not know the gang would kill Eduardo by starting the office fire which also killed Helda.

Henry is shocked. He cannot speak. As he leaves, he sees that Kwang is making advances to the young waitress.

## **Chapter 19 (pages 273-290) Analysis**

Kwang exhibits the signs of depression. He does not go out in public. Instead, he talks only to Henry and during those discussions, Kwang speaks mostly of Korea. It is as if in relating those Korean folk tales, Kwang is escaping from his present circumstances. How much guilt Henry feels at this time is uncertain. He thinks that his activity did not cause Kwang's current situation, but he also knows that his method of gathering information will possibly hurt Kwang further. Perhaps Henry feels like he is harming a person who is already hurt and vulnerable.

The angry confession Kwang delivers at the nightclub is shocking but the most shocking aspect is hidden among the details and perhaps only noticeable to Henry. If Eduardo was delivering reports to some unknown recipient, it might be possible that Eduardo was in the same business as Henry. It is also possible that it could have been Henry who was killed instead of Eduardo.



## Chapters 20 & 21 (pages 291-306)

### Chapters 20 & 21 (pages 291-306) Summary

Henry and Leila wait for a train at a subway station. Later in the day, Henry is supposed to meet Pete and Grace from Glimmer & Company and give them the ggeh printouts. Henry is nervous about the meeting and he has been imagining that he sees Pete and Grace throughout the day. Once Henry gives the material to Pete and Grace, Henry will be finished with both Glimmer & Company and with Kwang.

Henry decides not to tell Leila about Kwang's part in the fire. He does not want to burden her with more worries. Henry also decides not to tell Hoagland about the fire. He does not want to give Hoagland additional material for causing harm to Kwang.

Henry meets Pete and Grace at a Korean restaurant. Pete and Grace have been on an assignment together in the Bahamas and they have begun a romantic relationship. Henry gives the printouts to Pete and Grace and after they leave, Henry thinks about what parents of immigrant children would think about what Henry did for Glimmer & Company. Henry thinks his own father would have seen it in pragmatic terms, seen it as simply something Henry had to do to succeed.

In Chapter 21, Henry learns that after he left Kwang at the Korean nightclub, Kwang stayed for a long time and then left with the young waitress. Kwang was drunk and wrecked his car. Although Kwang was hardly injured, the young waitress was severely injured and was taken to the hospital. Kwang was arrested and had to pay a bond to be released from jail.

Henry meets with other staff members at Janice's apartment. Upon seeing the news of Kwang's arrest, Henry leaves his own apartment. Henry knows that he does not have to go but he does anyway. Janice is unable to reach other important staff members such as Sherrie. It seems that many people are trying to distance themselves from Kwang. Henry tries to offer support to Janice. They walk to a nearby Chinese restaurant.

While they wait for their food, a television news broadcast reports that the Immigration and Naturalization Service has discovered that many members of Kwang's "money club" are illegal immigrants. Authorities have arrested those people and the news report also says that the waitress injured in Kwang's automobile accident is also an illegal immigrant.

### Chapters 20 & 21 (pages 291-306) Analysis

Henry's decision not to reveal to his wife or his employer that Kwang is responsible for the fire that killed two people is not an instance of Henry reverting back to his habit of failing to communicate with his wife. He realizes that no good can come from her

knowing. Henry's reasons for not telling Hoagland are for a different reason. Henry knows that Hoagland could and likely would use the information to further harm Kwang.

In Chapter 21, Henry wonders what his father would think of some of his work for Glimmer & Company. Specifically, he wonders what his father would have thought of Henry making a living by exploiting other immigrants. Henry thinks his father would have looked at it as simply something Henry had to do in order to succeed in America, much like some of the sacrifices his father had to make. It might be fair to say that rather than Henry believing this is the way his father would view the situation, this is the way Henry hopes his father would think.





## Chapters 22 & 23 (pages 307-324)

### Chapters 22 & 23 (pages 307-324) Summary

Crowds gather outside Kwang's house and they are divided into two factions. One faction consists of those protesting Kwang and are mostly Caucasians who are worried about Kwang. The latter group, the one Henry stands with, is composed mostly of immigrants. Janice is inside the house with Kwang's family. Janice has been extremely worried about Kwang, but Henry reassures her that Koreans do not commit suicide because of shame.

Henry returns to his apartment and Leila is in bed. She asks what will happen to the arrested immigrants and Henry says that it is now in the hands of the courts. Leila tries to console Henry by saying he did not know this would happen, and she reminds him that he is finished with Glimmer & Company. She says he can now work with her. Henry says he is making one last visit to Kwang.

Outside the apartment, Henry begins to look for a taxi and he sees Jack in his car. Jack offers to give Henry a ride. Jack reveals that Eduardo was working for Glimmer & Company compiling the same types of reports as Henry. When they reach Kwang's house, Henry says goodbye to Jack.

The protesters are still present and Henry sees several police cars arrive. Kwang gets out of one of them. The police try to hold the crowd back, but they break through and rush Kwang. Henry also rushes to Kwang and begins hitting anyone who tries to harm Kwang. Henry is beaten to the ground in trying to defend Kwang.

In Chapter 23, Henry usually spends his mornings shopping in Korean stores. One morning he visits Kwang's house, which is now for sale. Henry asks the realtor whom the house used to belong to and the realtor says that it used to belong to foreigners who have gone home.

Leila now teaches for the school district and Henry often goes with her as an assistant. He dresses in a costume and helps teach the students English.

### Chapters 22 & 23 (pages 307-324) Analysis

Henry thinks about how he was born a citizen of the United States and that he takes so much for granted that other immigrants only dream of. He takes no consolation in the fact that he did not know it would be many poor immigrants who would suffer because of the information he supplied to Glimmer & Company. Henry knew something bad would happen and he did his job anyway.



The revelation that Eduardo was an employee of Glimmer & Company might be surprising to the reader but Henry seems so weary that he is beyond feeling surprised at anything. The goodbye between Henry and Jack has a note of finality.

In Chapter 23, Henry seems adjust to a new life. It seems appropriate after all he has been through that he channels all of his efforts into performing work that helps the children of immigrants.



# Characters

## Henry Park

Henry is a first generation Korean American. He is a college-educated professional and as narrator of the novel, he is an articulate and keen observer of everything around him. In fact, Henry thinks a great deal of his problems can be traced to his knack for being the unseen observer who is never the participant.

Henry has an unusual profession. He refers to himself as a spy and there is perhaps no better word for his occupation even though he does not work in the service of any government. He works for a private company that will provide information on anyone for a price. Due to his ethnicity, Henry's particular area of specialization includes people of Asian descent. In this way, Henry believes that he exploits those he should feel a special kinship to.

Henry is not the only person that holds him in low regard at the opening of the novel. Henry's wife, Leila, is leaving him as the novel opens. She has grown weary of trying to maintain a relationship with a man who she regards as cold and emotionless. Leila's accusations that Henry is devoid of emotion are not entirely unfounded. He does feel emotion like the rest of us, but after many years of observing others, particularly his father who as a poor immigrant had to work hard to give Henry a good life, Henry has learned to conceal any emotion he may feel. In short, Henry's greatest failing as a spouse is that he does not communicate with his wife. Leila even has a term for the way Henry gives noncommittal or meaningless answers to questions. She calls it "Henryspeak."

## Leila Park

Leila is the wife of Henry Park and the readers' first introduction to her occurs as she is leaving Henry for an indefinite period. She gives Henry a note that is rather insulting. In the following chapters, the Leila that is presented comes from the narrator Henry who is in a great deal of pain because of the separation and the image of her may not be entirely accurate.

Leila came from a wealthy family and she works for a relief agency when Henry first meets her. They both experience an immediate physical and intellectual attraction. Leila is able to match Henry in his fascination with language and meaning and her sense of humor, like Henry's, is subtle and dry. Henry says that the thing he loves most about Leila is her transparency. Whatever she is feeling immediately shows in her expression, speech, and behavior.

The Leila that the reader comes to know in the latter parts of the novel is nothing like the Leila that is presented initially. At the opening of the novel Leila leaves her husband and we later learn that she has an affair while she is gone. The Leila that is presented



later is a warm, loyal, and supportive partner. She shows genuine care and patience with Henry once he begins trying to communicate with her. In fact, Leila displays the same care and patience with Henry that she shows her speech therapy students that struggle with a difficult new language.

## Henry's father

This character dies before the novel opens and we never even know his given name. Henry refers to him only as "my father." The fact that he is not alive during the present setting of the novel in no way diminishes his status as a significant or major character. In fact, he could be the most significant character aside from Henry.

Everything Henry experiences is judged in relation to his father. Henry's father serves as a benchmark for everything Henry sees, feels, or does. In constantly judging himself against his father, we are able to simultaneously see how Henry is both very much alike and different from his father.

Henry's father had been an educated and talented engineer in Korea. He gave that up to become a fruit and vegetable seller in the United States. Rather than focus on how the job was beneath him, Henry's father worked hard and prospered. Yet Henry's father never felt as comfortable in American society as Henry does. He always felt and behaved as an outsider and Henry's father rarely showed emotion of any kind.

Over the course of the novel, Henry's opinion of his father seems to change. With wisdom and experience, Henry also seems to acquire greater admiration and affection for his father.

## John Kwang

John Kwang is a Korean American city councilman. He is popular with the immigrants in his district, and he is beginning to enjoy popularity with the city at large. Though he has not officially stated that he will run for the office of mayor, most believe he will. Kwang is also the target that Henry is supposed to observe.

Henry's task of observing and reporting on Kwang is made more difficult because of Kwang's likable nature. Though Kwang was born in Korea, he speaks fluent English. Henry sees Kwang as something of a bridge between his life and the life Henry's father knew. This is also the image many people have of Kwang. He is able to bridge racial and ethnic divides that otherwise erupt in violent conflict.

## Jack Kalantzakos

Jack is one of Henry's coworkers at Glimmer & Company, and he has been there longer than anyone except the company founder. Jack is approaching retirement when the novel opens. Unlike the other employees who merely have experience befriending



subjects in order to gain information, Jack has a past that involves violent forms of espionage. As a young man in Athens, he was involved in arson, kidnapping, and murder.

Jack serves as a sort of mentor to Henry. He tries to advise Henry on matters pertaining to his job. Jack offers Henry advice and encouragement for repairing his marriage.

## **Janice Pawlowsky**

Janice is an energetic and enthusiastic supporter of Kwang. She is in charge of planning all media appearances. After the tragedies and scandals, she is one of the people who turn out to be most loyal to Kwang.

## **Sherrie Chin-Watt**

Sherrie is a Chinese American lawyer, and she is in charge of public relations for Kwang's campaign. She is Henry's supervisor when he first starts working for the campaign. Henry later learns that Sherrie is having an affair with Kwang.

## **Dennis Hoagland**

Dennis Hoagland, Henry's employer, is the founder and owner of Glimmer & Company. At times, Hoagland seems merely annoying or exhibiting a lack of sensitivity and poor taste. On other occasions, Hoagland seems positively sinister and mentally unbalanced.

## **Pete Ichibata**

Pete is Japanese American, and like Henry he works for Glimmer and Company specializing in gathering information about people of Asian descent. Pete is very effective because he is not afflicted by notions of morality.

## **Grace**

Grace is an employee of Glimmer & Company. Hoagland sees her on the street outside a temporary employment agency and he recruits her to work for his company because he believes that she has an "Iron Curtain" look.

## **Dr. Emile Luzan**

Dr. Luzan is a Filipino psychoanalyst who is the subject of one of Henry's past assignments. Henry fails in that assignment because he begins to like and care about Dr. Luzan.



## **Mitt Park**

Mitt is Henry and Leila's son. He dies when he is seven-years-old.

## **Molly**

Molly is the friend that Leila lives with after her return from Europe and before she reconciles with Henry.

## **Sophie Kalantzakos**

Sophie is Jack's wife and friend to Henry and Leila. She dies of cancer before the opening of the novel.

## **May Kwang**

May is the wife of councilman John Kwang.

## **Ahjuhma**

Ahjuhma is what Henry called the woman that cooked and cleaned for years after Henry's mother died. Ahjuhma is not a name but a form of address for a Korean woman who is not a relative. Henry never learns her real name.

## **Cameron Jenkins**

Cameron Jenkins is the supervisor of Kwang's volunteer staff.

## **Mayor De Roos**

De Roos is the current mayor of New York during the action of the novel. He never appears in any of the actions but he is often talked about by the other characters.

## **Stew Boswell**

Stew is Leila's father and a successful businessman. He thinks highly of Henry.

## **Alice Boswell**

Alice is Leila's mother. Leila believes her mother gets increasingly odd with age.



## **Eduardo Fermin**

Eduardo is a favorite of Kwang's. In fact, Kwang regards him like a son. Eduardo dies in a fire that destroys Kwang's offices.

## **Helda Brandeis**

Helda is the janitor at Kwang's offices. She dies in the fire that kills Eduardo.



## **Objects/Places**

### **El Paso**

This is the city in Texas is where Henry and Leila first meet.

### **New York City**

All of the action of the novel takes place in or around this large city.

### **Glimmer & Company**

This is the name of the company Henry works for. Although the employees say the company supplies lighting to military bases, the company really gathers intelligence for anyone who can pay.

### **Ggeh**

This is a type of money club. Members make regular contributions and on a rotating schedule, each member receives the money.

### **Ardsley, New York**

This affluent suburb is where Henry's father buys a house.

### **JFK International Airport**

This major international airport is where many people traveling to or arriving from international destinations leave and enter New York City.

### **Flushing**

This location is a neighborhood in the New York City borough of Queens. It is where Kwang's offices are located.

### **Staten Island Ferry**

This passenger service ferry operates between Staten Island and Manhattan. Henry and Leila enjoy a free afternoon and catch the ferry.



## **Henryspeak**

This is the term Leila has for the way Henry sometimes answers questions in a way that conveys no information and dodges the question.

## **Purchase, New York**

This location fifteen miles north of New York City is where Glimmer & Company's offices are located.



# Themes

## Language as Source of Identity

Henry Park equates language or mastery of language with identity. For immigrants, their use of language is as clear an identifier as their physical appearance and style of dress. Henry has the physical features of those coming from the previous country yet he speaks the language as well or better than any other native-born citizen.

Every time Henry thinks about his father and tries to describe his father's belief about a given subject, Henry includes some of his father's language. To Henry, the way his father expressed his ideas through language did more than convey his father's ideas on a single narrow topic. It also described who his father was. In most cases, Henry's father's use of language identified him as a "stranger" or someone from outside the governing society and someone who at best could hope for an auxiliary role in that society.

Using the same criterion of mastery of language, Henry comes to see himself as an enemy of society. Henry is an avid student of all around him, particularly language. He pays attention to the slightest nuances of meaning and he incorporates the knowledge into his command of the language. Henry's expert knowledge of English allows him to move within society in ways his father never could. Henry does not use this freedom and opportunity in beneficial ways in the manner of other characters such as John Kwang who works hard to bridge gaps in understanding and tolerance between different ethnic groups. Henry uses his command of the language to position himself between different ethnic groups so he can prey on and betray the group that most closely physically represents his own.

Henry is not the only character that comes to view his use of language as earning him the identity of enemy. While his wife is in Europe, Henry finds a note where Leila refers to him as a "false speaker of language."

## Hubris

John Kwang dares to do things other immigrants would find unthinkable. He moves beyond what many believe to be one of the acceptable niches of immigrants and entrepreneurship. Kwang moves into the forbidden territory of politics, which is the domain of the ruling classes or ethnicities. Henry's father lived every day of his life in the United States as if at any moment the rest of the country could stop tolerating his presence and send him away. Although Henry ridiculed such notions for much of his life, Henry does not move entirely outside of his safety zone and join mainstream society. Henry finds a way to stay hidden and exploit immigrants. John Kwang challenges the preconceived notions of both immigrants and natives alike when he tries to rise to a



station that will allow him to bring peace and understanding to a variety of people. Through such a daring act of hubris, retribution is sure to follow.

After rumors of Kwang's improprieties surface, crowds of protestors gather outside his home and blame him for an array of conditions that he has nothing to do with. Kwang is blamed for illegal immigrants getting into the country and for enabling these illegal immigrants to succeed and even steal the livelihood of native-born citizens. Kwang has no notion of who is legal and who is not and Kwang does not care. Kwang wants only to improve the society that has allowed him to achieve wealth and a good life. By daring to emerge from the station of millionaire immigrant for the purpose of sharing his good fortune, Kwang makes himself a target. If Kwang was content to remain an unseen immigrant and enjoy his riches, there would have been no retribution.

## **Communication: Burden or Sign of Trust**

Henry says that he learned from his father to send people away rather than share a burden with them. Henry realizes that what he calls his "mask of serenity and repose" is truly a mask or a fake façade. After a lifetime of conditioning, believes that this is the only option. Leila recognizes that the outward presentation is contrived and she knows more is going on behind the mask. She battles the frustration until she can endure no longer and leaves, escapes to Europe. Henry and Leila have a fundamental difference of belief when it comes to the purpose of communication.

To Henry, when he conceals through omission of full disclosure, he is sparing his wife an unnecessary burden. To Leila, the omission demonstrates a lack of trust or at least a lack of regard for her as a valued partner. Even after Henry becomes fully aware of the core of the problem, which is his lack of honest communication, he seems unable to break the habit. Moreover, he seems to think the only value in doing so will be to placate his wife.

Once Henry is able to force himself past the barriers and start talking to Leila about some of his troubles, the change in her demeanor is immediate. Their level of physical intimacy is instantly rejuvenated, their ability to enjoy playful verbal repartee returns, and they are in general happier. Once Henry is able to demonstrate that he does indeed value his wife as a trusted partner, he immediately reaps the reward of having a loving and patient wife.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view comes entirely from the first-person perspective of the narrator, Henry Park. As in any first-person narrative, the reader's perception of characters and events is colored by the narrator's own peculiar prejudices and the issue of reliability in narration arises. With Henry Park, we have a narrator that is so obviously flawed and troubled that it gives us a sense that we are getting a more reliable narration because we believe we can tell when Henry is being less than subjective.

A significant part of the narrative, especially in the first half of the novel, includes flashbacks. Somehow the narrator manages to do this without ever letting the readers feel like exposition is being delivered. Henry as narrator never really seems to tell us anything or give us an outright explanation that would come across as dry exposition. Instead he allows current action to spark memories that are conveyed to the readers. We draw our own conclusions. This is a fitting form of narration for Henry as narrator because Henry as a character, is also a master of avoiding giving direct answers. His business is to adopt various aliases and rather than tell his subjects who he is, he simply constructs a persona that he allows them to believe. Henry the narrator treats the reader in much the same way. He does not tell us through exposition but rather allows us to believe what we will from his detailed and often poetic descriptions.

The point of view of Native Speaker allows for another aspect of the novel that must be satisfying to readers. Accompanying Henry through his many trials and mistakes, we can appreciate his maturation and development at the end. This aspect would probably not be possible from any other point of view.

## Setting

The physical setting of the novel is New York City. Almost all of the action of the novel takes place in the city or a few nearby suburban areas. Although no specific year is given, descriptions of conditions in the city lead the reader to understand that the time is most likely the 1980s or 1990s.

One of the clues to the time setting of the novel is the frequent mention of strife between Korean Americans and African Americans. This racial tension began as Korean immigrants began moving into previously African American neighborhoods and the tensions, motivated in large part by cultural misunderstandings, turned violent over time. During the 1980s and 1990s, several tragic instances of violence occurred. This background of racial tension has a significant effect on the setting and overall tone of the novel. So much of what happens to the characters on an individual level as well as on a larger societal level is the result of cultural tensions or misunderstandings.



Two physical settings are often juxtaposed. There are the wealthier and predominantly white and suburban neighborhoods, and there are the inner city and less affluent neighborhoods where the majority of the immigrants live. Henry is able to move freely between the two settings and through his movements, we get a more accurate picture of the larger societal forces.

There is yet another setting in the novel. Since the novel is told in the first person narrative and so much of the narrative consists of flashbacks, one of the settings or sub-settings is Henry's mind. At first it is a troubled mind that is afflicted with personal tragedy and self-doubt. Later, it is a wiser and more hopeful mind.

## Language and Meaning

Since the story is told in the first person from the perspective of Henry, and because Henry is an educated and articulate person, the language of the novel is sophisticated and precise but still easily approachable. In many ways, *Native Speaker* is a novel about language and meaning. In the opening of the novel, Henry's wife, Leila, leaves him for his failure to communicate with her, and one of her characterizations or insults of Henry is "false speaker of language." In another discussion when Leila is hurt and disappointed by Henry giving her a meaningless and diversionary answer to a question she replies, "Oh good, it's the Henryspeak."

Henry understands early in life that mastery of language equals power. Being the child of immigrants to American who never fully master the language, Henry has seen that one's level of proficiency with language can determine one's economic station in life. It can mean the difference between being a menial laborer or street vendor barely able to survive and being a prosperous person who fully assimilates into the dominant society. Some people such as John Kwang use the mastery of language to work toward helping others, while other characters such as Henry and his colleagues at Glimmer & Company use language as a tool to remain hidden and parasitic.

Toward the end of the novel, after Henry has seen many trials and tragedies, he begins to see another kinder and even beautiful aspect concerning mastery of language. After beginning to honestly communicate with his wife, Henry is able to enjoy a happy and fulfilling partnership. The partnership and marriage also exposes Henry to the world of education where instead of being a parasite feeding on the difficulties of immigrants, he can help the children of immigrants to master the language and lead better lives.

## Structure

Although told in the first person and covering the time period from when Henry's wife leaves him until after he has finished his disastrous assignment with John Kwang, the structure is not simply linear. In the early part of the story, the narrator, Henry, moves back and forth between the current action and remembrances of the past. In early parts of the novel, the flashbacks make up the majority of the narrative. As the novel



progresses, the flashbacks, while still frequent, become less lengthy and the current action begins to be the main focus of the novel.

Beginning at the opening of Chapter 15, a dramatic change occurs in the narrative. It changes from past to present tense. Flashbacks are still told in the past tense but all descriptions of current action are presented in present tense. This unconventional move in narration has immediate and profound effects on the tone of the story.

The shift in tense comes at a crucial time in Henry's efforts to understand and repair his marriage. By beginning the present tense immediately after Henry's first efforts to honestly talk to his wife, the narrator creates a sense of some kind of breakthrough for Henry. Indeed, this shift and the feeling of a breakthrough coincides with Henry revealing to the reader that Leila has returned to their New York apartment and that plans to relocate to the house in Ardsley are still being considered. The shift to present tense creates a feeling that there are two separate narratives. In the first narrative, told in the past tense, Henry is in a deep fog of confusion, trying to make sense of the past and present. In the second narrative, told in the present tense, Henry has emerged into a world of clarity and there is hope for his future.



## Quotes

You are surreptitious  
B+ student of life  
first thing hummer of Wagner and Strauss  
illegal alien  
emotional alien  
genre bug  
Yellow peril: neo-American  
great in bed  
overrated  
poppa's boy  
sentimentalist  
anti-romantic  
\_\_\_\_\_ analyst (you fill in)  
stranger  
follower  
traitor  
spy  
(Chapter 1, pg. 5.)

"I am an amiable man. I can be most personable, if not charming, and whatever I possess in this life is more or less the result of a talent I have for making you feel good about yourself when you are with me. In this sense I am not a seducer. I am hardly seen. I won't speak untruths to you, I won't pass easy compliments or odious offerings of flattery. I make do with on-hand materials, what I can chip out of you, your natural ore. Then I fuel the fire of your most secret vanity" (Chapter 1, pg. 6.)

"We pledged allegiance to no government. We aren't ourselves political creatures. We weren't patriots. Even less, heroes. We systematically over-assessed risk, made it a bad word. Guns spooked us. Jack kept a pistol in his desk, but it didn't work. We knew nothing of weaponry, torture, psychological warfare, extortion, electronics, supercomputers, explosives. Never anything like that" (Chapter 2, pg. 15.)

I still imagine Mr. Kim's and Mr. Yoon's children, lonely for their fathers, gratefully eating whatever was brought home to them, our overripe and almost rotten mangoes, our papayas, kiwis, pineapples, these exotic tastes of their wondrous new country, this joyful fruit now too soft and too sweet for those who knew better, us near natives, us earlier Americans (Chapter 4, pg. 50.)

"Byong-ho," he said firmly. His voice was already changing. He was shifting into Korean, getting his throat ready. Then he spoke as he rose to leave, 'Let's not hear one more



thing about it. The woman will come with us to the new house and take care of you. This is what I have decided. Our talk is past usefulness. There will be no other way" (Chapter 5, pg. 59.)

"I told him how I still felt love, but that I didn't trust you anymore. That I didn't know how you really felt about anything, our marriage. Me. You. I realized one day that I didn't know the first thing about what was going on inside your head. Sometimes I think you're not even here, with the rest of us, you know, engaged, present. I don't know anymore why you do things. What you want from me. I don't know what you need in life" (Chapter 7, pg. 117-118.)

"To tell him that I loved him, I studied far into the night. I read my entire children's encyclopedia, drilling from aardvark to zymurgy. I never made an error at shortstop. I spit-shinned and brushed his shoes every Sunday morning. Later, to tell him something else, I'd place a larger bouquet than his on my mother's grave. I drove only used beat-up cars. I never asked him for money. I spoke volumes to him this way, speak to him still, those same volumes he spoke to me" (Chapter 7, pg. 119.)

"When I was a boy I wouldn't join any school club or organization before a member first approached me. I wouldn't eat or sleep at a friend's house if it weren't prearranged. I never assumed anyone would be generous to me, or in any way helpful. I never considered it my right to expect approval or sanction no matter what good I had done. My father always reminded me that neither he nor the world owed me a penny or a prayer, though he left me millions of one and braying echoes of another" (Chapter 10, pg. 149.)

"I celebrate every order of silence borne of the tongue and the heart and the mind. I am a linguist of the field. You, too, may know the troubling, expert power. It finds hard expression in the faces of those who would love you most. Look there now. All you see will someday fade away. To what chill of you remains" (Chapter 10, pg. 159.)

"I will duly retreat to the position of the good volunteer, the invisible underling. I have always known that moment of disappearance, and the even uglier truth is that I have long treasured it. That always honorable-seeming absence. It appears I can go anywhere I wish. Is this my assimilation, so many years in the making? Is this the long-sought sweetness?" (Chapter 12, pg. 188.)

"I hear the talk from all his people. They offer each other the spectrum of notions; the bombers are North Korean terrorists, or the growing white separatist cell based on eastern Long Island, or even the worldwide agents of the Mossad—you can always lay blame on them—who will never forget Kwang's verbal support of the children of the Intifada. The late money says it's the Indians, who despise Korean competition, it's the





Jews envious of new Korean money, Chinese hateful of Korean communality, blacks who want something, anything of justice, it's the uneasy coalition of our colors, that oldest strife of city and alley and schoolyard" (Chapter 17, pg. 243.)

"I think John Kwang would be a man to keep his boys close, keep May even closer, that he would collect the four of them in one shut-away room and have them sleep and eat and bathe all together until the tempests subsided. His move is more what my father would do, what I have learned, too, through all of my life. To send people away or else allow them to go, that what is most notable to me is the exquisite gift of silence. My mask of serenity and repose" (Chapter 19, pg. 276.)

## Topics for Discussion

Discuss your thoughts on the list Leila gave to Henry when you first read it, after you get to know a little about Leila, and your thoughts about the list by the end of the book.

Through the course of the novel, how have Henry's thoughts about his father changed? Is he equally critical of his father at the beginning and end of the book?

As a spy often under cover, Henry takes on many different identities. However Henry believes that all people have multiple identities. What other major character of the novel has multiple identities or shows different identities to different individuals or groups?

Midway through the book, the narration changes from past tense to present tense. What effect did this shift have on your perception of events? Does it create a heightened sense of tension or immediacy?

A significant element of the plot involved Henry's attempts to repair his marriage. At the opening of the novel, the marriage is in a poor state and might not even continue. By the end of the novel, the couple seems as close as any two people can be. What brings about this change? Did one character change entirely or did both characters compromise?

Without confusing a "satisfying ending" with a "happy ending," can an ending be both satisfying and realistic? "Happily ever after" endings are rarely realistic. Discuss whether you find the ending of *Native Speaker* realistic and whether you see any positive aspects in the ending as it relates to the main characters.

The racial strife between Korean Americans and African Americans is mentioned many times throughout the novel. After conducting some brief historical research on race relations between Korean Americans and African Americans in the 1980s and 1990s, discuss whether you think the narrator, Henry, is correct in saying that the root cause of the trouble was a misunderstanding between different cultures.