

Necessary Roughness Short Guide

Necessary Roughness by Marie G. Lee

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Overview

Necessary Roughness is a coming-of-age story that revolves around Chan Kim and his twin sister, Young. In Los Angeles, the Kim family owned a successful grocery store, Chan was a popular soccer star, and life was comfortable in their vibrant multicultural neighborhood. All that changes when the Kims are forced to move to Iron River, Minnesota, to save the family's honor after their father's drug-dealing brother flees the town, leaving debts and ill-will behind him. The family must learn to deal with vicious prejudice from hostile townspeople, struggle to make their new store succeed, and cope with new conflicts between Chan and his father. Worst of all, Young is killed in a car accident. In the end, father and son come to understand and accept each other, and Chan gains new respect for his Korean heritage.

About the Author

Marie G. Lee is a second-generation Korean American, the daughter of Dr. William and Grace Lee. She was born and raised in Hibbing, Minnesota. Growing up in the small Minnesota town Marie had the distinction of being part of a Korean family in a town where people had never seen Korean Americans. In *Necessary Roughness*, as in all of her novels, she draws upon that experience to portray young Korean Americans surrounded by people from other backgrounds. *Necessary Roughness* was named one of the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults and the New York Public Library's Best Books for the Teen Age.

In an interview for Amazon.com, Lee talked about how she got her start as a writer. She said, "I've wanted to be a writer ever since I was nine and my brother gave me his old typewriter. I was fascinated by how the letters came out looking immediately professional, so I typed up my first 'novel' and sold it to my parents for a nickel." Her first real publication was an essay that appeared in *Seventeen* magazine when she was sixteen years old.

Lee has a special writing companion whose photo appears on her official web page. Her cat Arthur sits on her printer while she writes. She even started putting a pillow on top of it so he will be more comfortable.

Lee teaches literature and her day is filled with reading students' papers. She devotes the hours between 5:00 A.M. and 7:00 A.M. to her own writing, which she does first by hand and then types into the computer. She explains this by saying, "I think I like the feel of my pen in my hand, and typing it into the computer is another time for me to edit."

She enjoys running, rollerblading, and tae kwon do (a Korean martial art). About tae kwon do she says, "I find doing TKD very mentally refreshing because when you're in the middle of a full-contact fight, you have to concentrate very, very deeply."

Lee also enjoys meeting readers through book-signings and conferences, such as the Association for Asian American Studies conference. She tries to answer all of her fan mail, and she uses email to keep in touch with people.

As an author Lee has had numerous accomplishments. She has taught at Yale University, and has been a Fulbright Scholar in Korea. She has been published in numerous newspapers and journals, such as the *New York Times*, the *Kenyon Review*, and many anthologies, including *Making More Waves: New Writings by Asian American Women* and *New Worlds of Literature*. A founder of the Asian American Writers' Workshop, Lee has appeared on PBS's *Asian America*. Fans can discover more about Lee's achievements by viewing her official website.

Setting

The story begins in Los Angeles, California, where the Kim family must leave their familiar neighborhood and the only place the twins, Chan and Young, have known.

They travel across the country, crossing the symbolic and literal Continental (and cultural) Divide to get to their new home.

After growing up in the cultural diversity of Los Angeles, Chan and Young must adjust to the completely white, small-town Midwestern culture of Iron River, Minnesota. This is a town that values a state champion football team enough to paint its accolades on the town's water tower.

Social Sensitivity

Lee deals with the racism in a sensitive way without shying away from its reality.

Chan and Young have grown up as an accepted part of their multicultural neighborhood in Los Angeles. The same cannot be said of Iron Falls. For example, an apartment manager insults Chan's well-educated father by saying, "I can't understand a freakin word you said." The gritty realism of the novel is furthered when the manager refuses to let them rent an apartment. As they leave the man yells, "And stay out, chinks!"

Lee is at her strongest when writing about the prejudice and Chan's classic confrontational relationship with his father.

Young adult readers will be able to identify with Chan's struggle to live within his family's expectations while trying to discover his own identity.



Literary Qualities

At the beginning of the story Abogee becomes very agitated when Chan suggests that they leave the Buddha behind when they move. Chan does not understand why they need the Buddha, since they say grace before meals and therefore they are Christians. Chan does not understand how difficult it would be for his father to completely abandon the heritage of his religion.

When the family crosses the country in their broken-down old junker, Chan begins to wonder whether the car will make it over the "twisty cliff road that crosses the Continental Divide." As the car sputters and coughs Chan wonders whether the "tin foil guard rail" could keep them from going over the cliff's edge. Chan worries about the weight of the Buddha as they move ahead. At one point he reaches over and touches the Buddha's nose. "If we go, you go," Chan reminds him as he looks over the edge of the mountain road.

Abogee's sense of family honor makes it necessary to move in order to take over his brother's business. Abogee tries to justify the move, since L.A. is overcrowded and less safe than Iron Falls. The irony appears when Chan is assaulted in the locker room at his new high school. The death of Young further emphasizes the irony contained within the novel. Although the twins' father says that they will be safer living in Iron Falls than they are living in Los Angeles, this does not turn out to be the case.

When the family arrives in Iron Falls, Chan realizes for the first time that his father and mother may not have everything under control. As the story progresses Chan becomes more mature and he is better able to understand his father's choices. Chan is more able to look into the soul of his father and to see the struggles that Abogee has overcome. He is able to see that his father is willing to face humiliation in order to secure a future for his family.

Iron Falls is an unfriendly place for the Kim family, but Chan manages to find humor in many things about the town, including the name of the motel where they first stay. The "Hello Motel" has been transformed to the "Hell Motel" since the "o" on the neon sign is almost out. Chan's ability to find humor in even the most difficult situation makes him a likeable character.

Throughout the book Lee does a good job of creating realistic dialogue for her characters. Chan's story is told in first person, and this gives the reader a chance to see directly into the thoughts of the main character. However, as readers we are limited to only what Chan feels and understands. His perception of the other characters is complex and not always accurate, which makes the story work on several levels. Readers must recognize that every aspect of the story is being filtered through Chan's eyes.

From the beginning of the story Lee captures the sensory perceptions of Chan as the story evolves. When Chan describes the smell of the kitchen while his grandmother is



cooking, he says that she surrounded them with "pungent Korean food smells like ginger, garlic, and sesame oil."

Through Chan, the author explores the richness of the Korean culture. Chan remembers all of the stories his grandmother told him, such as the one about the rat king who found the perfect husband for his daughter. Perhaps this story is aimed at convincing the twins to trust their father to guide them toward making good decisions in important matters like dating and marriage.

A Korean proverb also fits the ending to the story. "When parents die, you bury them in the ground. When children die, you bury them in your heart." The novel closes with the image of Chan at the cemetery, as he talks aloud to his sister's headstone. The snow starts to fall. Chan realizes that this is Young's first snow, and he wants to be there to share it with her. What a poignant ending to the story. One twin is in the grave, while the other stands with his feet firmly planted on the ground. Together they experience snow for the first time.



Themes and Characters

Throughout this novel and others written by Lee, the struggle to fit in and belong is a major theme. Traditional family values and expectations, combined with a clash of generations, become apparent early in the novel. For example, Chan wants to tell his father to let them all stay in L.A., but he knows no one would listen to him. This leaves Chan feeling helpless to control the course of his own destiny.

Unlike Chan, his sister, Young, stays within the safety of traditional family expectations. She plays the flute and makes excellent grades in school. In everything she does she strives to please her family. At times Chan considers himself to be his sister's evil twin.

Chan also thinks of himself as the rebel of the family. While in L.A. he has to convince Abogee (his father) to let him play soccer with the neighborhood boys. He finally convinces his father by using his Chinese friend, Calvin, as an example. Chan satisfies his father's desire for him to be a "smart college-bound" Korean boy, by telling Abogee that his friend Calvin is going to Yale on a soccer scholarship.

When Chan leaves L.A. he has to say goodbye to his soccer team. During his last practice they present him with a red-and-gold Alameda Eagles jersey. They further honor him by retiring his number. This could symbolize the importance of an individual and the inability to fully replace any missing member of a team or family. Each person in the story is valued as an individual.

Chan's girlfriend introduces another major theme when she uses prepackaged phrases like, "If you love something, set it free."

The reader is left to finish the well-known phrase that continues on say, "If it comes back to you then it is yours forever. If it does not, then it never was." This philosophy relates very well to the children who are growing up and away from their parents.

The phrase also captures the irony of Chan and Young's struggle to live within the strict and traditional expectations of their family. This irony becomes apparent when one considers all of the tragic experiences of the twins. Although their father claims that the family will be more safe in Iron Falls than in Los Angeles, the tragic events of the story occur after the move to Iron Falls.



Topics for Discussion

1. The women in the story hold the family together. Give several examples to demonstrate this. How do Haloni, O-Ma, and Young uphold traditional roles within the family unit?
2. Abogee and Bong do not get along with each other. What significant event brings the brothers' arguments out into the open?
3. Abogee claims that he wants to move his family to Iron River Falls. What clues show that this move is a matter of honor, not one of choice?
4. Honor and family are very important to Abogee. At what point does O-Ma confront Abogee about his desire to pay his brother's debts. How do they each react to the confrontation over money?
5. When the family leaves Los Angeles, each of the family members is leaving an important aspect of his or her life behind. What does each member of the family lose as a result of the move?
6. When the family must get rid of some items before the move, Chan suggests that they give the Buddha statue away.

What is Abogee's reaction to Chan's suggestion?

7. Abogee owns a grocery store in Los Angeles even though he has a Ph.D.

and is a chemist. Since other well-educated men that Abogee knows also own and run stores, there must be a reason they "cannot find jobs" in their professions. What is keeping Abogee from working as a chemist?

8. For the twins Abogee has declared that dating is off limits until college. Is Abogee able to keep Chan and Young from dating?
9. Chan calls the people from their Los Angeles neighborhood the "Korean CIA." What is meant by this term?

What type of activity would the "Korean CIA" report to Abogee?

10. When he goes with his father to the Irongate Apartments, Chan is embarrassed by the way his father smiles while the apartment manager is "chewing him out." Why does Abogee want Chan to go with him to pay the man for the apartment? Why does Abogee become angry with Chan when the man will not rent to them?

11. Chan does not want his father to attend the father and son football banquet.

Does Abogee embarrass Chan during the banquet? What racist comment does Chan hear, while he is leaving with his father.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explain the use of Korean words as they are introduced in the story. What does each word mean? What is the importance of the Korean culture throughout the story? Could this story fit another culture? If so, which? Explain.
2. Abogee wants the twins to put off dating until they are in college. What is Chan's reaction to this demand? Is this a realistic expectation for their father to have? Why is it so important to Abogee that the twins get a good education?
3. Do any of the women in the story step outside of the traditional role they are expected to play? Whether the answer is "yes" or "no," be sure to elaborate upon the answer.
4. Abogee's brother Bong is a source of pain and embarrassment for the family.

Explain the conflict that Abogee has with Bong at the beginning of the story.

Is the relationship the same at the end of the story? Use examples to help explain.

5. How is Chan able to adapt to his new high school? Are his soccer-playing skills helpful when he agrees to play football? The term "unnecessary roughness" is used in football. Explain how Lee plays on the term in the title for this novel. How does Chan deal with the obvious racism that he faces from some of his teammates?
6. Explain the role that the Buddha statue plays both at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Why does the Parks family offer food to their Buddha? Does Chan understand his father's religious convictions by the end of the story?
7. Explain why Chan is embarrassed by his father at the beginning of the story.

By the time they attend the father and son football banquet have Chan's feelings toward his father changed?
8. Does Young encounter the same type of racism that Chan does? Which twin assimilates into the culture first? Does Young tell her parents everything about herself?
9. O-Ma worked to create Kim's Green Extravaganza, their successful grocery store in Los Angeles. What business strategies did she use? Is she able to apply these strategies to the convenience store they own in Iron Falls?

Explain. In contrast, Bong wants to be an entrepreneur, but he is unable to succeed. Explain the difference in the two store owners' approaches to business and customers.
10. When Chan feels snow falling for the first time, it is a sad moment for him.

Explain what makes this experience memorable for him.



11. Explain how the author uses humor to make serious points in the story. Give as many examples as you can find of Chan's ability to laugh at himself, his family, and the events that occur in their lives.

12. Although the Kim family experiences many examples of racism that make their lives more difficult, they also encounter people who are genuinely kind and helpful. Who are these people?

Give examples of ways that they help members of the Kim family.

For Further Reference

Review of Necessary Roughness. Kirkus Review (November 1, 1996).

Review of Necessary Roughness. School Library Journal (January 1997).

Review of Necessary Roughness. Booklist (January 1-15, 1997).



Related Titles/Adaptations

Each of Lee's novels explores the Korean culture and the desire for a young person to fit into another culture. Her literature is multicultural and she sees the need to realize that, "for me being an American of Korean descent and being a writer are inextricably linked." In her 1995 interview with Digital Library and Archives she explains that when people ask when she is going to be through with the "race thing" and go onto "universal themes" she always answers that with a "probably never."

Although each of her novels deals with this "race thing," unique approaches are given to each story. Lee has said that the character that is closest to being who she was in high school can be found in her first novel, *Finding My Voice*. Although the book is not autobiographical, Lee says, "In some ways this is the book I wish I had had in high school."

In *Finding My Voice* Ellen Sung, who is growing up in an all-white town in northern Minnesota, must deal with the racism that she faces. Later the sequel, *Saying Goodbye*, follows Ellen to college. There she deals with racial tensions that flare up on campus in the shadow of the Los Angeles riots.

If It Hadn't Been for Yoon Jun is a book written for middle-school students. It deals with the special challenges a Korean girl must face as the adopted daughter of white parents.

Lee's fourth novel, *Necessary Roughness*, is also set in Minnesota. However, this one is unique among her novels. It focuses on the sports of football and soccer, and it is the only one told in first person from a male protagonist's point of view.

Lee's husband, who is from Mexico, introduced her to the Chupacabras legend for the only mystery/thriller that she has written to date. *Mi-Sun* spends the summer in Mexico with her friend Lupe. Her younger brother, Ju-Won, accompanies them as they attempt to solve the mystery of the vampire-like monster who is killing Tio Hector's (Lupe's Uncle Hector's) goats. In *The Night of the Chupacabras* it is up to the young people to solve the mystery.

Lee's latest novel, *F Is for Fabuloso*, was published in the fall of 1999. This novel is geared for children ages nine to twelve, and it revisits the small-town life of Minnesota.

Jin-Ha has only lived in America for a short time, and she is dealing with a mother who depends upon her as an interpreter. Her mother refuses to learn English. Her father, a Korean scholar, must find work as a mechanic. This is reminiscent of the Abogee in *Necessary Roughness*. Although he is a chemist he must work in his own grocery store, rather than using his education and working in his chosen profession. Jin-Ha's parents put the traditional academic pressures upon her that Chan has to face in *Necessary Roughness*. Her biggest challenge is to pass math in spite of her racist teacher. She is also faced with helping her parents adjust to living in a new country.

Related Web Sites

"Amazon.com talks to Marie Lee." http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/show-interview/1-m-earie/ref=pm_dp_ln_b_8/104/8458627-6966313.

Lee, Marie G. Official web site. <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/4416>.

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