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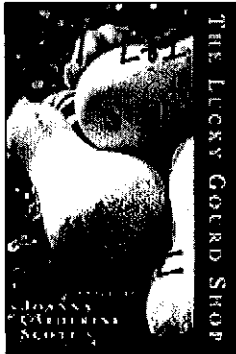
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The Lucky Gourd Shop

By Joanna Catherine Scott
MacMurray & Beck, \$27
ISBN
1878448013

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REVIEW BY AMY RYCE

The Lucky Gourd Shop tells a modern, realistic tale of how three Korean siblings come to be adopted into an American family. The narrative voice of Joanna Catherine Scott and the intriguing structure of her novel combine in an irresistible concoction that crosses cultural and generational boundaries. Scott uses her acclaimed poet's eye to enhance the rich imagery of Korea as she deliberately draws the reader into her lilting narrative.

The delicate issues of abandoned children and their birth parents are familiar ground for Scott, who has adopted three Korean children. **The Lucky Gourd Shop** has a lyrical counterpart in Scott's award-winning collection of poems, *Birth Mother*. She has written about Southeast Asia as well in her collection of testimonials, *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam*.

Structurally, **The Lucky Gourd Shop** is a story within a story. It begins in an American kitchen with a disappointing letter from Seoul -- inquiries about the children's birth family have resulted in only a handful of skewed facts. Scott responds to the disappointment felt by the children and their foster mother by opening up the world of Seoul, Korea, and imagining their birth mother's story. The reader is allowed to glimpse what the children will unfortunately never know about their parents and heritage.

Each adult character in the novel contributes somewhat to the children's destiny, and Scott is careful to paint each parent in a sympathetic, yet realistic light. Mi Sook, their uneducated mother, is torn between her immediate

to a friend

responsibilities to her family and her long-term dream of financial security. Kun Soo, their laborer father, generates familial chaos through his need for sons and self-worth. Ultimately, the reader is forced to wonder how the children would react to the story of their parents -- if the beauty and sadness of the story could ever translate into forgiveness for being left behind. In **The Lucky Gourd Shop**, Scott has revealed herself as a compassionate foster-mother as well as a fresh and compelling author.

Amy Ryce writes from Charlottesville, Virginia.

Home Reviews & Interviews

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Reviews for this Title:

Booklist Review: /*Starred Review*/ When the adoptive mother of three Korean children writes away to discover their past, she has no way of knowing that the real truth of how they became orphans is too complex and too full of hardship to ever come to light. Only we are told the whole story. It is the birth mother whose story is told in this moving novel. Mi Sook herself starts life as an orphan. She is abandoned once by her parents outside the gourd shop and then several more times by a succession of the shop's owners, who never bring her to their homes. Instead, she is raised, in a fashion, in the shop. As a result, she forms few meaningful attachments as she grows. Like other poor women in Southeast Asia, she sees her future improving only when she has a husband who can provide for her. However, she picks poorly, and she is bitterly disappointed when her new husband's promises before marriage are empty ones. Far more important, he has a terrible secret past that stays buried until his death. When Mi Sook is finally told her husband's secret life, it sets in motion a series of events that doom her and her children to very different fates. An excellent read. ((Reviewed July 2000)) -- Marlene Chamberlain

Publishers Weekly Review: After nearly 11 years with their American adoptive parents, Dae Young, 17, and his sisters Li Na, 16, and Tae Hee, 14, decide they want to know more about their ancestry. But information provided by the Korean orphanage from which the siblings were adopted doesn't match their memories. In this atmospherically detailed and deeply felt work, the children's quest serves as a preface to the central tale, which flashes back to South Korea a generation earlier, to recount the life of the children's mother, Mi Sook. Abandoned as a newborn, Mi Sook is found by the wife of the owner of a coffee shop in Seoul, who keeps her in the back room of the shop and leaves her there four years later when the shop is sold. Each time the business changes hands, Mi Sook gets a new "mommy" who may be fond of her but never loves her. The engineering students who frequent the shop teach her to read and write, and Mi Sook, still living in the back room, eventually becomes manager. The young beauty catches the eye of a laborer, Kun Soo, who lies to her about his marital and financial status. Before they marry, he and Mi Sook have a son together, but when he takes her to his dilapidated house in Inch'on, Mi Sook realizes she's been trapped, and she mourns the loss of her independence. When their second child is a daughter, Kun Soo begins to beat Mi Sook. After her husband dies of injuries while drunk, Mi Sook discovers that he had other wives and many other offspring. Mistrustful of a generous offer that would provide for her children, she returns to Seoul, where she gets her old job back. But her children wind up in an orphanage, and when Mi Sook is offered a chance at true love, she is forced to make a practical, heartbreaking decision. Scott's (Indochina's Refugees; Charlie and the Children) empathy for her vulnerable protagonist and her understanding of the cultural issues in Korean society make this an engrossing tale, albeit one marred by an ending that fails to resolve the opening theme. (Aug.) Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

Library Journal Review: This tale of a ravaged contemporary South Korea quickly shatters the reader's complacency. Scott, author of Pursuing Pauline, a story of women in revolution, has written a riveting, compelling, and disturbing novel. The main characters are three Korean children who first we meet as Americanized teenagers searching for their heritage. We are quickly taken back to Seoul ten years earlier, where the story of Li Na, Dae Young, and Tae Hee unfolds. Remembering that this story takes place in contemporary times is often a difficult task because of the primitive surroundings and starvation fare. Mi Sook, the children's mother, doomed by circumstances to fail, has to abandon the children to an orphanage where they were found by their American family. But there is more to the story, and it soon becomes evident that the children's history will remain a mystery. Scott's descriptive talent is enormous; at times you wish it were not so good. Recommended for all venues.--Patricia Gulian, South Portland, ME Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

The Asian Review of Books

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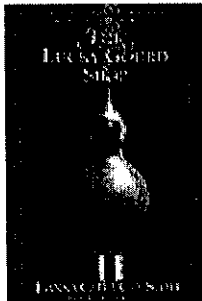
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The Lucky Gourd Shop by Joanna Catherine Scott

When **JOANNA CATHERINE SCOTT**'s three adopted Korean children begin to show a desire to explore their Korean heritage and their familial roots, the entire family embarks on the journey. But the response from the Korean orphanage where the children had been housed prior to their adoption is disappointing; their father was dead, but no information about their mother was forthcoming. What the children themselves knew, however, was that the woman who signed them over to the orphanage was a family friend, and not their mother.

Based on these, and a few other scant details and memories, the three siblings then asked **JOANNA CATHERINE SCOTT** their American adopted mother, a writer, to create the life story of their Korean birth mother in the form of a novel. **THE LUCKY GOURD SHOP**, written in only three months, was the result.

This is the story of Mi Sook, abandoned among trash bins behind a coffee shop at her birth and subsequently "adopted" by the various owners of the shop. She grows up, knowing only the back room of the shop as her home, but eventually marries and has a family of her own. Tragedy and bad luck (and bad choices) mean a difficult life for Mi Sook, who eventually loses her children.

This story of a mother's most tragic loss is one that **JOANNA CATHERINE SCOTT** can relate to personally, having lost custody of her three biological children when she divorced her first husband (she has since reunited with them, but admits to ongoing feelings of guilt). She says the stigma that came with this loss of custody, and the idea, held by many, that she must have been an unfit mother, made her to want to defend Mi Sook in her story. Although the ending is not strictly speaking a happy one, it is nonetheless a story of redemption, and success of a sort.

JOANNA CATHERINE SCOTT's knowledge of Korea is evident; the detail is both convincing and delicious to read. **THE**

LUCKY GOURD SHOP describes rough lives but is gently written; the language, simple and lyrical, is as engaging as the story itself. It's wonderful to find a book that makes you want to find out what's next, to turn the pages until there are no more. This is one such story.

Published by Washington Square Press (an imprint of Simon and Schuster), the book includes a WSP Reader's Club Guide comprising a background to the story by the author as well as 18 questions and topics for discussion.

Karmel Schreyer
11/03/2002

Karmel Schreyer writes educational materials for Asian children and is the author of the young-adult novels, *Naomi: The Strawberry Blonde of Pippu Town* and *A Singing Bird Will Come: Naomi in Hong Kong*.

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Scott, Joanna Catherine. The Lucky Gourd Shop - Book Review

Kliatt, March, 2002 by Francisca Goldsmith

Pocket Books, Washington Square Press. 296p. c2000. 0-743-3735-7.
\$13.00. SA*

When the author's adopted children, three siblings from Korea, reached adolescence, they wanted to search back to their birth roots from the orphanage from which they'd come to her. However, correspondence with that institution brought a quick end to the trail: the women who had delivered the then-preschoolers to the orphanage seemed to have been posing in familial roles, so tracing back from the information given by them was impossible. The teenagers then turned to their adoptive mother with the unusual but inspired request that, working with the few scraps of childish memories she had heard, and with her well-researched knowledge of the culture from which the youths had come, she invent the story of their ancestry. The Lucky Gourd Shop, then, is all fiction, but it stands in lieu of the author's children's true genealogy.

Set in postwar South Korea, this imagined history opens with a dramatic story-within-a-story. Mi Sook, who would become the now-American teens' birth mother, was herself found, very shortly after her birth, abandoned in a trash bin. Taken by her savior into that woman's coffee shop, she grows up in the back room of this small business even as it changes hands across the years of her childhood. Eventually, as a beautiful young woman, she catches the eye and heart of a workman from Inch'on who is nearly maddened by his wife's failure to produce an heir for him. He is the father of five daughters and a son who is mentally incompetent. This fictional birth father of the American teens, Kun Soo, is a character for whom reader sympathy is impossible, but credibility is palpable: wife beating, self-loathing, consigned to fate by his own traditionalism.

Scott weaves a highly textured tale of social roles and changing norms, individual psychologies, and the influence of Americans on the life of Mi Sook, wholly aside from her own children's eventual habitat. The poverty of Korea in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as its traditional riches of spicy foods and beautifully crafted ornaments, are brought to life vividly. In this reading group edition, a closing essay by the author discusses her family and her research into Korean culture. Francisca Goldsmith, Teen Svcs., Berkeley P.L., Berkeley, CA

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Joanna Catherine Scott

1943-

Also known as: Joanna Catherine Scott, Joanna C. Scott

Birth: 1943 in London, England

Occupation: Writer

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Entry updated: 04/11/2005

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"Sidelights"

Born in London, England, author Joanna Catherine Scott was raised in Australia. She met her husband when she was serving as a tutor in logic and analytic philosophy at the University of Western Australia, where he was a visiting graduate student. When he returned to Duke University to complete his Ph.D., Scott gave up her scholarship to Oxford University and accompanied him. After earning her M.A. in philosophy at Duke, she took a job working as a consultant in the nuclear electric industry as a writer.

Scott wrote her first book, *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam*, during the 1980s, when her husband's job as ambassador to the Asian Development Bank took them to the Philippines. Before they returned to the United States, they adopted three Korean orphans whose experiences are reflected in Scott's novel *The Lucky Gourd Shop*. In a review for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Andrea Behr called the novel "a story of rock-bottom poverty and institutional cruelty to women." A young woman, Mi Sook, finds herself a widow with three daughters when her husband is killed in a fall. While she is at work, her elderly mother-in-law takes the girls to an orphanage, believing this will free their mother to remarry, then passes away before her daughter-in-law returns home. Mi Sook arrives to find her mother-in-law dead and her children gone. The children are eventually adopted by an American woman. Behr remarked that "Scott relates all this tragedy without an ounce of sentimentality. She writes simply and lyrically . . . and creates a convincing world in which poverty tries hard to kill love and often, but not always, succeeds." *Christian Science Monitor* reviewer Liz Marlantes called Scott's book one of "those rare, exquisitely written novels that offer a glimpse into a completely different world, without asking the reader to do anything but marvel." She continued, saying that "sparse and elegant, the deceptively simple style allows Scott to touch on larger themes without ever sounding overwrought or heavy." Reviewing *The Lucky Gourd Shop* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Paige Williams called the book "a smart, sensitive book about independence, identity and survival."

Based on a true story, *Cassandra, Lost* recounts the experiences of Cassandra Owings during the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century. Forbidden by her father to marry Benedict van Pradelles, a French emigre, Cassandra decides to elope. She marries van Pradelles, and sails with him from Maryland to France, arriving on the shores of a country ravaged by the Revolution. Because her husband is an aristocrat, Cassandra finds they are reduced to poverty by the revolutionary government. A contributor for *Kirkus Reviews* found the book "a good sweep of history, though rather overwhelmed in the end by heavy breathing and swelling bosoms." Margaret Flanagan, writing for *Booklist*, said of the book: "brimming with romance, intrigue, and adventure, this spirited love story is firmly grounded in historical detail."

In addition to her novels, Scott has written several volumes of poetry, including *Birth Mother*, which won the Longleaf Poetry Award; *Coming down from Bataan*, which won the Acorn-Rukeyser Award; and *New Jerusalem*, which won the Capricorn Poetry Award. In 2002 she received the North Carolina Poet Laureate Award. Scott herself sponsors the Joanna Catherine Scott Award for Formal Poetry through the North Carolina Poetry Society, and the Joanna Catherine Scott Novel Excerpt Prize, which is awarded through PEN/Nob Hill in San Francisco.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1943, in London, England; married; children: three. **Education:** University of Adelaide, B.A.; Duke University, M.A. (philosophy). **Addresses:** Home: Chapel Hill, NC. Agent: Miriam Altshuler, Miriam Altshuler Literary Agency, 53 Old Post Road North, Red Hook, NY 12571.

AWARDS

North Carolina Poet Laureate Award, 2002; Longleaf Poetry Award, for *Birth Mother*; Acorn-Rukeyser Award, for *Coming down from Bataan*; Capricorn Award, for *New Jerusalem*; *Americas Review* Prize for Social Poetry; PEN/Nob Hill Poetry Prize; Black Zinnias Poetry Book Award, for *Breakfast at the Shangri-La*.

CAREER

Novelist and poet. Previously worked as tutor of formal logic and British analytic philosophy at University of Western Australia, Crawley; consultant for nuclear electric industry. Sponsor of the Joanna Catherine Scott Award for Formal Poetry, North Carolina Poetry Society; and Joanna Catherine Scott Novel Excerpt Prize, PEN/Nob Hill.

WRITINGS:

- (Under name Joanna C. Scott) *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam*, McFarland and Company (Jefferson, NC), 1989.
- (Under name Joanna C. Scott) *Charlie and the Children* (novel), Black Heron Press (Seattle, WA), 1997.
- *The Lucky Gourd Shop* (novel), MacMurray and Beck (Denver, CO), 2000.
- *Birth Mother* (poetry), Longleaf Press (Fayetteville, NC), 2000.
- *Coming down from Bataan* (poetry), Unfinished Monument Press (Hamilton, Ontario, Canada), 2000.
- *Pursuing Pauline*, Black Heron Press (Seattle, WA), 2004.
- *Cassandra, Lost* (novel), St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Breakfast at the Shangri-La* (poetry), California Institute of Arts and Letters (Palo Alto, CA), 2005.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These are not the only questions that could be discussed, and the answers given are by no means definitive. Each reader has a unique response to the book; that is why discussion is so enjoyable. The questions offered here are merely a starting point.

1. Can Americans relate to this story?

This is a universal story: human aspirations conflict with reality; social pressures and responsibilities constrain possibilities; fantasies interfere with the ability to make realistic plans. Most of all, the inexhaustible human capacity for self-deception knows no geographic boundaries or language barriers. The story is set in modern South Korea, and steeped in the expectations of more traditional Korean society. Yet the interactions of the characters and their inner lives are clearly recognizable, just as the Greek myths and European fairy tales are. Mi Sook is a girl and then a woman who learns on her own to fend for herself, but has both unrealistic aspirations and a naivete that pulls her into disastrous decisions. Her romantic dreams are those of many girls: marry a rich young man (who loves her), have children, and also become a person of means in her own right. She wants it all -- both to be a rich wife and to be a rich business woman. The stars in her eyes blind her to the danger signs *Madame* tries to show her. Kun Soo, likewise, dreams of wealth, a compliant and beautiful wife, and sons to increase his social standing. Tragically oblivious to the flaws in his character and to the realities of his social situation, he blames his failure to advance alternately on bad luck and on his wives. It's true that he is conscientious and hard-working, but he, like Mi Sook, keeps making unwise decisions on the basis of his romantic dreams rather than on the realities of his position. Kun Soo loses everything; Mi Sook manages to retain a part of her dream, but in the process sacrifices the possibility of family relationships, retaining them only in her imagination. The cultural setting is very different from contemporary U.S. culture, yet the story might just as well have happened in America. Knowing that the story is inspired by the author's own family situation also helps to make the connections. Dae Young, Li Na and Tae Hee might belong to a family just down the street in any town in America.

2. In what ways are Kun Soo and Mi Sook alike? Are they more different than alike?

From a brief description, only the differences between Kun Soo and Mi Sook might appear. He is a man, and much older; he has a family and she is a foundling; he has a furious temper and brooding personality, while she is outgoing and makes friends easily. Indeed, they do not get along at all once Kun Soo realizes that Mi Sook is not going to bring him instant wealth and many sons. But perhaps their clashes arise more from their similarities than from their differences. To start with, they are both the parents of Dae Young, Li Na, and Tae Hee. They are both naive: they keep believing that the next plan for instant success will be the one that will transform everything. Mi Sook is more naive than Kun Soo, due to her isolated and protected upbringing, but both have a large capacity for being surprised when things do not turn out as they had expected.

They both have more faith in their daydreams than in their own talents. Kun Soo, especially, tends to expect that the traditional sources of good or bad luck, and the prognostications of soothsayers, are more powerful than hard work, diligence, and perseverance. He wants instant gratification. Mi Sook has some daydreams that she is capable of turning into reality, but she is also capable of being drawn into making foolish choices despite good advice. The daydream of marrying a wealthy businessman blinds her to Kun Soo's true character and deafens her to *Madame's* warnings.

They are both stubborn. This may be why they persist in their naive, dreamy approach to life. The big difference between them here is that Kun Soo's stubbornness results in disaster for him, but somehow Mi Sook manages to keep floating to the top. In the end, Mi Sook survives

and prospers, while Kun Soo perishes. Though Mi Sook has lost a great deal, she seems to be headed for a life like that of *Madame*. But if they had not both stuck so determinedly to their false expectations of each other and of themselves, perhaps events might have taken a quite different course.

3. How does the style of the novel take us into the life of the characters?

Scott's language is both straightforward and intensely evocative, and it captures the personality and moods of the characters. Her narrative technique also provides descriptions of typical Korean scenes without creating didactic intrusions on the plot. The story of Joo Yup, for example, introduces the importance of sons, the naming of women, the traditions surrounding the birth of a child (pp. 21-22), and, in the later episodes, evokes images of life in Inch'on and the Inch'on harbor. Yet Joo Yup's story is an integral part of the story of Kun Soo and Mi Sook -- not just a plot device employed to introduce elements of Korean tradition.

Telling each part of the story from the point of view of the character whose scene it is, Scott also helps the reader identify more thoroughly with the characters. Part of Scott's motivation in writing the novel was to defend her own children's birth mother against the label "bad mother," as well as to imagine why the father refused to die inside his house (pp 105 ff). The third person narration allows us some distance from the characters, so that we are left with some questions -- allowed to imagine some of their story ourselves. The descriptive passages tell us what it was like living in the back of the coffee shop in Seoul and in a poor, small house in Inch'on. Yet the details do not interrupt the story, rather, they carry it forward.

The language is very evocative. Here are Kun Soo's mother's actions and thoughts as she tries to care for her grandchildren:

The old woman whispered softly to the children but they went on sleeping and she settled back onto her heels, waiting patiently, watching the baby's mouth make little sucking motions at the air. After a while, she leaned back and to one side, setting her hand against the surface of the floor. It was barely warm and she could tell that it was cooling rapidly, the small supply of coal Dae Young had shoveled under it last night burned down to nothing. She looked down at the floor, moving her fingers gently on its glossy surface. Kun Soo had built that floor, back when they were happy. It was not designed like any he had seen but conjured from his own imagination. He told her once it used to make him proud each time he lay on it, that sometimes, before he fell asleep, he dreamed of becoming a house designer. As time passed, though, and he became hard-pressed, he never spoke about such things. (p. 140)

Another passage describes a Korean market scene, when Kun Soo decides to visit the White Shaman:

By this time he was past the market stalls and almost to the warehouse, so he turned, and making his way back, argued with the chicken vendor until he got one at a price he could afford. Taking it by the feet, he carried it along the road, and the chicken, having flapped its wings a time or two and made a few complaining clucking sounds, pecked once at his knee, and then the inner membrane of its eye came up and it relaxed into its fate. (pp. 44-45)

One thing that makes *The Lucky Gourd Shop* so accessible to Westerners is the precise yet lyrical description. Scott explained that many of the episodes in the novel arose out of her research. As she encountered a description of Korean ways, a piece of story would grow out of it. Thus, the descriptive language became inextricably woven together with the plot.

4. Do we need to know more about Mi Sook other than that she gains her financial independence? Is this a satisfying end to the novel?

We already know that Mi Sook's children have lived for many years in America, and that the likelihood of their being reunited with her is extremely remote. Apart from the possible satisfaction of knowing that they might find one another again, we have what was needed: an explanation of why it was necessary for the children to be taken to the orphanage. Indeed, we have much more, in that their parents' history has been revealed to us. We have been privileged to live with Mi Sook, Kun Soo, Kun Soo's mother, within their world. To the extent that we think of Mi Sook's future beyond the end of the book, the novel has been successful because we have come to think of the characters as real people. Knowing that they are inspired by the lives of actual people perhaps contributes to a sense that there ought to be more to the story. But whether it's a biography or a novel, the characters in a book never reveal themselves fully to either the writer or the reader. Readers always create their own story out of the version offered to them in the book. A story that left nothing implicit, that did not allow the reader room to contribute out of her own imagination, would be an unsatisfying one.

5. What about Joo Yup?

The story of Joo Yup could have been left to a minimal account of the fact that he was brain-damaged and why that affected Kun Soo in the way it did. But Joo Yup keeps asserting himself in his own way. He has a personality: he is attached to his mother; he develops a sexual interest in his sisters. He comes back to Kun Soo to accuse, to haunt, and finally even to assert himself as a person in his own right. He tells us about life in a Korean village and about traditional Korean family life. Beyond these externals, he tells us how the human personality can have its own individual existence even within the constraints of severe physical and mental limitations. In terms of Kun Soo's story, a more fully present and assertive Joo Yup also deepens the reasons for Kun Soo's guilt and anger over his wife's "failure" to produce a son who can assure his status and carry on his family's name. But Joo Yup contributes to this story in his own way. The element of sadness at his diminished capacity becomes tragic as he speaks through the White Shaman and asserts himself in other ways to confront Kun Soo's tendency to place blame on everyone but himself. In some way, the confrontation gets through to Kun Soo, but the end result is to increase his feelings of guilt. An interesting human response to guilt feelings is often to try to shift the blame; remorse does not come easily to everyone. But no matter how self-deceptive one is, self-justification through blame shifting can only succeed if it's pathological. Otherwise, the blame shifting only makes one feel the more guilty. Kun Soo knows perfectly well that he was the one who attracted the attention of the demons who came and sucked the breath out of Joo Yup (pp. 37-38), and within his belief system he can neither deny responsibility nor take comfort in the knowledge that what happened to his son is just one of the very sad things that can happen to children. Furthermore, though he can make sure he avoids making the same mistake when Mi Sook's son is born, he can't undo or even make up for what he already did. When he realizes to his horror that Joo Yup is communicating with him through the White Shaman, he is only partially reassured when she assures him that Joo Yup is on his side (p. 51). He knows Joo Yup is right to accuse him.

But ultimately, Joo Yup's presence is much more than an explanation for the psychological development of Kun Soo. Joo Yup's spirit appears at Kun Soo's deathbed as a handsome young man (p. 114-115). There was more to Joo Yup than anyone quite realized. Kun Soo's mother's recollections reveal that, although she could never be sure exactly what it was. At the very least, Joo Yup managed to make sure that she witnessed his death. "She scrambled down into the thick mud of the ditch and up the other side, loudly calling Joo Yup's name. She was angry with him now -- he was not so stupid that he did not know his own name -- and came behind him, reaching out. And then he was in the water, vanishing and gone, with no struggle and his empty smile turned up to her as though in thanks." (p. 147) Joo Yup has a lot to tell us.

6. What's in a name?

A name is a very powerful thing. Americans, especially European-Americans, tend to be rather casual about names, using first names freely, applying nicknames without permission, and the like. But in other cultures a name can designate or even confer status; invoking a name can under some circumstances bring danger; a name often bears meaning. Anticipating that their second child would be a boy, Mi Sook and Kun Soo decided to call him Sun Dool, meaning "benevolent second son" (p. 52). Earlier, tragedy had struck when Kun Soo cried aloud the name of Joo Yup at his birth, attracting the demons before the safe period of 100 days had passed. And in traditional Korean society, a lack of name also indicates something about status. Specifically, once a woman has given birth, her name becomes "Mother of ____" [her first child's name]. If the first child is a girl and a son is later born, her name changes again to "Mother of [son's name]". If he dies, the name reverts again, to that of a younger son. Thus, in *The Lucky Gourd Shop*, we never learn Kun Soo's mother's birth name, and before she was called Kun Soo's mother she was named in turn for his older brothers (who had been killed in the war). Kun Soo's first wife was (tragically) Joo Yup's mother. Jung Hee's mother was named for her daughter, indicating she had no sons, while Jung Hee herself clearly was childless, since she had her own name. Even Mi Sook's mentor *Madame* did not have a real name, though her independent status was indicated by her not being called anyone's mother. So in traditional Korea, a woman's status and power derived entirely from her ability to bear children, and was affected by her success in having sons. Ultimately, if a woman survived her husband and all her children, she lost not only her means of support, but in some sense her identity. After Kun Soo died, his mother was no longer "Kun Soo's mother," but "the grandmother" or "the old woman".

It isn't strange that Mi Sook should be the only mother in *The Lucky Gourd Shop* who kept her own name. There was no longer any social safety net to fall into, as there had once been (p. 145), but women had not yet gained the ability to make their own way in the world. Nonetheless, by keeping her name, Mi Sook established that she was a new kind of Korean woman. Though she loved her children and intended to care for them, their existence could not determine the course of her life. She came out of nowhere; she didn't even have a name for the first four years of her life; and though in many ways she was socially formed by Korean society, she was never properly part of it. She was *sui generis*, and thus might as well have her own name.

7. Are ghosts and demons real? Can curses really come true?

Certainly Kun Soo's curses came true. One of the interesting aspects of his personality was his ability to lay blame on almost anybody other than himself. Whether he found it necessary to blame the demons, the fortune teller's and the White Shaman's bad advice, or the general bad luck brought to him by his wives, he could find plenty of scapegoats. Whether all these things have objective reality or are merely Kun Soo's way of explaining the inexplicable doesn't matter. They are plenty real to him and to others in his society. Two other events are perhaps more interesting: the visitations by Joo Yup's twin and the spirits of his ancestors; and Kun Soo's refusal to enter his house to die. The former seems to indicate that Kun Soo really did care about whether he was doing the right thing by his family tradition. The voice of the future that was not to be came to him through the White Shaman. He knew then that something was terribly wrong, and it was his fault. "Kun Soo looked hard at her with a frightened, dissatisfied face. 'I think it was an omen. I think I have done myself great harm by coming here today.'" (p. 51) Later, on his deathbed, he learns his family story and understands how much wrong he has done. But though he confesses his responsibility, though he begs forgiveness from the spirit of Joo Yup (p. 114), his apology to his ultimate ancestor is still defensive. "Kun Soo understood that he [the ancestor] was in charge here, and he beseeched him, alternately blaming and excusing himself." (p. 116) Whatever his faults, though, Kun Soo ultimately has the capacity to see that he has done wrong, and the desire to seek forgiveness. Why, then, did he curse his household by refusing to die in his house (pp. 121-122)? His fury at Mi Sook and his urge to punish her surely should not have been strong enough for him to curse his mother and children, including his only living son. Was it his sense of the guilt that he refused to acknowledge -- his guilt about Joo Yup's condition and Joo Yup's mother's death? Or was it

simply the force of his impulsive anger getting the better of him and his stubbornness in refusing to let go of it? Whatever his motivation, Kun Soo's curse was certainly effective.

8. While women are generally portrayed as oppressed, they often emerge with a surprising amount of strength. How does this manifest throughout the novel?

The naming of women in Korean tradition would appear to indicate that they are not only oppressed but willingly accept their low status. Yet that is clearly not the whole story. This is not a society where women must remain veiled and are forbidden to work. The example of Mi Sook's *Amas* should be an early indication that women have quite a bit of freedom to make their own choices. *Madame* is an even more powerful example, having built her own business independently of male participation -- a business which creates an entirely female realm of customers and employees as well as *Madame* the owner and manager. Kun Soo's older daughters escape on their own and do well for themselves, though not quite independently of men. Mi Sook herself manages *almost* to have it all -- children, marriage, and her own career. She just doesn't manage to have it all *together*, and she misses out completely on successful romance. But the one who exhibits the greatest strength and resourcesfulness is Kun Soo's mother. The most traditional of all the characters in the novel, she copes better than any of them. She survives beatings by her husband, witnesses her youngest son's foolishness and abuse of his wife, philosophically (though not graciously) accepts the installation of his non-traditional second wife with three children, and maintains her traditional moral standards. When the true crisis comes and she knows she will not survive to make sure Mi Sook's children are cared for, she does the hardest thing of all: giving them to strangers because she knows that is the only way to be sure they are all right. She loves her grandchildren and cares for them tenderly, and does not allow either the fierce winter or the social conditions to undermine her duty to them.

All in all, the women come off quite a bit better than the men -- even Joo Yup's mother. For Kun Soo and his friends, women function primarily to provide entertainment and children. Otherwise, they are inconveniences (p.103). The students, even Hyun Joon, live in their own world, in which girls are to be flirted with and eventually married so they can produce sons. Even at the social welfare agency and the orphanage, the Father is rather ineffectual, while the women handle everything quite well without male direction. Frank, the American G.I., seems different, but Mi Sook takes advantage of him and ultimately doesn't give him a chance to give her a different kind of life. Perhaps the women's oppression has in some way liberated them from the men!

9. There has long been controversy whether authors should stick to only writing what they know. What do you think of this book being written by a non-Asian woman? Does this affect its authenticity?

Some claim that only those who have had a particular cultural experience are qualified to speak or write about it. But given the vast body of literature written by people who can't possibly have had the experiences told in those stories, the claim is manifestly untrue. It serves more to discourage writers from exploring interesting topics than to improve the authenticity of fiction. Research provides factual material on which to build the story, and if the author needs to check the accuracy of the interpretation there are experts and cultural informants who can supply the necessary critiques. Moreover, plenty of writers produce historical novels whose settings and events are beyond the experience of any living person. The real question for authenticity is that of the author's competence. An unskilled writer can make events with which he is personally acquainted seem unlikely. A skilled writer reveals the truth of the story, and it is truth that provides authenticity. *The Lucky Gourd Shop*, while thoroughly researched and inspired by actual events, is a universal story. We recognize the characters; we identify with them. The settings and the Korean traditions are real to us, but what is truly important is that the motivations and actions of the characters are consistent and

believable. The fact that this is a novel about Koreans in Korea, written by someone who is not Korean or even Asian, does not diminish its authenticity. But in another sense, the admonition to write what one knows is true. One cannot make up life experiences. Writing about the death of a loved one, for example, requires that the writer have at least experienced an analogous loss, or the account will be flat and unconvincing. Authenticity depends on the writer's ability to portray universal human experiences, no matter what the plot or the setting of the novel.

10. Can people survive without roots?

The Lucky Gourd Shop is the story of a fictional family's imagined family history. It was inspired by the need of a real family to find their family history. For both the real family and the children in the story, an imagined history turns out to be better than none at all. In the story, the children's fragmentary memories give them only a distorted and unsatisfying notion of what their mother and father were like. Even if more information could be retrieved from Korea, it seems unlikely that the children would be able to find wholeness -- the information is likely still to be too scanty. Having no one to fill in the blanks for them is troubling to the children, and leaves them feeling cut off. Their mother explains that

. . . as adolescents will, they want to find an anchor in their ancestry. I am sorry for this dead end we have come to, and yet I know that if they found their mother the chances of a happy ending would be slight. (pp. 3-4)

The children, adopted at ages 6, 5 and 3, had enthusiastically embraced America, but now they realize their adopted culture is not enough; they need to know their roots as well. But the best they can do is a story their adoptive mother builds, with their few memories as a framework. This, it seems, is enough. All of our early memories, after all, depend on what our elders have told us. Even the memories we have formed for ourselves turn out to be incomplete when we compare them with the accounts presented by others who were there at the same time. It's not the roots themselves that are important, but the story which allows the children to place themselves in a context and to gain some self-understanding. They need to see that their rocky early start did not rob them of the ability to be whole persons. Since the story builds on their memories, it is their story, even though it's actually fiction. It's interesting to realize that the children's mother, Mi Sook, is herself rootless. Though she makes a lot of mistakes that might have been headed off by the guidance of effective parents, she does pretty well for herself. Perhaps one can't be whole without roots, but human beings have the capacity to grow their own.

The Lucky Gourd Shop
by Joanna Catherine Scott
(MacMurray & Beck 2000)

This article was originally developed in cooperation with MacMurray & Beck for the First Citings section. It is in a different format from other NoveList Book Discussion Guides, including an excerpt from the novel in addition to the usual discussion materials.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joanna Catherine Scott was born during an air raid over London, raised in Australia, and migrated to the United States in 1976 where she took her graduate degree from Duke University and now lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She is the author of *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam*, the Vietnam war novel *Charlie and the Children* (VVA Veteran Book-of-the-Month), and *Pursuing Pauline* (forthcoming), a novel of the women's revolution. Her poetry collection *Birth Mother*, winner of the Longleaf Press Chapbook Contest, serves as *The Lucky Gourd Shop's* lyric counterpart, telling the story of how, while living in the Philippines, she and her husband came to adopt three orphans from Korea. Three excerpts from *The Lucky Gourd Shop* have been published as award-winning short stories in *Literal Latté*, *Georgia State University Review*, and *Crucible*, and Scott has won several awards for her poetry.

The idea for *The Lucky Gourd Shop* came from the actual story of Scott's three adopted Korean children. The children had been told only a few bits of their family's history by their grandmother, and the oldest boy had vivid, but fragmentary memories of their life before they were taken to the social welfare agency for adoption. Scott identified with the missing mother, and wanted to explain her side of the story. When the children became teenagers, she helped them search for information about their origins. Though they learned nothing more, Scott decided to write the mother's story as it might have been. She read as much Korean fiction in English translation as she could get her hands on, immersing herself in the Korean world view, and building a profound and poetic history to supply what she sought: a story that could become her children's story.

Though the children were enthusiastic for the novel to be written, Scott was a bit apprehensive about what their reaction to it would be when they actually read it. As it turned out, they loved it. Not only did they have a role in a work of fiction, but they now had a story (albeit fictional) to tell them about their mother.

Scott's degrees are in philosophy (first class honors, University of Adelaide, and M.A., Duke University). She points out that writing in philosophy is the ideal training ground for any kind of writing. She has never taken a creative writing course. She also says that writers should write in order to learn, rather than to "write what they know." "The only reason to write is to discover something," by which she means to discover something brand-new, not something about oneself. The novel she is currently working on is a novel of American history, about which she wants to learn a great deal now that she lives in the United States.

Scott wishes there were a greater diversity of subjects in American fiction. So many cultural heritages are represented in the U.S., yet most fiction represents the majority. Writers of European heritage should branch out and explore other cultures, not just what they already know. Scott is proud of the fact that *The Lucky Gourd Shop* is the first novel written by a Caucasian on the subject and, as far as she can determine, it is also the first work of literary

fiction set in contemporary South Korea written by a Caucasian. Her earlier novel, *Charlie and the Children*, was the first, and still may be the only, work of literary fiction written by a woman that actually follows American soldiers into the jungles of Vietnam.

About Korea

In discussing the novel, it might be helpful to have access to some additional factual information about the Korea in which the novel is set (see also page 1 in the novel). In the 1970's and first half of the 1980's, the period of *The Lucky Gourd Shop*, Seoul, Korea's capital, was a rapidly growing city of about 7 million people. Inch'on is Seoul's port city, and is about an hour's bus ride away. Its population, too has increased fantastically, from about 4,700 in 1950 to 400,000 in 1960, to one million in 1980 and two million in 1992. Inch'on has an enormous tide, exposing long mud flats when it is out and advancing high up the sea wall when it is in.

At the time the children in *The Lucky Gourd Shop* were born, Inch'on still had a lot of the traditional style small houses, but the construction boom was rapidly wiping them out. Traditional Korean houses were heated by a method called *ondol*, which allowed heat from the cookstove to be circulated under a raised floor before being exhausted to the outside.

Traditional Korean society was very patriarchal. Indeed, a woman's very identity depended on her father, husband, or son. On the birth of her first child, a woman's name became "Mother of _____", the child's name. If older children were girls, the woman's name became "Mother of _____", the first son's name, as soon as he was named.

Decorated gourds are a traditional Korean gift. For special occasions, such as a 60th birthday, a marriage, 100 days following the birth of a child (when it's safe to celebrate because the child is likely to survive), and the like, Koreans give gourds incised with sentiments such as "long life," "many sons," and "good luck." The gourds are grown on trellises, fences, and the sides of buildings, and the flower is very beautiful. It opens to the moon and closes to the sun.

Names

Korean names are easy to pronounce, but a guide to the names in *The Lucky Gourd Shop* might facilitate discussion. Most of them are stressed on the first syllable.

Mi Sook	'Mee-sook ("oo" as in school rather than look)
Kun Soo	'Kun-soo (the "u" in Kun is like the "oo" in book)
Joo Yup	'Joo-yup ("u" as in "but")
Hyun Joon	'Hun-joon ("u" as in "but")
Eun Hye	'Unyeh ("Un" as in "bun")
Jung Hee	Jung 'Hee (exception to the usual stress rule; "u" as in "soot")
Li Na	'Lee-na (much like the English name Lena)
Dae Young	'Day-young
Tae Hee	'Tay-hee

PLOT SUMMARY

The Lucky Gourd Shop opens with a family scene. An American mother is about to read a letter from Korea to her three adopted children, Dae Young, Li Na, and Tae Hee. All of them hope for information that will help them learn something about the children's birth parents in

Korea. But the letter tells them almost nothing. Dae Young speaks for the first time of his fragmentary memories from his childhood, but they don't go very far.

The brief introductory scene in an American kitchen fades, and we are now in Korea, a generation earlier. A baby girl, abandoned behind a Seoul coffee shop, begins to grow up and interact with the world around her. Her name is Mi Sook, and she lives in the back of the shop, eventually becoming the shop manager. Her role model is a successful business woman called *Madame*.

Kun Soo, a builder's laborer and fish delivery truck driver from Inch'on, sees Mi Sook and is infatuated with her. He takes the beautiful coffee shop manager as mistress, telling her he is a wealthy building contractor. She has a son and two daughters and he eventually marries her. However, Mi Sook is not a pliant woman like his first wife. When he abuses her, she runs away to the coffee shop, returning occasionally to visit the children. Kun Soo, suspecting his wife of having an affair, attacks her. In the aftermath of the fight, he wrecks the fish truck, then gets drunk and falls off a roof. He dies a stubborn death, leaving his widow and children as well as his mother in desperate straits.

Mi Sook, frantic for a way to feed her children, returns to Seoul, where she dreams of marrying one of the wealthy students who frequent the coffee shop. For months, she leaves her children in the care of their grandmother in Inch'on. The old woman falls ill, and despairs; it is winter and they have no heat or food. Finally, she takes the children to the orphanage.

Too late, Mi Sook returns to Inch'on with money for the grandmother and the children. She finds the house empty and cold, and discovers the grandmother's frozen body. Meanwhile, the children are in the orphanage waiting to be adopted.

Thinking they are with relatives, Mi Sook teaches herself how to make lucky gourds for sale. She works at her project in the back of the coffee shop, and when her skill is high enough, looks for a way of financing her own business. She meets an American GI who offers marriage, but Mi Sook sells his ring and uses the proceeds to qualify for a loan from a credit union. Too late to save her children, she goes on to establish *The Lucky Gourd Shop* of her dreams.