

## Pachinko- Min Jin Lee

1. “History has failed us, but no matter.” How does the opening line reflect the rest of the book --- and do you agree?
2. In a way, Sunja’s relationship with Isak progresses in reverse, as her pregnancy by another man brings them together and prompts Isak to propose marriage. How does Lee redefine intimacy and love with these two characters?
3. “Their eldest brother, Samoel, had been the brave one, the one who would’ve confronted the officers with audacity and grace, but Yoseb knew he was no hero....Yoseb didn’t see the point of anyone dying for his country or for some greater ideal. He understood survival and family.” What kinds of bravery are shown by different characters, and what motivates this bravery?
4. Compare Noa’s biological and adoptive fathers, Hansu and Isak: What qualities does each try to foster in Noa, and why? Whom does Noa most resemble?
5. What does “home” mean to each of the main characters? Does it ever change? In what ways does a yearning for home color the tone of the novel?
6. How do courting and marriage alter from one generation to the next?
7. Compare the ways in which the women of this novel --- from Sunja to Hanav --- experience sex.
8. How much agency and power do you think Sunja really has over her life?
9. Sunja tells Noa that “Blood doesn’t matter.” Do you agree? What parts of the novel support or weaken Sunja’s claim?

**10.** Yangjin and Kyunghee agree that “A woman’s lot is to suffer.” Do you think the women suffer more than the men in this book? If so, in what ways? How does the suffering of Sunja and Kyunghee compare to that of Yoseb? Noa and Mozasu’s?

**11.** Much is made of Sunja’s fading beauty, as well as the physical appearance of all the women who surround her. What does this reveal about society at this time? Do you see this emphasis on female beauty reflected in present-day culture?

**12.** Throughout the book, characters often must choose between survival and tradition or morality. Can you think of any examples that embody this tension?

**13.** Many of the main characters struggle with shame throughout their lives, whether due to their ethnicity, family, life choices or other factors. How does shame drive both their successes and failures?

**14.** The terms “good Korean” and “good Japanese” are used many times throughout the book. What does it mean to be a “good Korean”? A “good Japanese”?

**15.** “Both men had made money from chance and fear and loneliness.” PACHINKO begins with the family of a humble fisherman that, through the generations --- and through times of poverty, violence and extreme discrimination --- gains wealth and success. What were the ways in which the family managed to not only survive, but also eventually thrive? What is the relationship among money, race, power and class?

**16.** “Wherever he went, the news of his mother’s death preceded him, wrapping the child in a kind of protective cloud; teachers and mothers of his friends were watchful on his behalf.” In what other ways does death act as a “protective cloud” in this novel?

**17.** Compare the many parent-child relationships in the novel. How do they differ across families and generations? What hopes and dreams

does each parent hold for their children --- and are these hopes rewarded?

**18.** Even in death or physical absence, the presence of many characters lingers on throughout the book. How does this affect your reading experience? How would the book have been different if it were confined to one character's perspective?

**19.** Why do you think the author chose PACHINKO for the title?



## **Min Jin Lee**

Min Jin Lee's debut novel, *FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES*, was one of the "Top 10 Novels of the Year" for the *Times* (London), NPR's "Fresh Air" and *USA Today*.

Her second novel, *PACHINKO*, was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction in 2017 and was named one of the "Top Ten Books of the Year" by the *New York Times*. Her short fiction has been featured on NPR's *Selected Shorts*. Her writings have appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *The Times* (London), *Vogue*, *Travel+Leisure*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times Magazine* and *Food & Wine*.

Her essays and literary criticism have been anthologized widely. She served as a columnist for the *Chosun Ilbo*, the leading paper of South Korea. She lives in New York with her family.



## Culture Clash, Survival And Hope In 'Pachinko'

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Jean Zimmerman

In fiction we seek a paradox, the familiar in the foreign, new realities that only this one particular author can give us. *Pachinko*, the sophomore novel by the gifted Korean-born Min Jin Lee, is the kind of book that can open your eyes and fill them with tears at the same time.

*Pachinko*, for those not in the know, is one of the national obsessions of Japan, a dizzying cross between pinball and a slot machine, wherein small metal balls drop randomly amid a maze of brass pins. There's a comic feel of Rube Goldberg to the device, but the final effect is oddly mesmerizing. The urge to play can quickly become an addiction, and of course the game is a perfect metaphor for the ricochet whims of fate. Owning pachinko parlors becomes a way for the clan depicted in the novel to climb out of poverty — but destiny cannot be manipulated so easily.

We are in *Buddenbrooks* territory here, tracing a family dynasty over a sprawl of seven decades, and comparing the brilliantly drawn *Pachinko* to Thomas Mann's classic first novel is not hyperbole. Lee bangs and buffets and pinballs her characters through life, love and sorrow, somehow making her vast, ambitious narrative seem intimate.

"History has failed us, but no matter," she writes in the book's Tolstoyan opening sentence, hinting at the mix of tragic stoicism that is to come. During the second decade of the 20th century, as Korea falls under Japanese annexation, a young cleft-palated fisherman named Hoonie marries a local girl, Yangjin, "fifteen and mild and tender as a newborn calf." The couple has a daughter, Sunja, who grows to

childhood as the cosseted pet of their rooming house by the sea in Yeong-do, a tiny islet near the Korean port city of Busan.

As a shy, vulnerable adolescent, Sunja is the prey of a formidable middle-aged gangster named Koh Hansu. With features that make him look "somewhat Japanese," and elegant Western-style fashions such as "white patent leather shoes," Hansu embeds himself deeply into the remainder of Sunja's life. He's a Godfather, but also something of a fairy godmother. Most importantly, he provides a financial buffer when the family relocates to Osaka, Japan.

Lee deftly sketches a half-familiar, half-foreign but oftentimes harsh new world of a Korean immigrant in imperialist Japan. Sunja gives birth out of wedlock to Hansu's son, her shame erased at the last minute by marriage to a patrician, good-hearted pastor. The entwined destinies of the gangster's bastard and a second child, the son of a preacher man, become an engine that drives the story forward.

Amid the nightmare of war, the people of Osaka deal with privations. "City children were sent alone to the country by train to buy an egg or a potato in exchange for a grandmother's kimono." Sunja and her beloved sister-in-law Kyunghee have set themselves up in business making the flavorful national specialty of Korea, kimchi. Pickled cabbage serves as mode of survival, rising to symbolic importance alongside the pachinko game itself, organic and homey where the other is mechanical and sterile.

There are horrors in 'Pachinko' — a lengthy prison term is marked by gruesome torture — but the core message remains ultimately one of survival and hope.

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The cultures, Korean and Japanese, clash. Sunja's son, Mozasu, who owns pachinko parlors, will level with his best friend over fried oysters and shishito peppers, in a passage that lies at the heart of these characters' dilemmas: "In Seoul, people like me get called Japanese bastard, and in Japan, I'm just another dirty Korean no matter how much money I make, or how nice I am."

Lee is at her best describing complex behaviors and emotions with unadorned, down-to-earth language. "Isak knew how to talk with people, to ask questions, and to hear the concerns in a person's voice; and she seemed to understand how to survive, and this was something he did not always know how to do." There are horrors in *Pachinko* — a lengthy prison term is marked by gruesome torture — but the core message remains ultimately one of survival and hope.

"Pachinko was a foolish game," Lee writes, "but life was not." The reader could be forgiven for thinking that the reverse might also be true. This is honest writing, fiction that looks squarely at what is, both terrible and wonderful and occasionally as bracing as a jar of Sunja's best kimchi.

*Jean Zimmerman.*

