

A Mother's Devotion, a Family's Tearful Regrets

By JANET MASLIN MARCH 30, 2011

“Please Look After Mom” is the work of a popular South Korean novelist, Kyung-sook Shin, who is being published in English for the first time. It sold more than a million copies in South Korea, where there may not be a dry hankie left in the land.

The book is about the selfish family of Park So-nyo, a woman who got lost in the crowd at a train station in Seoul and has not reappeared. Shocked into decency, her husband, two sons and two daughters find themselves replaying all the button-pushing, tear-jerking moments that illustrated this woman's love and devotion. It would be a grievous understatement to call her a mere martyr.

“Mom,” as she is jarringly called throughout the book's English version (translated by Chi-Young Kim), was much more than that. But we need to learn about her saintliness in stages. So the book is divided into sections, each devoted to the browbeating of a particular character. Mom's high-strung careerist daughter and Mom's faithless husband are both addressed by the author as “you,” as if Ms. Shin means to give each a highly personalized scolding.

Here are the circumstances of Mom's disappearance just to give a sampling of

hobbling along on feet that had been cut to the bone by plastic sandals, feet so pustulant that they attracted flies. Step by agonizing step, Mom was limping her way to the place where her favorite child settled in Seoul 30 years earlier.

That favorite child is Hyong-chol, her first-born son. Oh, what a favorite he was. “If she could have, Mom would have come to see him with eggplants or pumpkins tied to her legs,” Ms. Shin writes, using the book’s constant motif of contrasting Mom’s rural, hands-on, family-centric life with the modern, soulless city lives that her children have chosen.

When Mom makes one of her back-breaking day trips to Seoul for a wedding, she typically makes kimchi out of salted cabbage she has brought, scrubs the pots, cleans the stove, sews blanket covers, washes rice, makes bean-paste soup and serves supper. She puts pieces of the meat she has stewed on each of her grown children’s spoons, insisting that she herself is not hungry. Then she picks up and goes home, claiming that she must work in the rice paddies the next day. Her real reason for leaving is that the children’s city quarters are too small to have room for her.

Guilt-tripped by these memories, Hyong-chol vows to treat Mom better — if it isn’t too late. And the family’s older daughter, a snappish writer, realizes that she too has ignored Mom’s needs. This daughter remembers that Mom’s “dark eyes, which used to be as brilliant and round as the eyes of a cow that is about to give birth,” grew dim with pain as Mom began suffering the splitting headaches that nobody much cared about. Two other aspects of Mom’s life that went unnoticed: She was illiterate and had cancer.

The daughter remembers how she was too busy with city life to make anything more than a perfunctory phone call home. She remembers that Mom sold her only ring to pay for tuition, and that when she, the daughter, wanted a book, Mom even sold a favorite puppy. What did this wretched daughter want more than the puppy? A book by Nietzsche: that’s what she wanted.

Mom didn’t always suffer in silence. She was capable of whipping the kids, throwing a table and walking out on her heartless husband after he brought home his girlfriend and installed this woman in the household. Because Mom was always more sensible than anybody else, she rethought this last decision, came back for the

sake of her children and kicked out husband and girlfriend. Then she forgave him when, some months later, he came creeping back — alone.

“You spoke politely with others, but your words turned sullen toward your wife,” Ms. Shin intones from atop her very high horse. “Sometimes you even cursed at her. You acted as if it had been decreed that you couldn’t speak politely to your wife. That’s what you did.” “Please Look After Mom” is going to make you pay for that, mister.

Penitence is, after all, this book’s whole point. Characters’ eyes begin watering, pooling with tears, brimming over, etc., as each one has the chance to realize that Mom was a treasure. (Bonus sobbing cue: Nobody knew that Mom was secretly working at an orphanage in her spare time.) Mom’s children start to see how wrong it was to abandon ancestral traditions for their busy, newfangled, heartless, stressed-out city lives.

As Ms. Shin points out, the ancestral rites that used to hold families together are now neglected if they coincide with travel plans. “When people started to hold ancestral rites in time-share vacation condos, they worried about whether the ancestral spirits would be able to find them,” she writes, “but now people just hop on planes.”

So part of this book’s popularity in Korea stemmed from its cautionary powers. But how well will it work elsewhere? Ms. Shin has anticipated that problem by ending the book with a not-to-be-believed scene set in Rome, where Mom is compared to the most sacred of maternal figures. And let’s not underestimate how viscerally the sanctity of motherhood can be exploited as a narrative device. By the end of the book Ms. Shin has been canny enough to make even Mom feel pangs of tearful love for her own Mom. And she has turned the book’s title, which initially sounded like an order, into something much more powerful: a prayer.

PLEASE LOOK AFTER MOM

By Kyung-sook Shin

Translated by Chi-Young Kim

237 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.95.

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Please Look After Mom (Shin)

[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)



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Please Look After Mom

Kyung-sook Shin, 2011

Knopf Doubleday

256 pp.

ISBN-13: 978-0307593917

Summary

A million-plus-copy best seller in Korea—a magnificent English-language debut poised to become an international sensation—this is the stunning, deeply moving story of a family’s search for their mother, who goes missing one afternoon amid the crowds of the Seoul Station subway.

Told through the piercing voices and urgent perspectives of a daughter, son, husband, and mother, *Please Look After Mom* is at once an authentic picture of contemporary life in Korea and a universal story of family love.

You will never think of your mother the same way again after you read this book.

(From the publisher.)

Author Bio

- Birth—January 12, 1963
- Where—Jeolla Province, South Korea
- Education—N/A
- Awards—many (see below)
- Currently—lives in Seoul, South Korea

Shin Kyung-sook was born in 1963 in a village near Jeongeup in Jeolla Province in southern Korea. She was the fourth child and oldest daughter of six. Her parents were farmers who could not afford to send her to high school, so at sixteen she moved to Seoul, where her older brother lived. She worked in an electronics plant while attending night school. She made her literary debut in 1985 with the novella

Winter's Fable after graduating from the Seoul Institute of the Arts as a creative writing major. Shin is along with Kim In-suk and Gong Ji-young, one of the prominent new wave of female writers from the so-called 386 Generation.

Shin emerged as the new voice of her generation with the publication of her second collection, *Where the Harmonium Once Stood*, in 1993, which won wide recognition for the elegant lyricism and psychological depth of the stories. The book marked a major turning point in Korean fiction, which had been dominated for decades by political novels faithful to the aesthetics of social realism.

She won the prestigious Munye Joongang New Author Prize for her novella, *Winter Fables*. Her other works, which include *Where the Organ Lays*, *Deep Sorrow*, *A Lone Room* and others, have been recognized as vital parts of Korean literature, vaulting Shin to literary stardom. Her rise in popularity has been given the name of the "Shin Kyung-sook Syndrome".

Shin has won a wide variety of literary prizes including the Today's Young Artist Award from the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Hankook Ilbo Literature Prize, Hyundai Literary Award, Manhae Literature Prize, Dong-in Literary Award, Yi Sang Literary Award, and the Oh Yeongsu Literature Prize. In 2009, the French translation of her work, *A Lone Room (La Chambre Solitaire)* was one of the winners of the Prix de l'Inaperçu, which recognizes excellent literary works which have not yet reached a wide audience. The international rights to the million-copy bestseller *Please Look After Mom* were sold in 19 countries including the United States and various countries in Europe and Asia, beginning with China. (From Wikipedia.)

Book Reviews

Shin's novel, her first to be translated into English, embraces multiplicity. It is told from the perspectives of four members of [a missing woman's] family; from their memories emerges a portrait of a heroically industrious woman. [Mom] runs their rural home 'like a factory,' sews and knits and tills the fields. The family is poor, but she sees to it that her children's bellies are filled.... Only after her children grow up and leave their home in [the countryside] does Mom's strength and purposefulness begin to flag. Questions punctuate [the] narrative and lead to a cascade of revelations, discoveries that come gradually.... Shin's prose, intimate, and hauntingly spare, powerfully conveys grief's bewildering immediacy. [Daughter] Chi-hon's voice is the novel's most distinct, but Father's is the most devastating.... And yet this book isn't as interested in emotional manipulation as it is in the invisible chasms that open up between people who know one another best.... A raw tribute to the mysteries of motherhood.

Mythili G. Rao - New York Times Book Review

Intimate.... Reflective meditations on motherhood and a ruminative quest to confront mysteries... [The novel's] accumulating voices form a kind of instrumental suite, each segment joined by the same melody of family nostalgia, guilt and apology, and

each occasionally plucking away at several larger motifs: country vs. city living, illiteracy vs. education, arranged marriages vs. modern dating, traditions vs. new freedoms.... [*Please Look After Mom*] will strike a chord with many readers, stimulating their own recollections or regrets. Truth be told, I called my mom well before the book's final page, feeling the need to look after her a little myself.

Art Tyler - Washington Post

Haunting.... Fervent...but also sinuous and elusive.... Details, unembellished and unsentimental, are the individual cells that form this novel's beating heart.... [Shin] re-create[s] a life through fragmented family recollections [and] leads the reader on a switchback journey to the past, historical and personal.... The novel's language—so formal in its simplicity—bestows a grace and solemnity on childhood scenes.... The rhythms of agrarian life and labor that Shin deftly conveys have a subtle, cumulative power. With each description, the relentless tide of the past erodes the yielding ground of the present to reveal the contours of one woman's life. . . . Memory is the only guide and the least reliable one.... Revelation arrives quietly, but truth remains the sole property of the lost.

Anna Mundow - Boston Globe

Quite apart from the universal sentiment it expresses so well, *Please Look After Mom* is intriguing for its X-ray insight into the mind and experience of an uneducated woman born to generations of subsistence farmers in a remote, mountainous region of the old Hermit Kingdom. It is a cultural leap that most modern readers could scarcely imagine, but it occurs with miraculous ease over the book's 237 pages.... Shin uses the remorseful memories of the lost mother's loved ones to personalize the cultural chasm that separates modern Koreans from their immediate, pre-industrial past.

Globe and Mail (Canada)

[Shin's novel] can be read on several levels, as a metaphor for the impressions of the past as they linger in the present, as a story of mothers and children, husbands and wives. It describes one woman's self-sacrifice so that the next generation may realize their dreams, instead of putting them to the side as she had to.... It reveals the emergence of a post-war metropolitan society in the twentieth century.... A captivating story, written with an understanding of the shortcomings of traditional ways and modern life. It is nostalgic but unsentimental, brutally well observed and, in this flawlessly smooth translation, it offers a sobering account of a vanished past. It is the seventh novel by the much-praised Kyung-sook Shin and the first to be translated into English after a best-selling 1.5 million print run that changed the face of publishing in Korea in 2008. We must hope there will be more translations to follow.

Kelly Falconer - Times Literary Supplement (UK)

Please Look After Mom is a suspenseful, haunting, achingly lovely novel about the hidden lives, wishes, struggles and dreams of those we think we know best.... Shin's deft use of second person lends this story an instant intimacy.... There are few ways to describe this story that don't involve the word "devastating."

Seattle Times

Shin's affecting English-language debut centers on the life of a hardworking, uncomplaining woman who goes missing in a bustling Seoul subway station. After Park So-nyo's disappearance, her grown children and her husband are filled with guilt and remorse at having taken So-nyo for granted and reflect, in a round-robin of narration, on her life and role in their lives. Having, through Mom's unstinting dedication, achieved professional success, her children understand for the first time the hardships she endured. Her irresponsible and harshly critical husband, meanwhile, finally acknowledges the depth of his love and the seriousness of her sacrifices for him. Narrating in her own voice late in the book, the spirit of Mom watches her family and finally voices her lifelong loneliness and depression and recalls the one secret in her life. As memories accrue, the narrative becomes increasingly poignant and psychologically revealing of all the characters, and though it does sometimes go soggy with pathos, most readers should find resonance in this family story, a runaway bestseller in Korea poised for a similar run here.

Publishers Weekly

Discussion Questions

1. While second-person ("you") narration is an uncommon mode, it is used throughout the novel's first section (the tale of the daughter, Chi-hon) and third section (the tale of the husband). What is the effect of this choice? How does it reflect these characters' feelings about Mom? Why do you think Mom is the only character who tells her story in the first person?
2. What do we learn about the relationship between Chi-hon and her mother? What are the particular sources of tension or resentment between them? Why does Chi-hon say to her brother, "Maybe I'm being punished..." (p. 68)?
3. Why is it significant that Chi-hon is a successful writer, and how does her career affect her position in the family? What does this mean for her relationship to her mother, who is illiterate? How does it happen that her mother begins to treat Chi-hon like "a guest" when she visits home (p. 17)?
4. Mom's life has been defined by her relationships to others and the needs of her family. When her daughter asks her, "Did you like to cook?" how does Mom's reply summarize the divide between her own and her daughter's generations (p. 57)? How is the generational gap between you and your parents, and/or you and your children, at all similar to, or different from, this one?
5. What are some of the reasons for the special bond between the eldest son, Hyong-chol, and his mother?

6. Why does Hyong-chol feel that he has disappointed his mother? Why does she apologize to him when she brings Chi-hon to live with him (p. 89)? Why do you think he hasn't achieved his goals (p. 112)?
7. Why is food such a powerful element in Hyong-chol's memories of his mother?
8. How do you explain the fact that Mom has been seen by various people wearing blue plastic sandals, with her foot badly injured, although when she disappeared she was wearing low-heeled beige sandals (pp. 64, 72, 73, 90, 91)? What do you make of the pharmacist's story of treating her wounded foot and calling the police (pp. 99–101)? Does Mom's own narrative solve this mystery?
9. The Full Moon Harvest is a festival in which Koreans traditionally return to their family home to honor their ancestors. Hyong-chol reflects that people are now beginning to take holidays out of the country instead, saying, "Ancestors, I'll be back" (p. 92). What feelings do memories of their mother's preparations for the festival stir up in Chi-hon, Hyong-chol, and their father (pp. 92–98)?
10. Weeks after his wife disappears, her husband discovers that for ten years she has been giving a substantial amount of money—money their children send her each month—to an orphanage where she has taken on many responsibilities (pp. 116–21). How does the husband react to this and other surprising discoveries about her life?
11. After Mom has gone missing, her husband says to himself, "Your wife, whom you'd forgotten about for fifty years, was present in your heart" (p. 122). Discuss the pain and regret Mom's family feels, including in the context of the book's epigraph from Franz Liszt, "O love, as long as you can love." Have they followed this edict successfully? Why do you think Kyung-sook Shin chose this quote to open her story?
12. Taking out the burial shrouds his wife had made for the two of them, her husband remembers her wish that he die first: "Since you're three years older than me, you should leave three years earlier" (p. 135). What is the effect of the way this passage moves from poignancy to humor and back again? Similarly, how do grief and warmth, even happiness, intertwine as he recalls his wife's generosity and her hands applying a warm towel to his arthritic knee (p. 140)?
13. Do you think Mom's husband and children would have been able to help her if they had paid her and her illness more attention? Or, given her aversion to the hospital and the way she hid her sickness, was what happens to her inevitable?
14. Discuss the return of Mom as storyteller and narrator in the fourth section. What is inventive about this choice on the author's part? What surprised you—and what remained a mystery?
15. How does Mom's feeling for her younger daughter differ from her feeling for Chi-hon? Why was she able to be more attached to the younger daughter than the elder one (pp. 180–85)? How is the use of the second person here—Mom addressing her daughter as "you"—different from the use of second person in chapters 1 and 3?

16. What do her children and husband discover about Mom's life only after she disappears? How do her actions express her generosity and benevolence? Do you see some of her activities as ways of seeking self-fulfillment? Was she, through giving to others, taking care of herself?

17. What are we to understand of the fact of Mom's possibly being spotted, in chapter 2 ("I'm Sorry, Hyong-chol"), in the various neighborhoods where Hyong-chol has lived in Seoul? In Mom's own narrative (chapter 4, "Another Woman"), what is the connection between herself and the bird her daughter sees "sitting on the quince tree" (p. 175; see also p. 170).

18. At the end of the father's section, he says to his older daughter, "Please...please look after your mom" (p. 164). How does Chi-hon carry out this directive? How is it related to her feelings about the Pietà and her purchase of "rose rosary beads" at the Vatican (pp. 234-37)?

19. What are the details and cultural references that make this story particularly Korean? What elements make it universal?
(*Questions issued by publisher.*)

top of page (summary)