



Curriculum Connections

The Waiting

by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim
Translated by Janet Hong

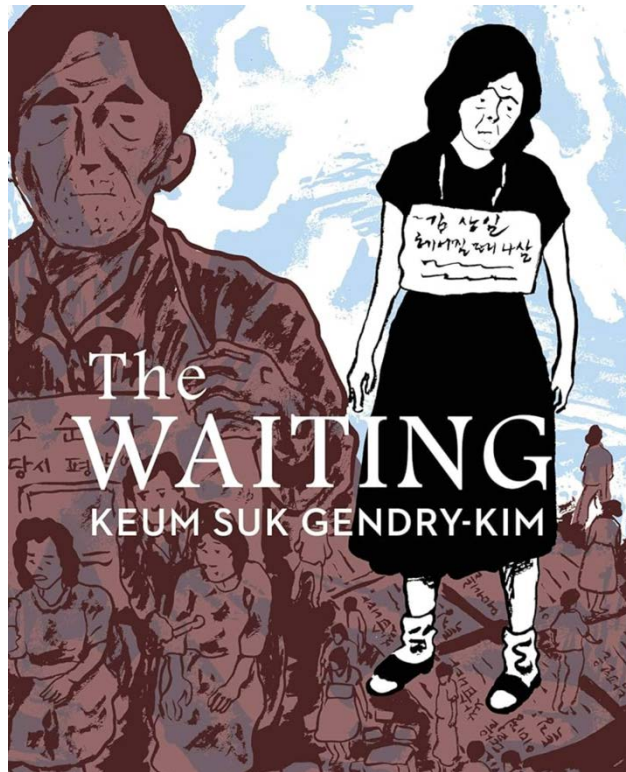
Drawn & Quarterly, 2021

Fiction, set in Korea

2021 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's graphic novel tells the story of her mother, who was separated from her sister during the Korean War. Inspired by her mother's tragic story, Gendry-Kim interviewed other Koreans whose families were separated by the war, and drew from their life stories to write *The Waiting*. With this work, teachers and librarians have the opportunity to add a personal dimension to the Korean War.

The Waiting is told from the perspective of a fictional mother and daughter, Gwija and Jina (pronounced: Jeh-nah), as Gwija (pronounced: QUEE-jah ["quee" as in "queen"]) shares the story of the loss of her brother seventy years earlier, and her daughter promises to find him. The book describes how families were separated during the forced migration, and the anguish it created.



Connections to Literature

Teachers of literature may choose to use this graphic novel in conjunction with other texts about war or family relationships. It may also be used in history classes to explore the effects of war on the people of Korea. Other texts that might be used with this graphic novel include *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* by Sook Nyul Choi and *Beyond the Border* by Tae-hyok Kim and Nicole Kim Rogers. *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* is the narrative of a ten-year-old boy in Korea who lives under Japanese rule during World War II; it highlights his experience with the colonial regime and the cruelties of war. *Beyond the Border* shares Tae-hyok Kim's experience of being captured at the 38th parallel and joining the South Korean Army's fight to end Communist rule in his country.



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Displacement

During the Korean War, many people in North Korea tried to escape to South Korea. Many Koreans were forced to flee their homes, seeking safety. In *The Waiting*, Gwija steps aside to nurse her child while marching south with other refugees; in the process, she loses track of her husband and her young son, whom she never sees again. Author Julie Lee also explores this idea in her book *In the Tunnel*, about a young refugee who loses her father when he is taken by the secret police, and who becomes trapped in an enemy tunnel during the war.

Forced Migration

This text explores the hardships that can result from leaving home in search of survival and safety. The decision to stay or to go, determining which alternative will be safer, is a battle faced by all during a forced migration. The book also deals with the struggles of having to make these decisions as a teen or young adult. Another Freeman Award Winner, *Brother's Keeper* (2020), explores a sister and brother's plight to escape North Korea on their own and would be an ideal companion to *The Waiting*.

Bias

Students should understand that many of the books they read have an inherent bias. Sometimes it is deliberate, and sometimes it is an unconscious bias. Exploring the concept of bias with students will help to make them more conscientious and empathetic readers. It could inspire them to use more primary sources and explore different viewpoints on historical events. The Library of Congress has a wonderful collection of oral histories available through the Veteran History Project, as does the Korean War Legacy Foundation, which features the viewpoints of Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, and British, as well as American military and government officials stationed in Korea.

Grade Levels

This book is recommended for use with high school students (grades 9–12), in humanities courses, world history, U.S. history, and Asian studies. The subject



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matter highlights the extreme violence and turmoil of war along with the loss of family; these topics might be too intense for younger students.

Suggestions for History, Social Studies, and Humanities

This text explores the kinds of life-or-death decisions many are forced to make during wartime or under dictatorship. The use of violence to create fear can be seen throughout history—for example, in the violence leveled against millions of newly freed African Americans during Reconstruction (1861–1900). Detailed images in the graphic novel allow the reader to visualize the struggles experienced by many refugees and those trapped in war. Exploring artifacts of survivors and items left behind can help students deepen their understanding, and this activity also connects to the National Social Studies Standards. Such materials can be found in the National Archives. Students can also use state or Common Core research standards to delve deeper into why the Korean War is referred to as the “Forgotten War.” They can look at a timeline to see what was happening ten years before and after the war. They could also research present-day Seoul and its economy to see the progress that South Korea has made since the Korean War. Students might research a World Heritage Site in Korea and share with their classmates what they learn about Korean culture. Here are two websites that may be helpful:

- <https://www.koreanculture.org/korea-information-culture-and-the-arts>
- <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-south/>

Racism and Xenophobia

When living under an occupation, people may struggle to determine where they belong. The division of a country can lead to mistreatment and racism by those of the same nationality, as well as by those in control. *The Waiting* explores what is lost from family, daily life, and personal identity during a war. The fear that continues to plague a survivor long after their war experience may explain why some secrets are kept forever and why some are revealed only when the person finally feels safe, as Gendry-Kim’s mother did when she was older. Losing what one knows and struggling to find oneself are relatable challenges for teens, and will also connect to the National Social Studies Standards of Individual Development and Identity and Culture.



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Experiential Learning Activities

This book began when Gendry-Kim's mother shared a family secret that led the author to conduct other interviews with Koreans who were separated from family by the war. Inspired by this, students could interview an older family member who is willing to share a story about growing up. By using research skills found in the National Social Studies Standards of Global Connections and Individual Development and Identity, students will explore their own family while seeing themselves as part of history.

American Ancestors gives suggestions for planning and conducting a family interview:

<https://www.americanancestors.org/conducting-family-history-interview>

Students can listen to Korean War histories on the Korean War Legacy Site:

<https://koreanwarlegacy.org/interactive-library/>

Exploring Primary Documents and Artifacts

- https://artsandculture.google.com/story/life-of-korean-war-refugees-national-archives-of-korea/tgVB5KsC_5i-EQ?hl=en
- https://artsandculture.google.com/story/life-of-korean-war-refugees-national-archives-of-korea/tgVB5KsC_5i-EQ?hl=en

Readings and Resources

- Choi, Sook Nyul. *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.
- History.com Editors. "Korean War." Updated May 11, 2022.
<https://www.history.com/topics/asian-history/korean-war>
- Kim, Tae-hyuk, and Rogers, Nicole Kim. *Beyond the Border*. Independently Published, 2023.



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- Lee, Julie. *Brother's Keeper*. New York: Holiday House, 2020.
- Lee, Julie. *In the Tunnel*. New York: Holiday House, 2023.
- Lesney, Meredith. "Brother's Keeper." National Consortium for Teaching about Asia, n.d. <https://www.nctasia.org/award/brothers-keeper/>
- Library of Congress. "Korean War (1950–1953)." Veteran History Project Collection, n.d. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/veterans-history-project-collection/serving-our-voices/korean-war/>
- PBS Learning Media. "Let's Talk Bias." Ethics in the Classroom, n.d. <https://lpb.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/cb19-ss-letstalkbias/lets-talk-bias/>

Accommodations

Background information for emerging readers:

<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/south-korea>

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