



Curriculum Connections

The Red Palace

by June Hur

Fiction, set in Korea

Feiwei & Friends, 2022

2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Like every other teacher, I compete with reality television, crime dramas, and TikTok videos for the attention of my students. *The Red Palace* by June Hur is the answer, with as much danger, intrigue, and drama as any episode of CSI, slightly gruesome crime scenes, and even a touch of romance. This book is a page turner! And lest anyone think that this text is in any way sensational, a quick search of Crown Prince Jangheon (also known as Crown Prince Sado) will remind readers that truth is often stranger than fiction.

Our narrator is a young woman of eighteen, Hyeon, the daughter of a concubine and a courtier, Lord Shin. Her lowly status and gender offer Hyeon few opportunities, but through education, she has earned the coveted position of palace nurse. Late one evening, when Hyeon and her friend Jieun should be leaving, they are asked to attend to the Crown Prince. While working with the Court Physician tending to the Prince, news of a terrible crime reaches the palace. Four nurses at the Hyeminseo—the medical facility where Hyeon studied since the age of eight—have been murdered. When Hyeon learns that her mentor, Nurse Jeongsu, has been arrested for the crimes, she displays bravery and tenacity far beyond her years as she throws herself into the investigation, seeking to prove her teacher's innocence.

At the heart of this mystery are Hyeon's relationships, and the realization that her parents, friends, and even her mentor are far more complex individuals than she had understood. As such, this text is well suited to high school students, who are often seeking to better understand who they are and their place in the world, and discovering that the other people in their lives are as multilayered as they are.

An interesting pre-reading activity would ask students to consider who has helped them to become who they are. What lengths might they go to help someone important to them? And what if helping that person meant risking your reputation at school, at home, and with your friends?





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Hyeon has long sought the approval of her father, Lord Shin, and as the story progresses, she learns that he may not be as worthy of her respect as she once thought. At the same time, she realizes that her mother is stronger and more loving than she previously realized. As Hyeon learns more about her parents, she learns more about herself, and is ultimately forced to create a future for herself very different from the one she had previously envisioned. Instead of becoming immersed in self-pity, Hyeon accepts this turn of events, and emerges as an independent and self-reliant young woman. For teenage girls in particular, the fact that the narrator is a strong woman is important; despite being set in the 18th century, Hyeon is as resilient as any contemporary female heroine.

In working with the young police inspector, Eojin, Hyeon encounters someone who is as bold and fearless as she. They form a friendship that eventually develops into love; however, this is only suggested as the book reaches its conclusion. Their relationship is built on mutual respect and admiration, underscoring in a subtle yet powerful way that relationships are often best formed on a foundation of friendship and respect. At one point, the two work together form a timeline that includes similar mysterious deaths from the past, the four deaths at the Hyeminseo, as well as recent victims. At this point in the text, literature students could be divided into small groups, each responsible for mapping out what is known about different characters. The class could share their findings and come to a conclusion (or not) about who might be guilty of the various crimes. Is there more than one murderer in the capital city? This exercise will encourage close reading and further reinforce the importance of relationships. In this world, a servant can be as significant as a courtier, depending on what they know or may have witnessed. The whispering and rumors that swirl around the palace is somewhat reminiscent of a high school.

The author's style is highly descriptive, but not overly graphic, which is appreciated when describing the various crime scenes. As a nurse, Hyeon is well-versed in anatomy, an understanding of herbs and their medicinal properties, as well as tools used by those in the medical field. For students interested in anatomy or biology, this book will be especially rewarding. Other topics worth further research include the medicinal plants mentioned and the overall approach to health care at this time in Korea, including the connections made between physical and mental health.

Many of the scenes throughout the book create strong visuals in the reader's mind that would be well suited to drawing, enabling teachers to encourage students to illustrate



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what they see as a pivotal or significant moment in the narrative. As an art teacher, I see more and more of my students using various computer programs with which to draw, and this could be a way to combine technology, a studio art exercise, and literature. As I was reading, I was continually struck by the author's use of the weather as both a foreshadowing device and a way to create a strong sense of mood. For students who are less comfortable or interested in drawing realistically, taking such a scene and focusing on representing the mood could enable students to work abstractly with color, in the form of a collage, for example.

The rich descriptions of the palace complex lend themselves to visual representations or further research into the architecture of palaces in Korea during the Joseon period. In addition to the homes of the rich and powerful, the author takes us to more humble domestic interiors, and these too would be worth further study. Also worthwhile would be a study of the dress of both commoners and the royal family, from the kinds of fabrics used to construct their garments as well as their hairstyles, all beautifully described throughout the text. Hyeon wears a uniform that denotes her role and status, and it quickly becomes evident that dress plays an important role in Korean culture at this time.

Hyeon is an intelligent and strong narrator, a complex young woman with an interesting story to tell. Overall, this book is an interesting and fast-paced thriller that will immediately engage students. It also lends itself to close reading and offers the educator the opportunity to show students how to be active readers by taking notes, maintaining an ongoing list of the characters, and noting their relationships to others in the text. There is also the opportunity for creating a vocabulary list, complete with definitions of unfamiliar and new words.

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