

# Reading Group Guide

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 Hana—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?

# A Conversation with Min Jin Lee

What initially inspired you to write this novel? Why did you choose to focus on Korea and Japan during a time of war?

I learned about the Korean-Japanese people nearly thirty years ago when I was in college. I didn't know anything about this community, which had its origins during the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. As a history major and as an immigrant, I was curious about the Korean diaspora, resulting from the invasions and destabilization of the once-unified nation. However, what really moved me to write this novel and to rewrite it so many times were the compelling stories of individuals who struggled to face historical catastrophes. Although the history of kings and rulers is unequivocally fascinating, I think that we are also hungry for the narrative history of ordinary people, who lack connections and material resources. The modern Korean is informed by the legacy of the Japanese occupation, World War II, the Cold War, and the Korean War as well as Confucianism, Buddhism, Communism, and Christianity. All these topics are reflected in this book, because they interest me, but I wanted to explore and better understand how common people live through these events and issues. These wars and ideas loom large in our imagination, but on a daily basis, such events and beliefs are illustrated concretely from moment to moment.

What was the process of writing such a long family saga like? Did you begin with that intention and a map of how the characters' lives would play out, or did you work it out as you wrote?

I wrote a draft of this novel between the years 1996 and 2004, and it was called *Motherland*; an eponymous excerpt of it was published in *The Missouri Review* in 2002. But after I wrote the whole manuscript, I knew there was something wrong with it as a novel draft. Consequently, *Motherland* became the second novel manuscript I put aside, because it didn't match the vision I had of the work in my mind. I was also working on *Free Food for Millionaires*, and although it was my third novel manuscript, *Free Food for Millionaires* became my first published novel in 2007. That same year, I moved to Japan with my family. In Tokyo and Osaka, I interviewed many Korean-Japanese. Through that process of gathering oral histories, I felt compelled to discard my earlier draft. In terms of plot, in my initial draft, I had started the book in the late 1970s; after my interviews, I realized that the story had to begin in 1910, and my character Sunja moves from Korea to Japan in 1933. To put it mildly, this was a traumatic realization, because I had to change everything and start again. I wrote a new outline with new characters, and *Motherland* became *Pachinko*. After I got over my initial shock of having to throw away a whole manuscript, I returned to my desk and wrote new chapter outlines. In short, I do work with outlines and maps, but I am in the habit of throwing away my outlines and maps when necessary. I don't work very efficiently.

Why did you choose for the narrator's perspective to switch from character to character, rather than focusing on one person's experience?

Both *Free Food for Millionaires* and *Pachinko* are written in an omniscient point of view. In both works, there is a narrator who knows the viewpoints of each character at all times. In Western literature, omniscient narration was the popular style in the nineteenth century, and it is my favorite point of view for community narratives. In both novels, I wasn't interested in only one or two main

characters. This bias may arise from my personality. I am normally interested in the minor characters as well as the major ones. In realistic fiction and especially in a book-length work, characters cannot exist alone, and certainly they are never in a vacuum. Naturally, the interplay of characters in setting and time affects both plot and characterization. There are major plot lines, but minor plot lines should offer critical support to the story. If history so often fails to represent all of us, it is not because historians are not interested, but because historians often lack the primary documents of so-called minor characters in history. Interestingly, women have become at best the minor characters in history—although we represent half the human race—because we have left so few primary documents in nearly all cultures and civilizations. Also, poor and middle-class men of all races and cultures—although their lives were so often tragically sacrificed in war and labor—are often minor characters in history, because they too did not leave sufficient written evidence of their lives. I am drawn to novel writing using the omniscient point of view because this allows me to imagine and reveal the minds as well as the behaviors of all characters when necessary. For the kinds of books I want to write, I need an omniscient narrator. That said, I love to read first-person (singular and plural), second-person (singular and plural), and third-person limited (fixed or shifting) points of view. The twenty-first-century author has a lot of choices.

Did you consciously shift the narrative tone as you switched perspectives?

I think my narrator's tone (by "tone," I mean the attitude the narrator has toward the subject) does not shift much. More than anything, I wanted very much for the tone to be fair. There are remarkable narrators in great works of fiction that are wry (*Pride and Prejudice*), sarcastic and unreliable (*Lolita*), opinionated and high-minded (*Jane Eyre*), humble and curious (*David Copperfield*), and intellectual and world-weary (*Middlemarch*). "Fair" seems like such a simple word, but I think because my subject matter is so troubling and controversial, I wanted my narrator to be as objective as possible. Above all, I wanted the narrator to be sympathetic to every character's plight. I will be forty-eight years old in November 2016, and as I get older, it is easier for me to imagine and appreciate many more perspectives—perspectives I may have disliked when I was much younger. Especially for this book, I wanted my narrator to be fair to each perspective because the Korean-Japanese are so seldom written about in English. I find that in life, even the most unsympathetic person has a clear delineation of his motives, however complex and unappealing, but to him, there is a moral clarity to his actions. I think part of my job as a storyteller is to recognize the congruity or incongruity of his motives and behavior and somehow still be fair to the character and to the reader. I think, especially here, if the narrator is fair, then the reader can decide what happened and what she feels about the story.

Which authors do you admire?

I adore nineteenth-century writers Bronte, Eliot, Trollope, Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Balzac. I also love Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, Mark Twain, Tanizaki, Henry James, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. As for modern living writers, I very much admire Lynn Ahrens, Lan Samantha Chang, Alexander Chee, Junot Díaz, Robin Marantz Henig, Kazuo Ishiguro, Colson Whitehead, Haruki Murakami, David Henry Hwang, Meg Wolitzer, Maxine Hong Kingston, Hilton Als, Simon Winchester, Chang-rae Lee, David Mitchell, Toni Morrison, Alice Munro, Gary Shteyngart, William Trevor, and Erica Wagner. The writings of Cynthia Ozick, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Audre Lorde, Vivian Gornick, bell hooks, James Baldwin, and Virginia Woolf continue to encourage me to write

more honestly and to dwell on subjects that matter to me.

In many ways, Sunja's plight is the catalyst for much of the book's plot. What is your relationship with her character? What inspired her creation?

From 2007 to 2011, I interviewed many Korean-Japanese men and women, and a great many of them mentioned a first-generation matriarch who sacrificed much of her life for the next generation, which ultimately led me to Sunja and her world. To earn money, first-generation Korean women in Japan worked in open markets, raised pigs in their homes, picked and traded rags and scrap metal, manufactured bootleg alcohol, farmed, and sold homemade goods from carts, among other things. Back then as well as today, the poorest women sold homemade goods in the open market, because they did not have much capital to invest. By selling boiled corn, *tteokbokki*, confections, sweet rice cakes, or *gimbap* in stalls or from carts, market women supported their families. Later, I met women peddlers in the open markets in Osaka and Tokyo. It is not easy to sell things in an open market, exposed to the elements as well as to be vulnerable to any person who wants to approach you. Also, then as well as today, market women often work in societies where women have less legal protections, rights, and significantly less socio-economic power.

I was born in Seoul and lived there until I was seven, and in my childhood I was keenly aware of the old women who sold snacks in the open markets and on street corners when I went food shopping with my mother. They were also vivid because they wore traditional clothing, in stark contrast to the modern Koreans of Seoul. When I visited South Korea as a college student in the late 1980s and many times later as an adult, I saw these women again in the markets and in the streets, almost unchanged in their expressions except for their clothes and hair.

Finally, my parents became small business owners when they immigrated to the United States. The daughter of a well-known minister and the headmaster of an orphanage school in Busan, my mother grew up very sheltered in a privileged home. A former music major at Yonsei University, she taught piano in our home when we lived in Seoul. When we moved to New York, she worked alongside my father in their cramped, under-heated wholesale jewelry shop in Manhattan, which was robbed and burgled on numerous occasions. She was on her feet most of the day dealing with customers. On weekends and school holidays, my sisters and I took turns working with our parents at the store. In college, I worked part-time selling clothes and shoes in retail shops. I continue to feel a strong connection with anyone who has worked in sales or in the service industry.

Is it easy for you to write your characters' deaths, or do you have a strong sentimental attachment to them?

My characters are very real to me, and I speculate that this must be true for most writers. Also, as a reader, I am very attached to characters in books. When Lily Bart dies in *The House of Mirth*, I wept and wept. Years later, I read Elaine Showalter's brilliant essay "The Death of the Lady (Novelist)" where she posits that Lily's death represents the death of the "perfect lady" who no longer belongs in an era of "vulgarity, boorishness, and malice." Showalter argues cogently that Lily has to die, because her aspiration for the ideals of a perfect lady no longer made sense and that the author Wharton was also shedding an outdated role as a "lady novelist": "In deciding that a Lily cannot survive, that the lady must die to make way for the modern woman who will work, love and give birth, Wharton was

also signaling her own rebirth as the artist.” I mention Showalter’s insightful analysis of a formative work in my reading and writing life because she taught me a larger idea beyond death as a plot element or death as the expiration of a life. It is possible that characters need to die for the author to make her moral point, for the author himself to regenerate by letting go of an ideal identity, or for the world to recognize the necessity of certain ideas and ideals to die. Certain characters die in *Pachinko*, and to me, their deaths were both natural to the plot and necessary symbolically. To me, the deaths were painfully inevitable; and to be clear, dear reader, each death broke me.

Much of this novel deals with the pressures of being a first-generation immigrant, or having dual cultural identities. How much of this was informed by your own experiences? What effects do you think war has on individuals and society?

Consciously or unconsciously, being a first-generation immigrant informs my point of view and interests. Regardless of one’s identity, all of us live in an information era where we are continually made to feel physically vulnerable to the political instability and violence around the globe in real time. Consequently, most of the developed world has growing factions in each nation, which want to raise the drawbridge and batten down the hatches. Out of fear, many of us want to retreat, and this makes some sense. Fair or no, immigration is considered in the context of economic scarcity, fear of terrorism, wars and geopolitical conflicts, which may be incipient stages of informal proxy wars. Whatever their cause, all such anxieties and conflicts affect individuals and societies and their movement patterns. Naturally, the movement of people changes the culture of the people around them, and the culture of the people around them affects the migrant people.

As for me, I lived just a few blocks away from the World Trade Center during the September 11, 2001, attacks, and my family and I had to be evacuated for a time. My family and I were residing in Tokyo during the Tohoku Earthquake on March 11, 2011. I have been changed by these events, and these events inform my work and the way I approach crises.

Unfortunately, every one of us is vulnerable to manmade and natural disasters, small and great. According to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), there are over 65 million refugees in the world, which is about 1 out of every 113 people on earth. When my father was sixteen years old, he lost his family in the Korean War. The war and the memory of being a war refugee was not spoken of often, but these events lingered in the air of my childhood home. I think this kind of trauma is an unspoken legacy for many first- and second-generation immigrants in the United States and elsewhere. My father, a teenage war refugee from Wonsan, became a South Korean migrant worker in Busan, then a college-educated businessman in Seoul. He immigrated to the United States and became a small business owner. He is now a naturalized American citizen, a retiree, and a member of the AARP who also enjoys recreational deep-sea fishing. He has lived many lives away from his birthplace. Most immigrants are like this. Many of my friends and their families have been directly affected by the Holocaust, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the suffering inflicted by military dictatorships in the Americas and in African nations. Today, all of us live in an era of vast income, educational and information inequality. However, what we also witness each day is how many ordinary people resist the indignities of life and history with grace and conviction by taking care of their families, friends, neighbors, and communities while striving for their individual goals. We cannot help but be interested in the stories

of people that history pushes aside so thoughtlessly.

Why did you choose to title your novel *Pachinko*?

Pachinko is a kind of vertical pinball game played by adults in Japan. Although gambling is formally illegal there, pachinko bypasses this prohibition by allowing the player to win prizes, called *keihin*, which are exchanged outside the premises of the pachinko parlor for cash. What is little known outside of Japan is that as of 2015, pachinko generates revenues of about 19 trillion yen, which is about \$190 billion U.S. at the current exchange rate, or about twice the export revenues of the Japanese car industry. Yes, this includes Nissan, Toyota, and Honda. The game started out in the early part of the twentieth century in tiny stalls with itinerant operators at local festivals. After World War II, pachinko was played in parlors for prizes like soap or cigarettes, which were exchanged elsewhere for cash. Today, many parlors issue tokens or cards embedded with valuable metals, which are exchanged for cash only a few steps away from the parlor. There are about 12,000 parlors officially registered in Japan, and 11 million Japanese play pachinko regularly, or about one out of every seven Japanese adults.

Although ethnic Japanese may have started the pachinko business, over its near century presence in Japan, a great number of ethnic Koreans have operated pachinko parlors and have been involved in the *keihin* business and the manufacture of the machines. Despite the strict regulatory involvement of the police and government authorities in the past twenty-five-plus years, the Japanese continue to view the pachinko industry and the people involved with suspicion and hostility. I mention all this here because nearly every Korean-Japanese person I met in Japan had some historical connection or social connection with the pachinko business—one of the very few businesses in which Koreans could find employment and have a stake. For example, if I interviewed an American-educated Korean-Japanese person who worked in the finance industry as an executive for a Western investment bank, he may have a relative who worked briefly in a parlor, or an uncle who lost everything in a failed pachinko business. Also, nearly every Korean-Japanese I interviewed had some close or distant connection to the *yakiniku* (Korean barbecue, or *galbi*) business. In short, Korean-Japanese had to participate in small businesses, which were often given outsider or inferior status, because it was not possible to find work elsewhere. For me, the pachinko business and the game itself serve as metaphors for the history of Koreans in Japan—a people caught in seemingly random global conflicts—as they win, lose, and struggle for their place and for their lives.

Female beauty, and how it can persist or fade with age, is such a recurring observation in your novel. Why?

One form of power, however fleeting, for anyone, is physical beauty. Unfortunately, for women, beauty is often expected in addition to whatever other attributes that may be needed or that may already exist. In many societies, females are often privileged or punished proportionately for their beauty or lack thereof. Without entering into a larger discussion of the intersection of beauty and age, as well as the impossible external requirements of physical beauty for women of all ages, I guess, I would like to discuss something more obvious in this work. In *Pachinko*, I wanted to reflect how a poor young woman's unconventional beauty, unknown even to herself, can be magnetic and resilient. In the West, there is a disjuncture between the reification and the excessive valuation of certain aspects of so-called Asian female beauty (Asian skincare products being perceived as superior; the

commodification of Asian hair, which is sold expensively for extensions; or the hypersexualization of Asian women in pornography, which I have discussed in *Free Food for Millionaires*) and the utter lack of ratification or acknowledgment of realistic Asian female beauty in mainstream media (the sheer absence of Asian female fashion models of varying appearances, mainstream actresses, or any major roles in film and television). There is even a grosser lack of recognition of Asian male beauty or sexual attractiveness. Scholars like David Eng have argued effectively that there is an established practice of a kind of racial castration of Asian men in Western media and literature. Orientalism, the objectification or erasure of Asian beauty and distortion of Asian sexuality deny Asian humanity. I treat all of these issues in my writings. That said, another cultural travesty is the sheer absence of realistic beauty of working-class women of all races in mainstream media, including novels and stories. In *Pachinko*, I am acknowledging the physicality and beauty of working-class immigrant women.

I grew up in Elmhurst, Queens, and now live in Harlem. All my life, I have been surrounded by all kinds of women who work in menial and middle-class jobs, who lack the resources to join gyms, color their hair, buy cosmetics and skincare, go to dermatologists and plastic surgeons, polish their nails, eliminate unwanted hair, buy expensive clothing, eat less cheap carbohydrates and eat more lean proteins to be slim...the list goes on. Conventional physical beauty takes time, money, and effort, and it is expensive for all women, but it is cruelly so for women without resources. Every study points to the fact that attractive people also earn more money and have higher social status. Needless to say, it is a perpetual loop of economic gender cruelty to require women to pay for their physical upkeep and then to punish them financially for not keeping up when they don't have the funds. However, the reality is that despite what the media says, there are many women in history and in life who are not conventionally attractive yet who are very appealing. So I wanted to write about the woman that I see on the subway or waiting for the bus in the winter wearing a threadbare coat, or the woman who works as a cashier at an H-Mart—women who are too heavy or wrinkled or gray-haired or improperly dressed by the standards of television, movies, or fashion magazines and now social media sharing apps which commend filters to alter our already insecure images. I am interested in the physicality of women who live their daily struggles with integrity; their beauty captivates those who know them.

Do you think you have certain themes that you gravitate toward as a writer?

My subjects are history, war, economics, class, sex, gender, and religion. I think my themes are forgiveness, loss, desire, aspiration, failure, duty, and faith.

How did your experience writing *Pachinko* differ from your first novel, *Free Food for Millionaires*?

I wrote *Free Food for Millionaires* exclusively in New York City. I grew up in Queens, went to high school in the Bronx, and my parents had a small wholesale jewelry business on 30th Street and Broadway in Manhattan's Koreatown. Both my sisters live in Brooklyn, and my parents now live in New Jersey. I went to college in Connecticut. Needless to say, I know the tri-state area fairly well. Although I had written a draft of this novel in New York, I wrote the new rough draft almost entirely in Tokyo during the years 2007–2011, and I rewrote the drafts between 2011 and 2015 in New York. In Tokyo, I was researching, interviewing, and writing all the time; I was also profoundly homesick and melancholy in a way I had never been before. I missed my family and my friends deeply, and I felt cut off from everyone back home. I enjoyed living in Tokyo very much, but it was difficult, too.

Living in Tokyo, I missed America very much; I yearned for the openness, hospitality, and optimism of Americans. I missed the ease of conversation that Americans can have with strangers. In New York, I am more guarded and private, but in Tokyo, I felt a kind of intense and immediate kinship with my fellow Americans. The epigram for Book III comes from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, where he writes of a "horizontal comradeship" which must be necessarily imagined in a nation. I felt this horizontal comradeship strongly with Americans when I lived abroad. I had lost my birthplace once when I moved from Seoul to New York as a child, and living as an adult expatriate in Japan reminded me again of what my characters who lost their birthplace experienced in *Pachinko*.

On a funny note, one of the things I did to overcome my intense homesickness for America, which allowed me to write the new rough draft of *Pachinko*, was to bake all the time. It was curious, because I have always cooked and baked, but never as much as I did in Tokyo. In my four years in Japan, I was baking the *Cook's Illustrated* Chocolate Sour Cream Bundt Cake on a dangerously regular basis. I don't know why, but to me, that amazing cake tastes like home.