

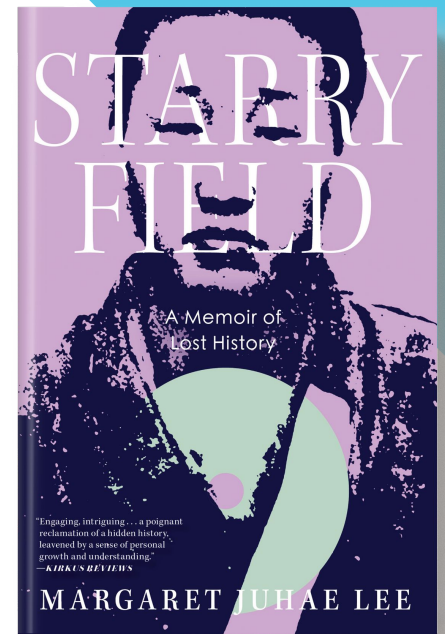
STARRY FIELD

A Memoir of Lost History

Margaret Juhae Lee

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“Engaging, intriguing...[*Starry Field* is] a poignant reclamation of a hidden history, leavened by a sense of personal growth and understanding.”

— **Kirkus Reviews**

“Absorbing. . . *Starry Field* reminds us that even knowing where we came from won’t tell us where we’re going—but it will help along the way.”

— **Susan Choi, National Book Award winning author of *Trust Exercise***

INTRODUCTION

A poignant memoir for readers who love *Pachinko* and *The Return* by journalist Margaret Juhae Lee, who sets out on a search for her family’s history lost to the darkness of Korea’s colonial decades, and contends with the shockwaves of violence that followed them over four generations and across continents.

As a young girl growing up in Houston, Margaret Juhae Lee never heard about her grandfather, Lee Chul Ha. His history was lost in early twentieth-century Korea, and guarded by Margaret’s grandmother, who Chul Ha left widowed in 1936 with two young sons. To his surviving family, Lee Chul Ha was a criminal, and his granddaughter was determined to figure out why.

Combining investigative journalism, oral history, and archival research, Margaret reveals the truth about the grandfather she never knew. What she found is that Lee Chul Ha was not a source of shame; he was a student revolutionary imprisoned in 1929 for protesting the Japanese government’s colonization of Korea. He was a hero—and eventually honored as a Patriot of South Korea almost 60 years after his death.

But reclaiming her grandfather’s legacy, in the end, isn’t what Margaret finds the most valuable. It is through the series of three long-form interviews with her grandmother that Margaret finally finds a sense of recognition she’s been missing her entire life. A story of healing old wounds and the reputation of an extraordinary young man, *Starry Field* bridges the tales of two women, generations and oceans apart, who share the desire to build family in someplace called home.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book begins with the line *once upon a time*, as in a children’s story. How did this beginning set the tone for the rest of the book?
2. Early in the book, Margaret’s grandfather is honored as a Patriot of Korea and his grave is moved to the National Cemetery. She and all her relatives are in attendance, except Halmoni. Why do you think she refused to attend?
3. *Starry Field* explores themes of colonialism—political, social, economic, cultural—specifically in Korea. Is colonialism of any kind part of your own family lineage?

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4. Margaret discovers facts about Halmoni's early life through interviews with her about girlhood, marriage, and motherhood. How do these phases of her grandmother's life compare to her own?
5. Margaret discovers that her father has struggled with the shame of his father's imprisonment and death his entire life. How has shame affected other members of the family and influenced their decisions?
6. The tumultuous history of Korea in the twentieth century forms the background of this book. How much of this history were you aware of? If you were unaware of this history, why do you think this is the case?
7. The concept of finding "home" is central to this book and its characters. What do you think "home" means for Halmoni, for Eun Sul, for Margaret? Is home a place or something else?
8. Margaret describes being perceived as foreign in the United States, because of how she looks, and in Korea because she struggles to speak her parents' language. How do these types of experiences affect how she sees herself?
9. During the Korean War, Halmoni burns all of her husband's papers, explaining to her young son Eun Sul: "You never know what will happen. History is the proof." What do you think she meant by this?
10. Margaret interviews several family members about the past, some who are initially reluctant to speak to her. Are there members of your own family you would like to ask about the past? How do you think you could approach them to speak if they are reluctant to do so?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Margaret Juhae Lee is an Oakland-based writer and a former literary editor of *The Nation* magazine. She has been the recipient of a Bunting Fellowship from Harvard University, and a Korean Studies Fellowship from the Korean Foundation. She is also a Tin House scholar, and has been awarded residencies at the Mesa Refuge, the Anderson Center, and Mineral School. In 2020, she was named "Person of the Year" by the Sangcheol Cultural Welfare Foundation in Kongju, South Korea, for her work in honoring her grandfather, Patriot Lee Chul Ha. Her articles, reviews, and interviews have been published in *The Nation*, *Newsday*, *Elle*, *ARTnews*, *The Advocate*, *The Progressive* and *The Rumpus*.

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