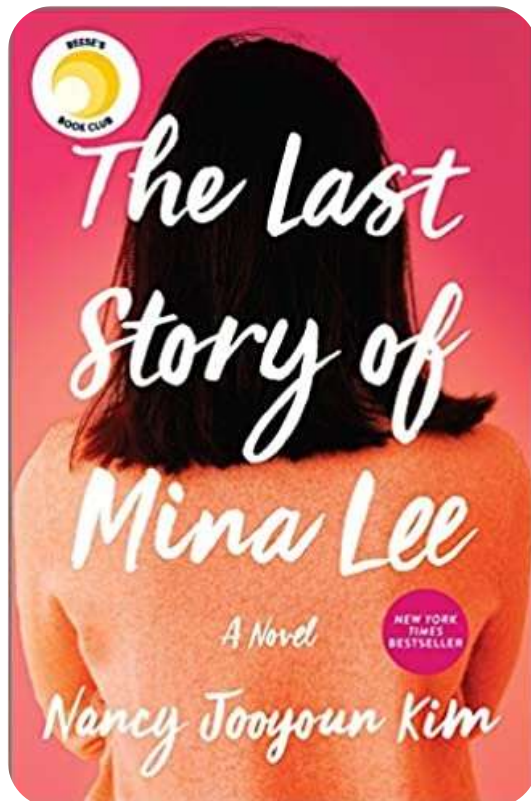


## Allison's Book Corner December 2020

***The Last Story of Mina Lee*** by Nancy Jooyoun Kim  
(Park Row, 2020)

This is a multi-layered, beautifully-written novel, a debut for the author. The reader goes into it expecting a certain story and comes away with something much better than imagined.

Superficially, this is a story of what it means to be an immigrant in America, but there is so much more here. First, we are reading about a group of people that we do not normally discuss. Our Korean American



author is focusing on Koreans who immigrate to America and their personal journey. We are taken into Koreatown in Los Angeles from 1987 to 2014. Next, readers are following the journey of a mother and a daughter.

Mother/daughter relationships are, by nature, very complex. Add a language barrier and a cultural misunderstanding into the fragile relationship and you have part of the main plot of this book.

Mina Lee was traumatized as a child separated from her parents while fleeing North Korea during the Korean War. She grows up in an abusive orphanage in South Korea. She meets her soulmate, gets married and becomes a mother, making a life in Seoul. Overnight, her life changes when her husband and daughter die in an accident. Mina flees once again, this time for the dream of America. As an undocumented immigrant, she lives under the radar, always alert to trouble

that may one day come and deport her. She describes America as "...this country that glittered untouched by the bombs it dropped everywhere else."

This novel made me think of another Asian immigrant community that I observed up close in Queens, NY as a child. I was in elementary school when Flushing, Queens became Chinatown. I distinctly remember going there with my mother to shop and get little treats both before and after it became a neighborhood of little shops and booths with Chinese merchants. In this novel, these street booths are called a swap meet. I am very aware that the Chinese culture and the Korean culture are not the same. There are many differences. But there are also some parallels once these Asian groups immigrate to America. The merchant booth is one and so is the restaurant. I was so lucky to have Elaine Lum Chune as a classmate. Her family owned Lum's, a very large, successful Chinese restaurant in the middle of Flushing. Elaine would invite her little group of girlfriends to the restaurant. We would all squeeze into one booth and have egg rolls and treats. It was a wonderful cultural experience that I have never forgotten.

In this novel, we have the Korean restaurant, Hanok House. Mina's roommate works there for years. The author's description of the Korean food made my mouth water. "The waitress returned spreading banchan on the table, mak kimchi and kkakdugi, seasoned soybean sprouts and spinach, soy-glazed lotus root...garlic cloves, green onions, soy sauce, sesame oil" make up the composition of the spinach dish. The traditional Korean meal is a feast for the senses.

While in America, Mina bears a daughter named Margot. There are many little mysteries to unravel in this novel. Who is Margot's father? Why doesn't Mina answer Margot's calls? What is Mrs. Baek hiding? I will not spoil these for you. It is a painful pleasure to see the secrets revealed. The author does this by telling the story from the perspective of Margot in the present and her mother Mina in the past as she arrives in America.

We see America through an immigrant's eyes. When Mina first encounters American food, she thinks, "American food seemed so barbaric. Where were the chopsticks?" The immigrants in Koreatown take comfort from signs in their native language. They want to speak English with their customers, but are embarrassed by how it may sound when they try to speak. They learn the phrases they need to survive. When one is afraid of being reported and then deported, he is vulnerable to abuse. The abuse can even come from members of your own community.

Nancy Jooyoun Kim does not sugarcoat the immigrant experience. She gives it to us straight. The reader confronts the reality of immigrant life in America. We see the immigrant as a whole person. They hear of the American dream from childhood and come here seeking the elusive perfection sold to them on television, in magazine ads, even in songs. As I read this book, I thought about all the immigrants I encountered growing up and all the hidden stories their eyes held. Do not pass over this special novel. This is not a story you will finish and forget; it will stay with you.

And if you read this review and you also have memories of eating at Lum's in Flushing, Queens, please call me at the Library. We'll have some great stories to share! Lum's closed its doors long ago. These cultural memories may be disappearing from New York City, as covid-19 continues to devastate small businesses.