

Software to Hard Truth

Novelist's first book tells allegory of self determination

The transition between writing software and writing fiction is a big one.

Ronnie Maycock the software writer, never thought of herself as Veronica Lee, the novelist, but the ideas were always in there, cooking. When she finally started writing them down, a novel spilled out, embodying her ideas about an individual's triumph over adversity and right to self-determination. That story, *Princess June*, was published this spring.

Lee, who uses her Korean name and not her married name in her writing, still seems to be turning herself into a novelist, allowing that part of her that ponders ideas to finally come out into the open. She understands now the signs that were always there. There was always a world of ideas in her that needed to be expressed.

"Ever since I was a little child, a book was my best friend," Lee recalls. "Also, I always had a very active fantasy life." She suppressed that fantasy life, she said, because she felt a little ashamed of it. Her father and uncle were professors, and her mother was an M.D. She imagined herself following her father into academia, possibly becoming a history professor.

But something else happened instead. During her junior year of college, she immigrated to the U.S. with her mother and younger sister, and settled near Los Angeles, where she and her mother still live. Her father, elder sister and step-siblings stayed in Korea. "It was our way of getting a divorce," she explained. "We had to get out of there without his knowledge."

Instead of continuing with her life as an up-and-coming future

history professor, Lee was suddenly immersed temporarily in the underclass of new immigrants. It was a painful, if educational experience. She had to think of something to do to make money. At first, it was odd jobs. She then thought she might be able to be a secretary. "I soon found I had no talent in that area. Plus, that's not a good job for an immigrant, when you don't even speak the language!"



Some of her experiences as a desperately unemployed person were laughable. "I remember going after a job in newspaper

delivery. A boy's job. I remember the phone interview, the guy asking 'So, how tall are you?' And I answered, 'Well, maybe five foot four?' You know, adding some inches! And then he asked 'And how much do you weigh?' And I was, like 'oh, maybe a hundred-ten?' He said, 'well I don't think you can do this job!'"

Lee eventually continued with her college education, but worked herself into a computer programming career by getting a night job as a keypunch operator, where she wondered, and then found out about the jobs of those who actually wrote the programs. "At first I thought it would not be me, because I didn't like math. But I took one class to figure out if I was interested, and I discovered I was a natural for it."

She became very successful at her computer career, but when she reached her mid-30s, she knew there was something missing. "It's all left-brained. All logical. I knew what was more important for me was ideas of life.

What makes life successful. Who we are. Some deeper meanings, that kind of thing. Social changes."

She realized she had learned a lot going from one culture to another, and in the process, finding out what it was like to be a staunchly middle-class person reduced to a minority person surviving at the margins of society. Some of the lessons were hard ones. "The whole experience of encountering racism ...It's a very visceral thing. You can't explain it. When I encountered racism, I finally could understand why people kill. My rage was that deep."

"I began to notice what that rage was doing to me," she recalled. "It was changing me into the kind of person I never wanted to be. I was noticing for instance, at job interviews. I was qualified, but was getting rejected for one thing or another. I noticed that I was going for these job interviews, and even before the interview, I was already bracing myself. I hadn't even met the person yet.

I'm already self-conscious. I'm already defensive.

"Finally, I asked myself, if I am expecting all these white people to be racists before I meet them, am I not being a racist myself? And the answer was, of course, yes. That was a revelation." She realized, she said, the real cost of being affected by a racist or other hateful mentality. "It can turn you into a racist if you are not careful about it."

Lee's ideas, developed from life experiences both as a child and as an adult, about resisting hatred, believing in self-determination, feeling the grind of poverty, all made it into her first novel, *Princess June*. The character of Junee is modeled after a nanny Lee and her sisters had as a child. Although she was obviously poverty-stricken, had been physically abused and lived in precarious circumstances, Lee's nanny was a person who had made a decision to be good to others, never harmful. She loved and gave of herself, despite everything life had thrown at her.

So affected was Lee as a child by the example of her nanny, that she too, decided she could resist the negative effects of the hateful or harmful people in her life. The character Junee goes through a similar process, deciding to choose good over evil when she is only about eight years old. This decision is pivotal to the story, just as Lee's decision to follow her nanny's moral and philosophical example proved to be a crucial decision in her life. That a person can choose a deliberately positive self-determining path that young and stick to it "made perfect sense to me," Lee said.

Junee, kept captive during her childhood by a violent, possessive brother, escapes her house and eventually disappears into Seoul's rough Keechun district, where she reasons that her brother's organized crime connections will not penetrate. There, she remakes her life, avoiding prostitution, crime, and numerous other hazards, eventually earning the respect and friendship of good people who can help her.

One of the families Junee works for is an autobiographical sketch of Lee's experiences with her nanny. There is an M.D. mother, a professor father, and two little girls in the family. When she was a little girl, Lee said, her family lived in that district, and the patients who went in and out of the house every day were the waitresses and prostitutes of the neighborhood. Her mother "worked herself almost to death" trying to help her patients, the women and their children, many of whom were children of U.S. servicemen. "She paid for it with her health."

While living at the doctor's house, the character Junee lives in relative safety and peace for the first time in her life, but begins to experience dark moods that last for days, a result, perhaps, of the trauma of her childhood. Lee's nanny, she said, also had never had a mother of her own, and bonded with her mother. Her nanny experienced the same kind of dark moods, which she remembers vividly as a child. Like Junee, she also had an

abusive brother who showed up at their house and frightened the family.

Despite her darkness and despair over her life at this point and at a later point in the book when she agonizes over placing her half-Caucasian child for adoption to America, "Princess" Junee remains the reigning monarch of her own soul and destiny. Her self-respectful, proud demeanor earns her the moniker from the patrons at the bar where she works.

The character of Junee is the embodiment of "the most empowering thing I ever learned," Lee said, "that your mind belongs to you. You cannot control how other people treat you, but you can always control how you react to them. You can just grab that moment, and you can refrain from reacting. At least you are not being an accomplice to spreading and accelerating and multiplying the hatred in the world."

Lee said she believes her nanny died, some years later, in the red light

district of Seoul. She saw a blurry newspaper picture of a murder victim. The name matched. The age was approximately right. She never had proof to substantiate this hunch, but deep down, she believes that victim was her nanny. “That really burned into my psyche. That picture. She never really left me,” Lee said. “She has been a constant companion.”

Racism is something she and many other Americans experience, but it is only one symptom or manifestation of a kind of hatred that affects all of mankind, Lee believes. In Korea, instead of racism, there are other artificial divisions, including class prejudice and oppression of women. “No matter what the form is, it starts with the notion that some people are somehow better than others because of only one factor. That people can be ranked according to their values, like objects.”

Under such an institutionalized system of top dogs and underdogs “everybody suffers and everybody

loses,” Lee said. “Once you dismiss a person (as being inferior), you just eliminated all possibility of learning anything from him.” One can see that kind of institutionalized system in Korea, Lee explained “where men do not really know women. Not like women know men.” Men are often cut off from the nurturing life of women through their attempts to dominate and, therefore, they are outside society looking in, she said. That is the case with June’s abusive brother, who treats her with extreme cruelty, and yet still tells June “You are the only beautiful thing in my life.”

Writing a first novel was more a process of relaxing, opening up, and letting the story flow out onto the paper, Lee said. She put no effort into thinking up material or deciding what to write, she said. “It comes from a place that’s beyond you.” She recalled one evening of writing in frustration and going to bed thinking ‘I really need some help with this,’ and waking to find two dozen characters lined up in her head, waiting

to be written about. “It’s like aliens take over you,” she quipped.

Having gone through this experience once, Lee feels she can relax a little bit. When the time comes, she said, the next story will occur to her, and the right characters will create themselves in her head. The important themes expressed in her first book will probably repeat themselves, with different props and settings.

“Perhaps it will grow out of my own immigration experience,” she said. “I cracked the entry with this book. And I chose to do it by writing of someone other than myself.” Even though some elements of Princess June were autobiographical, “It’s very very risky,” she said, to write frankly about one’s own life. The next time she writes, she said “I may be a little more courageous and readier to deal with the things that hit even closer to home.”

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