

Native Speaker *by* Chang-rae Lee



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Author: Chang-rae Lee

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A story about a Korean detective in New York. It is a novel about the immigrant experience, about love, loyalty and the languages that define us.



Reviews of the *Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee

Anaginn

I loved *A Gesture Life*, which I read a few years ago. *Native Speaker* is Chang-rae Lee's debut novel. Written in 1996, the themes of assimilation and being true to your culture are still relevant today. I find Lee's writing to be quiet and introspective, which may not be to everyone's taste. The book did drag for me in places, but it was still a good reading experience overall.

The novel is about Henry Park. He was born in America to Korean parents. He tries to eschew traditional Korean ways but also struggles to understand his parents. Most of all, he desires to be a "native speaker." His father owns a grocery store and proudly experiences the American dream of prosperity through hard work. Henry graduates college. He meets and marries an American woman.

His stoicism, memory, and feelings of alienation make him both a success and a failure. He is a success at work, at least in the beginning. He is recruited to work for a vague spy agency. This goes well until he lets down his emotional guard and becomes close to the psychiatrist he is spying on. At the same time, he is emotionally detached from his wife and is failing in his marriage. He keeps much of himself hidden including his job as a spy. When their young son dies in an accident, the distance is exacerbated. The novel opens with Henry reading a list of his character flaws. The list is written by his wife. It includes mostly negatives, including "neo-American," "stranger," and "emotional alien." She gives him the list when she leaves him. Having failed at work, he is given one chance to redeem himself. He infiltrates the campaign of an up and coming Korean-American politician. This does not go smoothly. Henry is also given a second chance with his wife and he has to make some decisions.

I really do enjoy Mr. Lee's writing style. It has a lot of layers, just like the story itself. There is some mystery and political intrigue and corruption to move the plot along. For me the more enjoyable parts are when Henry grapples with finding his place in the world and reconciling two cultures. There is a nice contrast among Henry and John Kwang, the Korean-American politician, as well as Henry and his traditional Korean father. All three men have different approaches to assimilation and fail at varying degrees. If you are looking for a thoughtful and beautifully written book about Korean immigrants in America, this is a wonderful choice.

Drelahuginn

When I started reading this book that was assigned in class I had very low expectations. I thought this novel was going to be just another story about a first generation Korean American struggling to keep his own identity against the evil American ways of life. However, *Native Speaker* by □ □□ destroyed all of my preconceived ideas about cultural assimilation books.

The main protagonist Henry works for the organization Glimmer and Company that uses immigrant American spies to exploit other immigrants. Henry's occupation as a spy actually represents the cultural alienation — from both American and Korean cultures — that many second generation Korean Americans face. The more he attempts to carry all the practices and attitudes of both cultures, the further he becomes from discovering his own identity and obtaining happiness. Glimmer and company is a sort of cultural limbo for immigrants. Henry describes his coworker Jack who has inflicted many immigrants but still cared for his family and for Henry when he says "But then who was the Jack that loved and buried Sophie; was he just another version in the schema, or the true soul. Or could he have been both?"(Page 33). His thoughts also apply to himself and to his last target John Kwang. The story by the end brings up many situations that make the reader question whether either culture truly defines people or if it is our choice to live in the way that will make us the happiest. It also reveals how immigrants play a large role in making themselves feel separate from the rest of Americans. A major reason that second generation Korean Americans are in this situation is that their parents who first came here pressure them into feeling like they are betraying their culture. However, the author does not demonize first generation Americans and makes Henry empathetic with his father. Henry's father is portrayed as a traditionally Korean parent who is determined to succeed financially in New York. Even though he has a masters degree in one of Korea's best schools, he becomes a fruit and vegetable grocer and believes that the world owes him nothing. Henry early in the novel admits that he cannot say that his father is a uncaring parent because he "put me through college, witnessed my marriage for my long-buried mother, even left me enough money that I could do the same for my children without the expense of his kind of struggle; his duties, uncomplex, were by all accounts complete. And the single-minded determination that had propelled him through twenty-five years of green-grocerying in a famous ghetto of America would serve him a few last days, and through any of my meager execrations" (Page 49).

The most enjoyable element of this novel is that is relatable unlike many other novels about

assimilation. In other reviews people say that even though you hear things about Korean culture, it is too hard to believe that keeping appearances and having financial stability has priority over personal freedom and love. Both of these are explored in a positive light through Henry's father and in a negative light through John Kwang. I think that empathizing with Henry is very appealing to Asian American readers but might bore other readers such as some of the other reviewers. Overall, *Native Speaker* sparked my interest for reading multicultural novels again and has me feeling like I am a part of the story unlike many novels that teachers force me to read.

Rrd

I am a Korean-born, and my parents used to own a grocery store just like the protagonist in the story. I found so many parallels between the story and my family experience, that I enjoyed this candid book a lot. This book gives insight into the thoughts, values, and loneliness of immigrants struggling to survive and adapt to their new lives but not quite fitting in even after their financial success. An interesting read.

Agamaginn

This is one of the best books I have read to date. I'm not Korean/KA, and I've never been to New York, so I have no idea how well the characters represent either of these facets of America, and don't much care. I read this book and tried to appreciate its narrator and setting as unique rather than metaphorical or archetypal. I found the prose to be exceptionally incisive and elegant in places; in fact sometimes the narrative was so intense for me that it was exhausting. The narrator felt very realistic in that no matter how introspective he became, part of him always seemed to remain a mystery to himself, and Lee does not condescend to the reader or brutalize the prose by spelling it all out. The only other author I've read who can write characters that are both unusually self-analytical and blithely (and realistically) un-self-aware is Haruki Murakami (though the style of the writing is totally different).

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