

The Vegetarian



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For me, books are a form of traveling to distant places, places I will probably never see. Because of this, I decided to check out this [Man Booker Prize](#) winner about South Korea.

My experience with books set in Korea has centered on North Korea—mostly nonfiction, except for [Adam Johnson's](#) stellar novel *The Orphan Master's Son* that won the Pulitzer in 2012.

The Vegetarian begins with the speaker, Cheong, saying, "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as unremarkable in every way." Cheong, an ambitious businessman, then states that he deliberately chose his wife because she was so bland.

But late one night, Yeong-hye wakes from a dream. Cheong finds her in the kitchen in the dark; she does not respond to his words or even his touch. The next day, Yeong-hye, almost in a trance-like state, throws away all the meat and fish from their refrigerator and freezer. She never willingly eats flesh again.

This short novel tells Yeong-hye's sad story, but almost always through other people's voices (there are a few italicized sections where she speaks for herself): her husband's, her unnamed brother-in-law's, and her sister's.

The book is divided into three sections: the first gives the novel its title. In this part, Yeong-hye experiences the nightmare that causes her to become a vegetarian. We also meet her family at her sister In-hye's housewarming. They do not react well to Yeong-hye's dietary choices.

In the second section, "Mongolian Mark," Yeong-hye's artist brother-in-law, learns that Kyong-hye, his sister-in-law, has a Mongolian mark hidden on her body, and becomes obsessed with it (and with her). Soon he invites Kyong-hye to model for a video art piece, which involves painting large flowers on her body. What happens afterward causes a rift in the family.

"Flaming Trees," the final section, is named for the mountain forests upon which the mental hospital sits, where we find Kyong-hye doing handstands on the cement floor. In-hye visits her, encouraging her to eat, but her sister refuses.

Several reviewers have called this novel Kafkaesque. It's explosive and memorable: Kang covers a variety of issues: self-identity, family relationships, mental illness, feminism, and the subjugation of women. But her main theme is that each of us hardly knows those closest to us. This story will linger in your mind's eye, and raise questions long after you close the covers.

Posted by Dory L. on March 16, 2017

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