

Year of Impossible Goodbyes

By Sook Nyul Choi

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
In 1945, 10-year-old Sookan's homeland of North Korea is occupied by the Japanese. Left behind while her resistance-fighter father hides in Manchuria and her older brothers toil in Japanese labor camps, Sookan and her remaining family members run a sock factory for the war effort, bolstered only by the dream that the fighting will soon cease. Sookan watches her people--forced to renounce their native ways--become increasingly angry and humiliated. When war's end brings only a new type of domination--from the Russian communists--Sookan and her younger brother must make a harrowing escape across the 38th parallel after their mother has been detained at a Russian checkpoint. Drawn partly from Choi's own experiences, her debut novel is a sensitive and honest portrayal of amazing courage. In clear, graceful prose, she describes a sad period of history that is astonishing in its horror and heart-wrenching in its truth. Readers cannot fail to be uplifted by this account of the triumph of the human spirit in an unjust world. Ages 10-up.
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From School Library Journal
Grade 5-9-- Ten-year-old Sookan tells of her Korean family's experiences during the Japanese occupation as World War II ends. The Japanese commit cruel, fear-provoking acts against this proud, hopeful family and against the young girls who worked in a sweatshop making socks for the Japanese army. Relief, hope, and anticipation of the return of male family members after the Japanese defeat is short lived as the Russians occupy the country, bringing their language, their customs, and communism to the village. Equally as insensitive to the pride and possessions of the Koreans, they are as bad as the Japanese. Plans are made for Sookan, her mother, and younger brother to escape to South Korea. However, their guide betrays them, causing the children to be separated from their mother, and the two begin a daring and frightening journey to cross the 38th parallel to safety. Through Sookan, the author shares an incredible story of the love and determination of her family, the threatening circumstances that they endured during occupations by two totalitarian governments, and the risks they took to escape to freedom. Readers will get a double bonus from this book--a good story, well told, and the reaffirmation of our faith in the human spirit against incredible adversities . -- Lydia Champlin, Beachwood City Schools, OH
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From Kirkus Reviews
A moving fictionalized account of Choi's last months as a child in Pyongyang under the brutal Japanese rule that oppressed Korea for more than 30 years before 1945, and her harrowing escape with her seven-year-old brother south across the 38th parallel. Choi describes the Japanese persecution in an even tone that makes it even more chilling: deliberate destruction of everything of value or beauty, even Grandfather's favorite pine tree; interdiction of religions other than Shinto and of the Korean language; indoctrination of children; systematic starving of the population; the forcing of young women to serve as ``spirit girls'' for the Japanese troops' pleasure. Despite all, Choi's family preserved dignity, familial love, and loyalty to their heritage. When the Russians arrived (not the hoped-for Americans), they proved less vicious but even more effective propagandists than the Japanese. Choi's father, who had spent the war in Manchuria, arranged an escape that was partially successful, even though their guide turned out to be a double agent: the two children, who had already demonstrated their intelligence and mettle, made their way on their own after their mother was detained (miraculously, she joined them later); other relatives left behind to cover for them were executed in retribution. A vividly written, compellingly authentic story that complements Yoko Watkins's fine So Far from the Bamboo Grove (1986), which details a Japanese family's suffering en route from Korea to Japan during the same period. (Fiction. 11+) -- *Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Norman Williams:

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