



Brother's Keeper

Written by Julie Lee

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Imagine North Korea in 1950. Perhaps we cannot because we do not know much about the country currently, and little about what it was like in the past. In 1950, North and South Korea entered into war when North Korea invaded South Korea. This is history, but what was life like for those within the countries? *Brother's Keeper* gives readers some insight into life in North Korea prior to the war. Twelve-year-old Sora Pak and her family are living with more and more limits. They need permission to travel, they must

go to "community meetings," and are forced to repeat slogans of support for an ever-increasing oppressive government. There seems to be no escape, yet some of their village members try. If caught, they are either taken to prison or killed, yet others still attempt to escape. Sora's family is divided on whether to attempt escape or remain under an oppressive rule. When war breaks out, they are given a chance to escape and join a river of refugees attempting to flee to South Korea and what they hope is safety, freedom, and better living conditions. Along the way, however, the refugees are attacked and in the melee that follows, Sora and her brother Youngsoo are separated from the rest of the family. Are they the only survivors? Did their family turn back? Sora is left to decide what to do to ensure her brother's safety. The journey they make together will have readers on the edge of their seats, and hoping along with Sora that the decisions they make will bring them home.

Both heartfelt and heartbreaking, *Brother's Keeper* is a one of those rare books that is a one-sit read. And if readers have to put the book down, they will think about it not only between reading sessions, but once they are finished, it will stay with them for a long, long time. Well-written with well-developed characterization, this survival story is both historical and timely. Readers will feel every step, every precarious situation, and every nuance of Sora's existence as a girl in a Korean family in 1950. What a lovely and harrowing novel that reveals a time and place seldom known by middle school students.

One book that especially complements *Brother's Keeper* is *My Freedom Trip* (Frances Park, Ginger Park, & Debra Reid Jenkins, 2010), a picturebook about a child's flight from North Korea just before the outbreak of the Korean War. Other historical Korean survival experiences include *When My Name Was Keoko* (Linda Sue Park, 2012), *Across the Tumen: A North Korean Kkotjebi Boy's Quest* (Moon Young Sook, 2013), and *Prairie Lotus* (Linda Sue Park, 2020). While different time periods, these books flesh out historical aspects of how people from the Korean peninsula survived and were treated either by the Japanese prior to WWII, as refugees attempting to get to China, or as immigrants to the US during the late 1800's.

Another book set in 12th century Korea is *A Single Shard* (Linda Sue Park, 2011), a novel for middle school students that won the Newbery Award. Two additional picturebooks are *The Name Jar* (Yangsook Choi, 2003), about a young Korean girl who wrestles with the possibility that no one at her new school will be able to pronounce her name, and *My Name is Yoon* (Helen Recorvits & Gabi Swiatkowska, 2014), which also addresses a Korean child's name, bringing to bear the reality that the concept of survival may include all types of experiences.

Julie Lee is Korean American and lives in Georgia with her family. In the notes at the back of her novel, Lee notes that *Brother's Keeper* is ultimately a family story that resonates with universal themes about families anywhere. Yet, it is also a story about her mother, who fled from North Korea when she was 15 years old. Lee used research to complete her work, including interviews with those who also fled North Korea during the Korean War and became refugees in different parts of the world. Lee was a history major at Cornell, and then worked in marketing research prior to writing *Brother's Keeper*. She is currently earning an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, and is working on her next novel. More information can be found at her website: www.julieleeauthor.com.

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