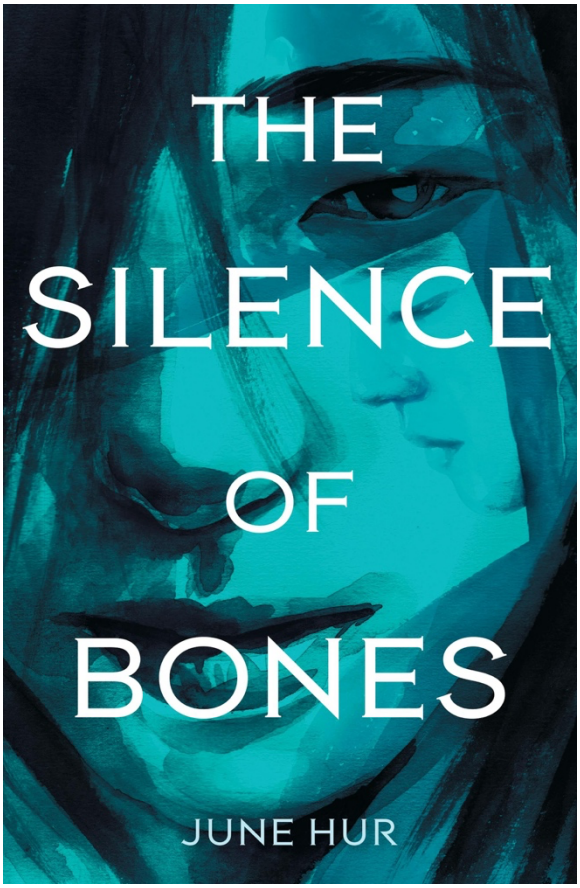
Curriculum Connections
The Silence of Bones
by June Hur

Macmillan Publishing, 2020 **Fiction, set in Korea**
2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature



June Hur's *The Silence of Bones* is a richly detailed murder mystery set in early 1800s Joseon Korea (1392–1910). Hur's exquisite attention to detail brings the Joseon period to life for the reader. In order to better understand the context of the novel, here is a brief overview of the Joseon period.

The Joseon Dynasty: Society, Ideology, and Persecution

Confucianism as State Ideology

The Joseon period lasted over 500 years, from 1392 to 1910. It started when the military leader Yi Seonggye (also rendered Yi Seung-Gye) overthrew the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392) and moved the capital at Hanyang (modern-day Seoul). The new dynasty embraced Neo-Confucianism as its guiding philosophy. It completely reshaped how Korea was governed, how people were educated, and how they lived their daily lives.

Power in Joseon Korea belonged to the *yangban,* the scholar-official class. They had to prove themselves by mastering the Confucian classics and passing incredibly difficult civil service exams modeled after the Chinese system. Their days were filled with scholarly pursuits, running the government bureaucracy, performing elaborate ancestral rituals, and setting a moral example for the rest of society.

Neo-Confucianism brought a whole system of rules for how people should behave, interact with family and organize society. At the heart of this system were the Five Relationships: between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friend and friend. These relationships defined how Koreans interacted with each other in daily life. Rituals, ancestor worship, and filial piety

became the essential fabric of everyday life. Confucian academies called *seowons* emerged all over the kingdom, serving as both schools and sites where scholars honored important Confucian thinkers. Meanwhile, the government actively worked to marginalize Buddhism by seizing temple lands and limiting its influence. Through all these efforts, Joseon Korea was deliberately shaping itself into a model Confucian society.

Stratified Society and Social Rigidity

Joseon society had a rigid hereditary class system that made social mobility nearly impossible.

At the top were the *yangban* aristocrats: about 10 percent of the population, they controlled political power and land. The *yangban* monopolized education and the civil service exams, keeping their privileged status across generations. Despite professing Confucian ideals, many *yangban* men enjoyed spending time at *kisaeng* houses (female entertainers), gambling, and engaging in political intrigue.

Below them were the *jungin* ("middle people"): educated professionals like doctors, interpreters, and astronomers, they were essential to government but couldn't advance beyond their rank.

The *sangmin* (commoners) formed the majority: farmers, artisans, and merchants. Farmers were theoretically respected as producers but faced heavy taxes and forced labor. Merchants, though economically important, ranked lowest among "honorable" occupations because Confucians saw them as parasites profiting from others' work.

At the very bottom were the *cheonmin* ("base people"): slaves (*nobi*), butchers, entertainers, and outcasts. Slavery was hereditary and widespread, at its height accounting for a third of the population. Unlike other slave systems, some Joseon slaves owned property and lived semi-independently, but they still faced severe discrimination and were subject to their masters' control. Slavery was abolished in the late nineteenth century.

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Women in Joseon Society

Confucian ideology created a deeply patriarchal society that severely restricted women. The principle of male superiority shaped everything from family structure to legal rights. Women were expected to follow the "Three Obediences," obeying their father before marriage, their husband after marriage, and their son in widowhood. The ideal woman was chaste, obedient, and self-sacrificing.

Women's rights declined gradually during the early Joseon period. Initially, women could inherit property and widows could remarry, but by the seventeenth century, both became heavily restricted or banned. The state even built commemorative gates honoring widows who stayed faithful to dead husbands or committed suicide after their husband's death. Upper-class women were confined to the inner quarters of the home and had to wear face-covering veils outside.

Female education focused on domestic skills and moral instruction, not classical learning. While some *yangban* women learned to read, they were completely excluded from civil service exams and politics. Women couldn't own property, and marriage meant joining the husband's family, often losing contact with their birth families. Despite these restrictions, women found ways to exercise influence within the home. The invention of Hangeul was particularly important because it allowed more women to become literate.

The Persecution of Korean Catholics

Christianity came to Korea in an unusual way, through books rather than missionaries. In the late eighteenth century, a scholar named Yi Seung-hun discovered Catholic texts during a diplomatic trip to China and became curious about the faith. He was baptized by a Jesuit missionary and returned to establish Korea's first Catholic community in the 1780s, all without any foreign missionaries. This makes Korean Catholicism's origin story unique.

The Joseon government saw Catholicism as a serious threat to the Confucian social order. Catholic teachings about equality before God directly contradicted Neo-Confucianism's hierarchical principles. Even more problematic, Catholics refused to

participate in ancestor worship ceremonies, which the government interpreted as rejecting family, society, and even the state itself.

Persecution began in 1791 and continued through major purges in 1801, 1839, 1846, and 1866. The government targeted both Korean believers and foreign missionaries who had secretly entered the country, executing thousands. Despite this brutal suppression, the faith survived underground as believers met in secret at enormous personal risk.

Catholics finally gained the freedom to practice openly in the 1880s. The Korean Catholic Church reorganized in 1962, and by the early twenty-first century, South Korea had about 4.5 million Catholics.

Legacy

The Joseon dynasty's 500-year reign left a profound mark on Korean identity that persists today. The Confucian emphasis on education created a culture that still prioritizes academic achievement and respect for teachers. The civil service examination system laid the groundwork for modern Korea's highly competitive education system and meritocratic ideals. The invention of Hangeul democratized literacy and became a source of national pride. The dynasty's hierarchical social structures influenced modern Korean concepts of age-based respect and proper social relationships. While many Joseon-period restrictions have been dismantled, the dynasty's cultural and philosophical influence remains woven into the fabric of Korean life.

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