



# Culture Notes

## *The Waiting*

by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim  
Translated by Janet Hong

Drawn & Quarterly, 2021

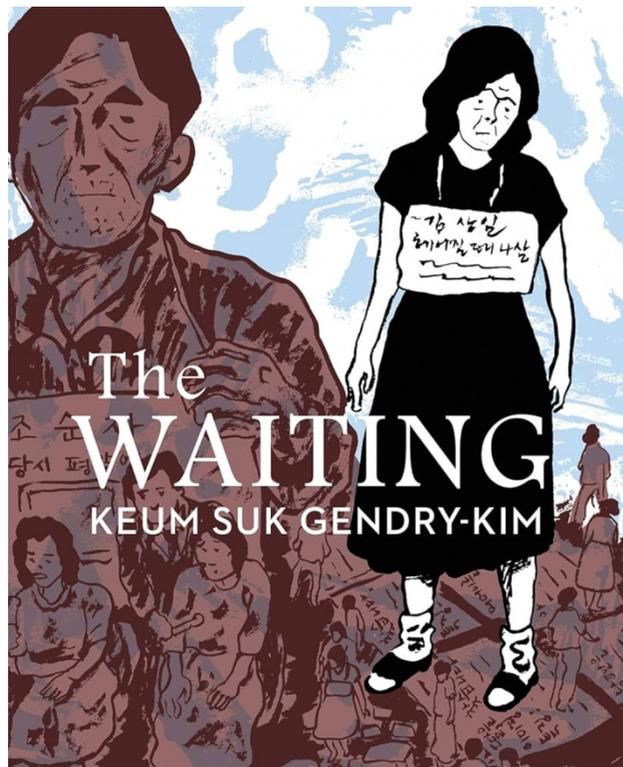
Fiction, set in Korea

2021 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Korea's modern history is a story of colonization, war, division, and extraordinary endurance—from Japan's colonialization of the Korean peninsula (1910–1945) to the devastation of the Korean War (1950–1953) and the division into North and South Korea that followed. *The Waiting*, a graphic novel by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim, brings that history to life through one family's experience. Based on memories from the author's mother, the story captures the emotional cost of separation and the quiet persistence of hope that defines much of modern Korean identity.

Following Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, colonial authorities sought to reshape Korean society in Japan's image. Japanese became the language of administration and education; Koreans were pressured to take Japanese names and adopt Japanese customs. Infrastructure projects, such as railways and ports, supported Japan's industrial goals but benefited few ordinary Koreans.<sup>1</sup> Beneath the surface, cultural resistance continued, and the dream of independence survived in art, religion, and underground schools.

The end of World War II ended Japan's rule but brought new tensions. Korea was divided at the 38th parallel, with Soviet forces occupying the North and American troops in the South. Within five years, ideological conflict erupted into the Korean War (1950–1953). The fighting displaced millions and left families scattered on both sides of the border. Some, like Gendry-Kim's mother, fled south during the chaos and never saw





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their loved ones again. *The Waiting* focuses this historical reality into a personal story, centered on a woman named Gwija who carries her longing across decades.

During and after the war, both Koreas endured hardship. In the North, reconstruction followed a communist model tied to Soviet aid; in the South, U.S. support fueled rebuilding and a democratic model of government but also political instability. Authoritarian governments in Seoul during the 1960s and 1970s emphasized rapid economic growth while restricting political freedoms. Many older South Koreans remained haunted by the loss of relatives in the North, a grief that found little public expression during this era of silence and censorship.

That silence is central to the narrative. Gwija's daughter, Jina, a novelist, records her mother's memories as they resurface late in life. Their exchanges reveal the emotional inheritance of a generation shaped by displacement. In Korean cultural tradition, such longing is often described through the concept of *han* (한; pronounced HAAN)—a feeling of deep sorrow, resentment, and unresolved yearning. *The Waiting* translates *han* into visual form, portraying absence and endurance through stark imagery rather than explicit sentiment.

The graphic novel's black-and-white artwork gives emotional weight to the story, using light, shadow, and silence to express what the characters themselves cannot say. Gendry-Kim's deliberate pacing and recurring motifs—roads, waves, empty rooms—mirror the emotional distance between past and present. Her work shows how visual storytelling can carry the emotional truth of history as powerfully as text.

*The Waiting* also speaks to South Korea's broader transformation. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the nation's industrialization—the "Miracle on the Han River"—lifted millions from poverty but often muted conversation about the personal costs of war. By the late 1980s, as democratization movements gained strength, stories of wartime separation and political repression began to surface. Artists, writers, and filmmakers used memory as a tool for national reflection, connecting private loss to collective healing.

Today, reunion programs occasionally allow elderly relatives from the North and South to meet briefly, often for the first time in seventy years. These encounters, heavily



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mediated by politics, remind readers that the war's consequences are not confined to history books. *The Waiting* gives shape to that ongoing separation and asks readers to consider what it means to live with unfinished history.

Through its blend of memory, art, and restraint, *The Waiting* introduces readers to a Korea still negotiating the line between past and present. It reflects the strength of ordinary people who endured upheaval and the persistence of love across borders both physical and emotional. Gendry-Kim's story, like many told by survivors of division, turns silence into remembrance and remembrance into a quiet form of reconciliation.

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<sup>i</sup> Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 169–175.