



Curriculum Connections

Banned Book Club

By Kim Hyun Sook and Ryan Estrada

Illustrated by Hyung-Ju Ko

Iron Circus Comics, 2020

Non-Fiction, Set in Korea

2020 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Story Background:

The Banned Book Club recounts the experience of Kim Hyun Sook (pronounced: KIM hyuhn-suh), living under the military dictatorship in South Korea during the 1980s. This work of nonfiction is written in the style of *manhwa* (pronounced: mahn-hwa), South Korean comics (similar to Japanese *manga*). The book begins in 1983 when Hyun Sook is a first-year college student. She's been preparing for this day for some time, working long hours in her family's restaurant to save money for tuition, fighting with her mother, who is more traditional, about even attending college. She arrives on campus to find students protesting against the oppressive military regime that ruled South Korea throughout much of the 1980s. As the story continues, Hyun Sook highlights the precious value in examining art and literature, especially from Europe and the United States, as a means of enlightening political viewpoints. Hyun Sook joins a group that meets in secret to read and discuss banned books, many of which explore ideas about systems of government that are far different from the regime they are living under. Through these books and clandestine meetings, the students begin to form their own ideas about the future of the country they will inherit. The book club inspires the students to activism and helps solidify their role in ultimately toppling the military regime in favor of democracy in 1987. The book concludes with a flash forward to 2016, where we find Hyun Sook and her former classmates at a reunion. The reunion takes place at a protest against President Park Geun-hye (pronounced: PAHK goo-neigh) and not only illustrates the legacy of activism and protest that has continued in South Korea but also highlights the importance of finding community and support among fellow activists, as Hyun Sook did during her university years.





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Political Background

The Banned Book Club is a graphic novel about the military dictatorship in South Korea during the 1980s. After the Korean War, South Korea experienced a tumultuous period of student uprisings and unstable leadership until the election of Park Chung-hee (pronounced: PAHK juhng-he) in 1963. Park ruled during the Third and Fourth Republics; his leadership style was socially and politically repressive with some progress in economic growth. Park was assassinated in 1979, ultimately leading to a military dictatorship. Under this Fifth Republic, President Chun Doo-hwan (pronounced: CHUN do-whan) systematically oppressed any political opponents and restricted free speech. It is during this period that *The Banned Book Club* begins.

Notably, the author starts her story after the 1980 Gwangju Uprising (pronounced: gwahn-jew), a series of student-led demonstrations demanding free and open elections. Ultimately, President Chun instituted martial law to stop these protests; many student leaders were arrested, and anyone present near the protest sites was in danger of being beaten by soldiers ordered to clear the area. It is with this alarming experience that Hyun Sook enters the university. The memoir covers several possible discussion topics related to Korean culture: class disparities, political activism, and art as politics.

Class Disparities

Kim Hyun Sook is not a typical university student; she comes from a working-class family that sometimes struggles to see the value in a post-secondary education. Hyun Sook does not have much support from her mother, in particular. The Kim family owns a steak restaurant, and Hyun Sook's mother sees little to be gained in engaging with a university where students are protesting rather than studying; by contrast, she has worked hard to provide for her family with little education. This divide puts Hyun Sook in an awkward position between wanting to remain loyal to her family and seeking new opportunities. The second chapter, "Masked Folk Dance Team," further illustrates the class divide Hyun Sook experiences. She performs with her new dance team at the university, in a show that reflects the historical distance between the educated class known as the *yangban* (pronounced: yahng-bahn) and the majority of Koreans. The *yangban* in the show are devoured by a monster representing the working class.



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Similarly, Hyun Sook finds herself straddling the line between life at the university and her working-class family. This theme is revisited in the final chapter, “Class Reunion,” when Hyun Sook reunites with her university friends thirty-five years later, only to join a protest against then-president Park Geun-hye—the daughter of former president and dictator Park Chun-hee and a descendant of *yangban*. It seems that those who see themselves as elite or destined to rule Korea are still quite distant from the interests and needs of the Korean people.

Political Activism

At its heart, *The Banned Book Club* is a love letter to the student activists of the 1980s. Hyun Sook’s stories weave sentiments of the Gwangju Uprising into her own experiences with the banned book club she joins; students are portrayed as passionately devoted to their country. As various friends from the book club are targeted by police and interrogated, inspiration from books such as *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Motorcycle Diaries* by Che Guevara, and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan inspire the students to keep going despite their powerlessness in the face of authority. In the final chapter, the reunion of banned book club members concludes with a conversation in which Hyun Sook states, “People [must be] stubborn enough to fight for what’s right, even when no one’s listening...look for the truth, figure out what [you] believe, and stand up for it...[you] are not alone” (pg. 195). Political activism and the power of democratic ideals are essential to the university students’ experience in the 1980s and seem to have a lasting impact on political engagement in Korea as illustrated by the protests and subsequent impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in 2016.

Art as Politics

As the title suggests, *The Banned Book Club* places great value on the influence and impact of works of both fiction and non-fiction. The university students are forbidden from reading unapproved books, yet the banned book club acquires and reads such books despite the danger in being caught discussing ideas and actions against the government. At various points in the memoir, Hyun Sook refers to the impossibility of



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separating politics from the content of books or other art forms (“In times like this, no act is apolitical,” pg. 23). Throughout the memoir, Hyun Sook describes books (and eventually music, newspapers, and films) that she and her friends access illegally. In each resource, the group gains insights into political systems that the government has desperately tried to keep from its citizens.

Connections to Today

The book lends itself to contemporary issues such as public protest, democratic ideals, and student action. The Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 or the March for Our Lives demonstrations in 2022 provide excellent parallels to Hyun Sook’s story. Students can discuss the role of art as political activism in these contemporary movements as well as in Hyun Sook’s experiences. Likewise, the concept of free speech is relevant to the battles currently being fought in public schools and libraries across America (see <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>). What is the role that governmental figures play in regulating the information accessed by its citizens? What information should citizens be able to access? Presented alongside current events, this book could elicit valuable classroom discussions and debate.

Curriculum Connections

The Banned Book Club would be an excellent book or resource in the secondary classroom. Due to some violence and complex political themes, grades 7–12 would be most appropriate. Standards with connections to themes in *The Banned Book Club* include the following:

NCSS Standards:

Culture & Society: In a democratic and culturally diverse society, students will comprehend multiple perspectives that emerge from within their own culture and from the vantage points of the diverse cultural groups within that society.

Civic Ideals & Practices: Students will explore how individuals and institutions interact. They will also seek to understand different points of view and weigh the evidence used to support various perspectives. Students learn through active learning experience how



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to participate in community service and political activities and how to use democratic processes to influence public policy.

Common Core, ELA grades 7–12:

RI.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (for example, how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

RI11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (visually, quantitatively, etc.) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Recommended Resources

English Language Arts Standards, Reading: Informational Text, Grade 11–12." Common Core State Standards Initiative. Accessed May 12, 2022. https://www.marylandpublicschools.org/programs/Documents/ELA/Standards/Grades_9-12_MCCR_Standards.pdf

"National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Introduction." Social Studies. Accessed May 12, 2022. <https://www.socialstudies.org/standards/national-curriculum-standards-social-studies-introduction>.

Oberdorfer, Don, and Robert Carlin. *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*. New York: Basic Books, 2014.

Additional Pronunciation Notes

Family names are given first in this essay: Kim, Park

Kim = pronounced like the English name Kim

Hyun = barely pronounce the "h" and slide immediately to the "yuhn"

Sook = the "oo" is pronounced like "u" in "put" and the "k" is silent

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