



Black Flower

Young-Ha Kim , Charles La Shure (Translation)

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“Kim takes a small moment of Korean history . . . and transforms this moment into a powerful, sweeping epic that resonates across continents and oceans, bridging East and West . . . The scope and breadth of Kim’s talent is evident on every page of this breathtaking novel.” —*List*

In 1904, as the Russo-Japanese War deepened, Asia was parceled out to rising powers and the Korean empire was annexed by Japan. Facing war and the loss of their nation, more than a thousand Koreans left their homes to seek possibility elsewhere—in unknown Mexico.

After a long sea voyage, these emigrants—thieves and royals, priests and soldiers, orphans and entire families—disembark with the promise of land. Soon they discover the truth: they have been sold into indentured servitude.

Aboard ship, an orphan, Ijeong, fell in love with the daughter of a noble; separated when the various haciendados claim their laborers, he vows to find her. After years of working in the punishing heat of the henequen fields, the Koreans are caught in the midst of a Mexican revolution. Some flee with Ijeong to Guatemala, where they found a New Korea amid Mayan ruins.

A tale of star-crossed love, political turmoil, and the dangers of seeking freedom in a new world, *Black Flower* is an epic story based on a little-known moment in history.

Black Flower Details

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From Reader Review Black Flower for online ebook

Rana says

As a story, a novel, this falls pretty flat. Minimal character building, not much of a plot. As historical fiction, something attempting to impart info about a specific time and specific people, this is pretty good.

The jumping between people and skipping huge chunks of time all work to give a good overview. So, read this for the history and not the story. Think of it as a fictionalized Wikipedia page.

David Macarthur says

I *really* enjoyed this book. What a fantastically surprising historical eddy--unimaginably transformative for those who lived it. A gripping tale for the rest of us. The translation is imperceptibly excellent.

Yann says

La fleur noire, c'est le sisal, cette plante mexicaine que récoltent un millier de coréens émigrés au Yucatan au début du siècle dernier, alors qu'ils fuient les progrès de l'impérialisme Nippon. Séduits par le mirage d'une vie nouvelle et facile, ils vont déchanter face à la rudesse de la vie dans les haciendas. Bien que ce livre soit écrit dans un style un peu sec, que les clichés abondent, on est dépaysé par ce choc des cultures, et étonnés par cet épisode peu connu de l'histoire mondiale.

Renée says

First of all, I must say I love the front cover of the book, not necessarily because it looks Asian but because it is graphic, not photographic, as I deeply dislike the last mentioned and will keep complaining about it too. Photos distract from the content, make stories go blunt, whereas graphics or illustrations arouse the imagination.

So to move on....it took me a couple of pages to get into the story because there were so many characters introduced in the beginning. I did get into it though so much as to read the whole thing and somewhat like it. I particularly liked the way Yeonsun was described, may it be stereotypical I don't care and in general I liked the 'adventures' on sea and on the henequen fields.

I had some issues with the sudden violence and also sexual acts, exploding into your face, one doesn't get time to prepare for it. And maybe because these scenes lacked preparation I felt less empathetic towards the characters, had trouble understanding why they would act like that, although further on I could imagine it better because of the hopelessness of the situation of many.

I have flipped through some of the pages describing the historic backgrounds and battlefield bla bla, I am really, but I mean really bad in remembering historical facts and follow anything factual about war (before

you know it, I think I'm reading about Japan while I am reading about Korea or something else, completely clueless).. It's not really the fault of the writer I think, I just suck at it and my interest does not reach far so I did not learn anything basically.

I sometimes felt I had rather seen more of a focus on one or two characters and followed them on for a long time, it all seemed a bit random now and too many shifts in perspective, but interesting enough.

One more thing that surprised me was that when Iljeong had been battling for some years I started to feel a sort of loss of hope, innocence, for him. It was like I could imagine what it would be like to first have dreams about your future and spending it with someone else but getting so stuck in another lifestyle (and another country) that it becomes impossible to get out and you sort of end your days as a soldier, wherein basically your own life does not matter much anymore because you lost hope in a way or there is no perspective...damn it's sad. and maybe not at all what Il Jeong was up to, but this is where I ended up with anyway.

feux d'artifice says

interesting tidbit of history, terribly boring story

J.R. says

Fleeing the encroachment of Japan as it swallowed up the Korean Empire, a group of some thousand emigrants fell prey to a fantasy of land and hope in far off Mexico. This mix of rich and poor, thieves and aristocrats, priests and soldiers, only discovered they'd been sold into indentured slavery when they arrived in the Yucatan—a place totally unlike anything they'd imagined in their homeland.

Though the main focus of the plot is the experience of the small party of Koreans who journeyed to a foreign land where they encountered a culture clash and unanticipated hardships, it is also an exploration of diaspora in general.

Kim tells his story from a multitude of viewpoints, which may be a drawback for his American audience. I'm sure some readers would have preferred he stay with the story of the orphan Ijeong and his romance with Yeonsu, daughter of a noble, who dreamt of independence in a new land. Their tale is told, but it is only part of the wider story of the brave souls who interact in this epic account of an actual historical event.

The Koreans are a resilient people who have overcome oppression by the Japanese, Chinese, Russians and many other invaders over the centuries. This hardy band in Mexico exhibited that same tenacity and succeeded in finding their own place here despite the odds.

Having lived and worked in Korea and been married to a Korean I thought I was familiar with the history of the nation. This story was totally new to me and, as he reveals in an afterward, it was to Kim prior to a chance meeting which inspired the novel.

Kim, whose novel won Korea's prestigious Dong-in Literary Award in 2004, also explains the unusual title in that afterward, noting that black is a combination of all other colors and resembles the mixing of gender, race, status and religion of the various characters in the story.

Charles La Shure, the translator, holds an MA in classical Korean literature and is currently a professor at the Graduate School of Interpretation and Translation at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. In an interview in the Korea Herald, Kim said La Shure volunteered to do the translation after reading and falling in love with the story.

Stephen Douglas Rowland says

A brilliant, fascinating novel based on real, obscure events that I had never heard about or even considered. Kim's documentary, seemingly unorganized style and construction may be off-putting to some, but it drew me in. I've also read his novel "Your Republic Is Calling You," which is nothing like this one. Hard to believe the same author is responsible for both works. You can take or leave "Republic," but I strongly recommend "Black Flower."

M.M. Strawberry Reviews says

This book failed to resonate with me. I saw this for sale in the library, they were withdrawing a bunch of their books and replacing them with new titles, and I came across this. The summary seemed good to me and I thought hey, for a dollar, why not.

Was it worth it? Just barely. I learned some actual history, but the writer's storytelling left a hell of a lot to be desired. I had no feeling for the surroundings the Koreans found themselves in. The characters were flat, the narration sparse.

fallendevil17 says

Once again, another proof that wars indeed destroy people. I love the author's writing style - simple, descriptive, paints a vivid picture in readers' mind. I also love how he transitions one scene to another so smoothly.

Maybe because I'm not well-versed with Mexican history, I was lost among the revolutions and rebellions happening throughout the timeline. But still, I really appreciate the fact that the author had done his research thoroughly as he wrote this book.

It didn't really leave a deep impact but it was a good read :)

Christina says

3.5 stars. One reason I'm drawn to books in translation is authors set their characters and stories in times and places I'm not very knowledgeable of. Young-Ha Kim's novel is a great example of this. I had no idea Koreans were sold into servitude on Mexican haciendas around 1905 and enjoyed Kim's (fictional) exploration of this fact.

Tony says

I quite enjoyed Kim's previous novel in translation, *Your Republic is Calling You*, and eagerly picked this up as soon as I heard the premise. Following the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1905, a number Koreans emigrated to other countries, including more than 1,000 packed on the British steamer, *Ilford*. Having eagerly signed contracts with the Continental Colonization Company, they were bound for Mexico, where they believed high wages and a better life awaited them. (Several thousand Koreans came to Hawaii around the same time for the same reason.) However, the passage across the Pacific (which the first 1/4 of the book details) was their first hint that their new life might be harder than expected. Packed below decks in conditions only marginally better than an Atlantic slave ship from a century before, the Koreans underwent gruesome hardships. Once in Mexico, they were transported to the Yucatan and sold into indentured servitude on large henequen plantations or haciendas, to work alongside native Mayans.

Kim attempts to dramatize all this through the eyes of several fictional characters, including a poor teenage boy, a family of the royal clan (including a comely teenage daughter), various ex-soldiers, a thief, a former Catholic priest, a eunuch musician, and even a shaman. The short sections alternate among the characters, as the reader learns what drove them to the desperate decision to leave their homeland, and how their sense of social order is upended in their new circumstances. Although the book more or less makes the two teenagers and their love story its center, it suffers from too many shifts in perspective. This gets worse in the last third of the book, when he periodically leaves the Korean workers to zoom in on some diplomatic efforts being made on their behalf, as well as various Mexican aristocrats plotting during the Mexican Revolution.

These all feel like the mistakes of a writer trying historical fiction for the first time -- there's often the sense of research getting shoehorned in, simply because the author had facts at his disposal. Several times, the book totally grinds to a halt for an info-dump that reads like a cleaned-up Wikipedia entry (for example, the details of the henequen plant, or the background to the Mexican Revolution). It's a fascinating little historical episode, and Kim is very effective at portraying the suffering, but it never really worked for me. While it might be true that Koreans fought alongside Pancho Villa and Zapata, and founded the short-lived nation of New Korea in the jungles of Guatemala, those threads arrive so late in the book and are given so little space, that they are robbed of their potential. A fascinating piece of history, disappointingly told.

Irene says

I found it difficult to engross myself in this novel and read it straight through for two reasons. First, although the book is touted as "an epic story of star-crossed love" there is no main story or main characters. The narration's perspective switches back and forth between a dozen characters or so. Second, historical background is frequently and abruptly inserted into the story. I understand that the historical background is necessary to understand the environment the characters are living in. The way the history is shared with us,

however, reminds me of my grade school history books - dry, dull facts of names, dates, and places I have no knowledge of and very little interest in, except for how it affects the story. Every time I found myself becoming interested in a particular character's story, the perspective would change or a history lesson would occur, and I would have to abruptly switch my frame of my mind.

Having said all that, I did enjoy the book and found it interesting. I will probably try reading other books by the same author.

Bobby D says

This novel relates a little known true story that in 1905 some 1,000 plus Koreans boarded a British ship and sailed from Korea to Mexico ending up not in the new utopia they expected but instead being sold into four years of indentured servitude as field hands. They arrived in the Yucatan and were separated into groups sent to various large haciendas harvesting henequen (which was used to make robe). The journey and destination was both ugly and depressing as they left behind a Korea that had ceased to exist as it had been annexed by Japan. It was my interest in learning more about this history that drew me to choose this book.

The publisher in part is also marketing the book in part as "...an epic story of star-crossed love..." It is true that the book does have two young characters that meet ship board and a small part of the story follows their fate and separation. But this is not in any way a love story. The book is mainly a history lesson. Its multiple characters are interesting but lightly drawn and only provide the reader with a cross section of the 1,000 plus passengers. They are mainly a plot device in service to tell the history rather than their own stories. It is a question of emphasis. In my view the book is written as if it is non-fiction and has no real plot beyond the actual history of events. I did love the epilogue that brings the characters fate up to date but the novel has a lot of weaknesses that distract from a rave on my part. Mine is a guarded recommendation.

The biggest weakness is the writing style or maybe it is with the English translation from Korean. The book in the original Korean did win Korea's Dong-in Prize. The style when translated into English is a very simple journalistic offering of the facts and characters' actions. It's that these short declarative sentences don't flow or deliver any internal reasoning, emotion or visual sensory experience. I found the style takes some getting used to.

No doubt many people are going to give up on the book early and my only comment is to recommend one stays with it as you will be rewarded with some very interesting history of Mexico (some revolutions) and these Korean's who got swept up by history because they made a decision to seek a better life. Theirs is a story common to refugees who in this case thought they were sailing to freedom and bit of utopia. And some even formed a new country, New Korea on the Yucatan peninsula which became a little known fact of this tragedy.

Stephen says

In general, this story has been told before. In particular, author Young-Ha Kim had his reasons for retelling it in "Black Flower."

This is a tale of misbegotten folk who were sold a bill of goods about a rich land where they could elevate their lives, erase their present miseries, and live prosperously.

The author's interest here is in the plight of approximately 1,000 Koreans who fled their crumbling kingdom for Mexico in 1905.

After a harrowing three-month journey in which disease overtakes the boat, they are sold to various hacienda owners in the Yucatan Peninsula and bound to a four-year contract.

The group is dotted with aristocrats, thieves, farmers and anything else Korea was producing at the time. Kim (Young-Ha?) makes threads of certain passengers' stories in varying degrees of detail.

There's a young aristocratic women whose scent of deer roe blood drives the male passengers to distraction, the solitary teenage boy who falls in love with her, a common thief, a disgraced Catholic priest, the last eunuch to serve a Korean imperial court, a reticent shaman, and a slew of former soldiers.

Back-breaking toil for paltry wages spent at the company store, physical abuse, evisceration of their own beliefs by Catholic maniacs, and death for those who escape, are the unfortunate pilgrims' lot.

Young-Ha provides nice historical backdrops both to the simultaneous subjugation of their Korean homeland by Japan (so that they've no place to return to), and the Mexican revolution, which upends the henequen haciendas in which they work and absorbs them in its senseless cycles of murder.

Sent to differing haciendas, theirs is the progress of a mini-diaspora that ultimately extends from San Francisco to Guatemala. Few come out of their contracts with enough money to return home. Some open small shops in Mexican cities. Others marry their indigenous coworkers and begin melting into their new land.

Another band join Mayan revolutionaries in Guatemala and found the nation of New Korea in the tropical jungle. Spoiler alert: It doesn't go well for them.

According to the back cover of "Black Flower," Young-Ha Kim is a popular and respected writer in South Korea. He'd heard the inklings of this story about a boatload of Koreans who disappeared into the Mexican landscape and took on the job of recuperating their memory through this narrative dramatization of their star-crossed plight.

"While I was writing," Kim explains in the epilogue, "I thought of myself as a sort of shaman. The desires of those who had left for a distant place and been completely forgotten came to me like letters in bottles cast into the sea, and I believed that the emigrants directed me to write their stories."

The translation is a straight-ahead, serviceable English stripped of literary device and much poetry. It does not lag, nor get confusing, and successfully imparts an interesting history lesson, a portrait of human cruelty, and cautionary tale for utopian seekers.

Olga Kowalska (WielkiBuk) says

Very original and historically accurate story of a small group of Korean immigrants that on the beginning of

the 20th century ran from occupied Korea to Mexico. Almost incredible, mixing true facts with simple, emphatic prose it is a real treat for every reader who wants to experience something new and worth knowing.
