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SPECIAL SECTION: RESTLESS HISTORY

DIVIDED FAMILY

A Floating City on the Water

By Jang-Soon Sohn

Translated by Jin-Young Choi

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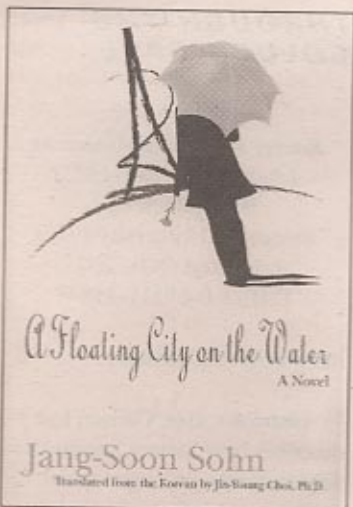
Review by Bill Drucker

A Floating City on the Water is a modern novel of unforeseen consequences and choices, revolving around how the impact of a divided Korea affects a family for three generations.

The most devastating event is the meeting of Sujin and Hansuk, two Korean students, in Paris. Sujin was raised in South Korea. Hansuk was born in North Korea. They fall in love but discover, too late, that they are blood siblings of the same parents. Sujin returns to Korea and raises their son, Hyungwoo, alone.

The story is told through the eyes of Sujin, a somber and resigned woman. Abandoned by her parents, she was raised by her uncle. Sujin carries the emotional baggage of her parents, who possibly were communists. In spite of her good education and the freedoms of a modern South Korean, she is a stifled, inward-looking creature, who seems unable to fully come to terms with her past, or to make a fulfilling life for herself. The time abroad in Paris could have been the liberating, romantic point of her life, but it is not. Sujin remains the sad Korean wherever she is.

Hansuk, the North Korean, fully exploits the open society of Paris. So does Sujin's cousin and best friend, Susie, who takes in the best of Korean and European ways.



Through several examples, Sujin's character appears flawed. For example, she debates with herself about having an abortion or having the child. She decides against abortion, but once her child is born, Sujin has no maternal feelings for her son. Instead, she repeats the abandonment pattern begun by her mother by transferring her son Hyungwoo's upbringing to aunts and uncles. Sujin expresses no deep angst in this action.

When she meets her mother and discovers the true relationship between Hansuk and her, the realization releases a rare anger in Sujin. She burns all bridges to her mother, and might have gone into a complete self-exile if not for Hansuk's continued persistence.

A Floating City on the Water is about personal liberation and reconciliation. Jang-Soon Sohn skillfully covers several mature themes. Incest is never addressed as a horrific vehicle for moral or social ax grinding. It is not a Christian or intellectual sin. The child of the illicit affair bears no mark of shame, physical or mental. When Hyungwoo discovers the truth of his parents, he is not repelled but glad that the truth is finally revealed. Rather, he is portrayed as the first in this family to be liberated, free to live his life as he chooses.

The background of the story is based on the author's own studies and time spent in Paris. Paris, the City of Lights, is the famous Mecca for Asians and Americans, political exiles, poets, artists, and writers. Fitzgerald, Hemingway lived and worked there, as well as Ho Chi Minh. In addition to the interpersonal story, Sohn's tale is also a portrayal of a place where both Easterners and Westerners have exiled themselves to think and remake themselves in a new culture.