

History As Literature, Literature As History

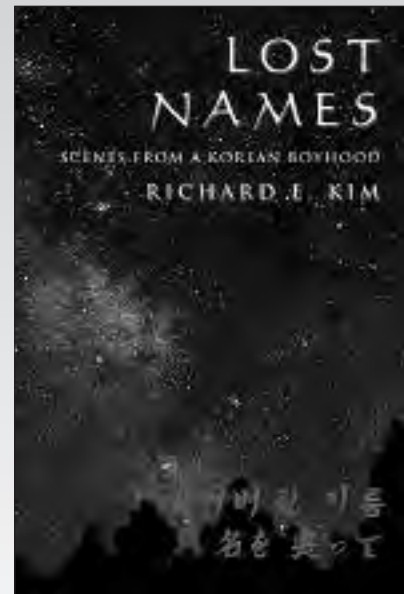
Lost Names: Scenes From a Korean Boyhood

By Richard E. Kim (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998). 196 pages

Lost Names is a useful, rare, and wonderful book for several reasons. The book's title reflects the Japanese Pacific War policy of forcing Koreans to replace their own names with Japanese ones. *Lost Names* is the story, as recounted by a young boy, of one Korean family's experience during the war years. Although *Lost Names* is technically a novel, according to author Richard Kim, ". . . all the characters and events described in the book are real, but everything else is fiction." Never in my time in Asian Studies has one work been so applicable to such a wide range of students as is the case with *Lost Names*.

In the pages that follow, we feature an interview by EAA editorial board member Kathy Masalski with Richard E. Kim and essays by a junior high, senior high school, and university instructor on how they have used *Lost Names* as a highly effective teaching tool. We sincerely hope this special feature encourages teachers at all levels to read *Lost Names* and consider using it with students.

Lucien Ellington



Kathleen Woods Masalski — I first met Richard Kim in 1994 when I asked him to speak at a National Endowment for the Humanities summer institute on the War in the Pacific. The audience responded so well that I invited him to speak at several other summer institutes sponsored by the Five College Center for East Asian Studies. After reading Peter Wright's, Susan Mastro's, and Dick Minear's essays about their teaching of *Lost Names*, I asked Lucien if he would be interested in an interview with Kim. Lucien had read the book and read the essays (Kim did not ask to see them before publication), and urged me to proceed. Kim agreed to get together with me on May 18 in Amherst, Massachusetts.

I presented him with a list of questions that I had prepared. The interview lasted three hours; I took copious notes and wrote them up immediately afterward. Although I suggested that he edit the final interview, Kim declined. What follows are selected passages from our discussion that afternoon.

I should note that I approach *Lost Names* as history, and my questions reflect my background as a history teacher. An English teacher would have asked different questions. *Lost Names* is first and foremost creative writing. Social studies teachers may well wish to introduce the book to their colleagues in the English or Language Arts departments.

MASALSKI: *One question the audience always has about Lost Names is whether it is fiction or nonfiction. Do you really intend to tell readers that nothing in Lost Names is "factual" or "historical"? How much of what is in it actually happened? How much actually happened to you?*

KIM: Everything in the book actually happened. It happened to me. So why am I always insisting it's not autobiographical? I think because of the way I used the things that actually hap-

pened. You have to arrange them, mix them up. Above all, it's interpretation of facts, of actual events—some thirty or forty years later. For example, when "the boy" gets beaten, what went through his mind? We don't know. . . . even I don't know. I like to separate the actual events from the emotional, the psychological. One shouldn't confuse the actual events with the inner events. That's where a lot of beginning writers make a big

mistake. A lot think everything is exactly as it happened; but we put our own interpretation on events. I didn't invent any actual events. . . . but everything else is fiction. That is very important to me.

MASALSKI: *When you wrote the book in 1970, how did you go about gathering evidence? Or didn't you?*

KIM: I didn't have to gather much. I made a chronology of actual political events and a chronology of events in

my life. Then I rearranged . . . I had to rearrange the events in my life. I think that the private events happened at the time [I described them] . . . but maybe not. The big world events happened . . . [the question was] how to bring them together . . .

The original plan for this book was different from what it turned out to be. Praeger planned a series of books on different countries, Japan, China, India, Korea, etc. to introduce these countries to American children. I decided to introduce Korea through family life. As soon as I started writing, the book took on a different life. I called my editor and said, "I can't do it the way it was planned." She said, "What is your idea for the book?" and I said I didn't know. She said, "Let it loose, let it go." I had already listed many details, for example, what we typically ate for breakfast, because I was using that information to introduce what Koreans eat. When I finished writing (it took me only three months), we took a look at the manuscript. It was not what the editors had in mind, but they liked it. They took the work out of the country series and decided to publish it separately. But, they wondered, how should they treat it? They sent the manuscript to Pearl Buck, and she praised it as a novel. But Praeger didn't want a novel. So they convinced her to call it something else. [She called it "the best piece of creative writing I have read about Korea."] So Praeger decided to just get it out . . . to let others decide. And the reviews were good. [Edward] Seidensticker reviewed it for the *New York Times* and Praeger breathed a sigh of relief.

MASALSKI: *You were a boy of thirteen or fourteen when the book—and the war—ended. What do you remember of your feelings then? Now, fifty-plus years later, how have your feelings changed?*

KIM: I don't feel differently about things today. I feel the same as when they happened. My father was in a detention camp, so I didn't jump up and down for joy. Rather, I felt that



Richard Kim

finally it's happened. Something that should have happened happened.

I didn't have feelings of hatred for the Japanese. My feelings were more of contempt. I despised, had contempt for [them]. . . . In a perverse sort of way, I had a feeling of superiority. It was a defense mechanism to think, "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do." This may be a cultural, a class thing. I felt the Japanese were not to be trusted or respected. It might have been different in Seoul, but not in my small town. The Japanese we dealt with were not very good. After all, who would go to a dinky town, a dinky province, if they had a choice?

I [didn't] think of the Korean characters as saintly, but as ordinary. In those days there was no room for cynicism. Everything seemed clear cut. We knew where we were and where we stood. Today is different; I don't know where I stand. I don't know what to think. . . . in those days I knew. Them and us. Cynicism comes from self-doubt. There was no room for that sort of thing.

When the Japanese priest and his wife [who lived nearby] came [when the end of the war was announced] and begged that we protect them, my grandfather didn't know what to do. . . . I didn't know what to do. . . . We went

back to the source of authority. . . . do what your father would have done. The tenant farmer, too, kept telling me that my father would have protected them. . . .

Actually, my father was a saint. I wrote an inscription on his gravestone, "He was a good man and just." He was like that—truly. I never heard him say anything bad about anyone. I never saw him enraged. I'm not like him. . . . He had a great capacity for suppressing his feelings; he was patient.

If I had been exposed to constant hatred at home, maybe I would have felt differently about Japan and the Japanese. But I wasn't. Grandfather never said much. And I never heard my father say nasty things verbally. We thought, they're bad ones. . . . so why should we waste our time talking about them. . . .

MASALSKI: *What difference to Lost Names does it make that you and your family were well-to-do and Christian?*

KIM: This is a very important question. We were upper-middle class, the town's elite. The Japanese who were there were not. We saw them as men who couldn't get jobs in Tokyo. "Why are they here?" we asked ourselves. As colonizers, they were supposed to be better than the colonized, but a lot of Japanese were simply not that great. It's a cultural, a class thing. I didn't hate them. They were like dangerous dogs to be avoided.

Although we were not that wealthy, we were reasonably well-to-do. In those days we were made to look upper class because we went to college. The Christian thing is tricky. I've been thinking about it. Some really well-to-do Koreans, especially in the South—even among my generation—sometimes the Japanese treated them like upper class, with kid gloves. Made them feel better, like the aristocracy, the ruling class, the landlord class. Made them feel as if they were treated with respect. To this day I know people with backgrounds like this who are without anti-Japanese feelings.

The lower classes—what did they

care if they were governed by the Japanese or a Korean dynasty? They were treated the same. My grandfather told me that one time, when he witnessed royalty passing by, he saw someone miserably beaten because he didn't bow low enough. And he (my grandfather) felt that when the dynasty perished, well, it served the royalty right.

I don't know how much of a sense of nationalism existed at the time of Japanese annexation. As long as the upper classes kept their money and status, and as long as the Japanese left them alone, what difference did it make? And what difference did it make to the peasants—both Korean royalty and the Japanese took eighty percent of their crops, regardless. If the Japanese had been victorious, if the war had lasted another four or five years, maybe most Koreans would have become "Japanized."

I think it was the middle class, the upper-middle class who were affected most by the war. That group produced more educated people, those with expanded consciousness.

To the Japanese, the Christians were the ones with the most connections with the West—simply because they were Christians. They were therefore characterized as outsiders, as dangerous. They were an important minority because they were upper-middle class. They sent their sons to schools and colleges. So as a group they were more conscious of national identity. I don't think the upper or lower classes thought about nationalism or independence, but I really don't know. The early uprisings were not organized by the upper classes. In those days [during the war], memories were fresh. Twenty-thirty years later, I don't know. . . .

Belonging to that class and being Christian made all the difference. We were more aware of where we belonged. I grew up thinking we were a little different. *Lost Names* would be a different book if it were written by someone else at the same time but in a

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different class and in a different place.

The book is not representative of "the Korean experience." I was a marked boy. Somehow the village had voted me most likely to succeed, because I was my father's son. My grandfather, the minister, was one of the best-known leaders of the Christian community. Most Christians knew my grandfather's name. The first day back in a Korean school, things were very tense for me. My parents wondered, how would he (I) be received—both by the Japanese and the town's kids. I always had to be conscious of what I was. The key was "do not disgrace the family."

MASALSKI: *In your opinion, has the Japanese government apologized to the Korean people for its treatment of them during the occupation period?*

KIM: I'm not so sure they've apologized. Regret, maybe. But that's beside the point. I don't really care if any government apologizes. It's probably a political thing, anyway. It seems to me that Asians are less capable than Europeans of accepting collective responsibility for their actions. Maybe the Judeo-Christian culture has more possibilities for atonement and redemption. Not so true for Asians. Why is it so difficult for Asians or Koreans to say we are all guilty? We tend to say, "I didn't do it."

MASALSKI: *The title of the book is problematic—in all three languages. Why did you choose it? What was your intent?*

KIM: I loved the word "lost" and all the things that it conjures up, especially in English. *Paradise Lost*. Lost is almost damned. . . . almost sinful. Lost Souls (which was at one point my working title). I like "lost" because it has a lot to do with my sense of my generation. Kind of like I am now. I don't belong. Born in Korea. Moved to Manchuria. Back to the north [Korea]. Then to South Korea. Didn't belong either place. Then to the military, where I didn't belong. To here. For awhile I thought about it, then I gave up thinking about it, for it's not important. Especially my generation of Koreans happened to be between periods. . . . Japanese occupation . . . a little of that . . . then the country was divided. . . . then exodus . . . lost again. Led a refugee's life . . . lost again . . . then ended up here in god-forsaken Shutesbury with a name like Richard. . . .

My college dean in this country thought that other students would have difficulty pronouncing my Korean name, so we looked at names in a telephone book. I chose Richard because I knew of Richard the Lion-Hearted. I finally had it legalized. I like to think it fits with my character . . . it's how I think of myself. I'm lost, lost between two cultures, two worlds, neither North or South Korea, not Korean or American. I felt that way always, even as a little kid. I couldn't even sing Korean songs. . . .

This has been one of my missions in life, to teach Koreans to accept responsibility for their lives, to stop blaming others, the Japanese, the Chinese. We lost it. . . . but many Koreans would like to think someone grabbed it. . . . thinking this justifies hatred. I've often said that Koreans need a national psychotherapy session, a large couch. Why are we as we are, why is self-examination such a rare commodity in Korean life?

Koreans are so good about blaming others . . . they know so little about what they have done. They lack a collective sense of guilt or action.

Koreans can't say we were careless, we dropped our names, and someone else picked them up and took them away. What the Japanese did was terrible—perhaps more stupid than terrible. How can such smart people do such dumb things? Didn't they see that what they did would cause more resentment?

MASALSKI: *One of the most important scenes in the book takes place in a graveyard, where all your known ancestors are buried. You, your grandfather, and your father visit that burial ground after the Japanese have given you new names, Japanese names. Your grandfather says, "We are a disgrace to our family. We bring disgrace and humiliation to your name. How can you forgive us?" He and your father bow, their tears flowing (p. 111). . . . Will you explain that scene?*

KIM: My father felt that his generation had failed. (Maybe that's why there isn't naked hatred of the Japanese.) The kind of man he was resulted in his asking, "What have we done? How could we have allowed this to happen?" I don't think he blamed grandfather's generation. My father had a perfect right to fly into a rage, but there was none of that. "The important thing," my father said, "is now how can we deal with this? Someday your generation will forgive us." Why otherwise would he have taken me to the graveyard where he and my grandfather asked their ancestors to forgive them? He was almost telling me that one day we would have to forgive his generation.

MASALSKI: *Were you surprised by the book's reception? By the way readers (then and now) interpret it? Is there a difference?*

KIM: It has been a surprise. It's especially a great honor to find it's read in so many schools. I really feel good about that. I have no way of influencing how readers take it, however. One exception I take is to anyone who says

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I wrote it quickly—between books. I had some legal problems with my second book and decided to do something with the Praeger series. It started out as one thing and ended up another. So I was very surprised.

MASALSKI: *When they finish reading Lost Names, how do you want readers to feel toward the characters and the countries represented?*

KIM: When I wrote the book, I didn't feel that I wanted the reader to feel this way or that. I really didn't think about writing for a foreign audience. I never thought about any audience, in fact.

MASALSKI: *What led to the rebirth of Lost Names? How much did the 50th anniversary of World War II have to do with it?*

KIM: I was willing to let it go, but the time came when Asian studies programs here and there realized that there's not enough material around. The talk was taken up on the Internet, and there you are. I don't think it had anything to do with the anniversary of the war.

MASALSKI: *What do you think the book has become?*

KIM: I don't know. A textbook. I'll tell you . . . when *The Martyred* came out, the *New York Times* reviewer said it

would last. . . . When I finished *Lost Names*, I didn't think it was in the same class as *The Martyred*, but I said to my wife, Penny, this is an exquisite piece, a small jewel. Because that was how I felt. It was hard to find fault with the book. The technique, the language: granted that the author was biased, prejudiced . . . I felt it was nice, not grand, not big (*The Martyred* was), but nice. I felt good, really good about it.

I don't know. . . . maybe it [the book] will last. If it does, it's only because people will look at it [in a larger context?] . . . if it were only a picture of a family. . . . I don't know, maybe there's something more to it than a family and a family's survival.

MASALSKI: *If you were teaching in a college, high school, or junior high/middle school classroom today, how would you "teach" the book?*

KIM: I would stress that they shouldn't read this book as issue-oriented, as anti-Japanese or anti-colonial. I would ask that they [teachers and students] observe and understand how a family, both in private and in times of war, copes with war and with one another. I know you think the characters are almost too good to be true, but we really were good. We never fought. My parents never exchanged harsh words.

My grandparents were patient souls. It may have to do with the culture thing. . . . They had humble beginnings. . . . didn't have the "more sinned against than sinning" attitude . . . they didn't feel wronged; they were always grateful for what they had. I think I have that. I'm so grateful every time I go into a grocery store that I am able to pick from the shelves that which I want. . . .

My grandmother was tough. . . . grandfather was saintly. They didn't talk that much. I'm different. I'm told that on the second day of Kindergarten I didn't like school so I stopped going. I left the house every morning and hid. No one knew until the school came looking. I never went back. . . . I'm different. . . .

MASALSKI: *At every one of our summer institutes, teachers have brought up the incident in Lost Names that involves rubber balls. The chapter, "An Empire for Rubber Balls," presents such an engaging, dramatic scene. When the Japanese Empire was at its height, the Japanese distributed rubber balls to all children. But after the tide turned for Japan, they wanted them back. As class leader, the boy was responsible for collecting the balls. He pricked them in order to fit them into a container, and the teacher beat him severely. What is the message here, the lesson?*

KIM: The Japanese really wanted the balls back. And here is the irony of the situation. My grandmother, in her peasant wisdom, came up with the idea of pricking holes in them. I think the Japanese assumed that the boy's father had influenced him. It was not so . . . the incident happened. . . . I was beaten pretty badly. . . . I don't remember all the details . . . for example, there was a Korean policeman, but I don't think he intervened. . . . this is where the fiction comes in. . . . I brought him into the story.

That's the fun part of a book like this. . . . taking fact and fiction and mixing them together. I don't know what my mother said in certain situations, but I'd make what she said sound good in certain situations. The momentum creates the situation. . . . dialogue comes out . . . you can't plan every dialogue. I would call my mother up (when I was writing the book) and say guess what you said today, and she would ask, "did I really say that?"

"There is no nobility in pain; there is only degradation" (p. 134). This was an unusual thing for me to say. It's not Christian, but . . . the truth is, for most people a beating is a beating. I remember my father was held upside down from the ceiling, not by the Japanese, but by a Korean who was working for American intelligence. (This took place in South Korea after the family moved from the north to the south.) He was picked up in 1946,

'47, '48. . . . a Korean detective working for the Americans brought him in, saying he was a communist spy sent by the north Koreans. They held him upside down and pulled all his hair out. (In the Japanese prison earlier, the Japanese shaved his head every day. . . . he said that was so painful. . . .) The Americans held him until something happened that proved he was not a spy. When I arrived in the south, I found him and spoke with a Korean American in intelligence. When my father was released, I shouted, "Someday I'll kill all you Americans." This was so difficult for me. . . . the Americans had come as our liberators. . . .

MASALSKI: *Which incident/passage in the book lends itself to teaching, or presents an "ideal" teaching situation?*

KIM: I don't know about teaching it, but my favorite scene in the book is in "Once upon a Time, on a Sunday." . . . They come home, finally, and the boy is outside the cottage with paper screen (*shōji*) for windows; the light inside glows, and the boy is looking up. . . . and this is fact and fiction . . . being so afraid of the dark, but suddenly with a sense of the insignificance of things . . . of his minute existence . . . and yet we were killing each other. . . . the sudden ludicrousness of being in a vast universe. That day we had studied with the map in the classroom. . . . and the day ended with the entire universe in the dark. . . . I felt some kind of fear, a primordial fear drove me into the cottage. Mom, Dad, and light were there in the face of this primordial fear of the vast unknown. And what was there to protect me was the family.

I like that one-page scene because it suggests the possibility for the mind and the view of this boy. . . . the scene is so commonplace, the beautiful stars, a conventional thing . . . why be terrified of that when everyone else sees something beautiful, awesome. . . . What is there to terrify him . . . something scary out there? Something terrifying out there—all this is

going on out there—war, nationalism, colonialism—it's all so insignificant.

Maybe in a sense that's what I think today, having gone through colonial life, war which consumed my youthful existence . . . and defined everything for me . . . now is so insignificant . . . in the twilight of my life. Really, what we think is so earth-shaking turns out in the end to be so insignificant. . . . ■

RICHARD E. KIM was born in Korea and has lived in the U.S. much of his adult life. He was educated at Middlebury College, Johns Hopkins University, the State University of Iowa, and Harvard. Richard Kim has taught at several universities in the U.S. and, as a Fulbright Scholar, at Seoul National University in Korea. In addition to *Lost Names*, he is the author of several books including *The Innocent* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) and *The Martyred* (New York: George Brassiller, 1964). He has also scripted and narrated several documentaries for KBS-TV in Seoul.

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