

Until American students see how these values work in everyday life, it is hard for them to understand how anything but being a “rugged individualist” can be a good way of life. When, in chapter three, the boy challenges a classmate to a race, knowing the classmate will win, students can see that losing can be a different kind of victory. From reading this novel students can begin to develop an understanding of the tragedy of war in general and civil war in particular. In addition, they can vicariously experience the triumph of the human spirit, something common to all mankind.

At the end of last school year, when I asked which works in the curriculum should be taught again and which replaced, there was a great outcry for the continued inclusion of *Lost Names*. For further information, see *Teaching More about Korea: Lessons for Students in Grades K-12*. The lesson plans are published by

The Korea Society as an outcome of the Tenth Annual Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies Program. The booklet includes “A Study Guide for *Lost Names* and Discussion Questions for Various Short Stories,” all by Korean authors. For more information about the publication, contact Yong Jin Choi, Director, Korean Studies Program, The Korea Society, 950 Third Avenue, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10022; phone: (212) 759-7525, ext. 25. ■

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Lost Names, Master Narratives, and Messy History

By Richard H. Minear

“**P**roblematize the master narrative!” These were the words some years ago at an NEH summer institute for teachers. The speaker’s language wasn’t mine then (it is now), but I realized that that’s what I’d been doing in my teaching for years: making an issue of the dominant interpretation (usually that of a textbook). It is what more of us need to focus on, at all levels and in all subjects. Textbooks are always wrong. History is never simple.

As a professor of Japanese history at a major state university, I have the luxury of teaching a full-semester survey course on Japan (History of Japanese Civilization). It is in this course that for many years now I have used Richard Kim’s *Lost Names*. (Just before the first edition went out of print, I was able to buy forty copies, so that *Lost Names* lived on in my course even though it was out of print.) So let me describe the course. There are forty-five students of various rank, freshman through senior; and the class meets three times per week. Two meetings per week are lectures, films, or other activities; one meeting per week is a discussion. I lead all the discussions. One of the concerns throughout the course is the relation between author and material (study the historian), and the syllabus carries biographical data on all authors we encounter, including both me and Richard Kim. I have as well the advantage of having been present twice in the last five years when Kim discussed *Lost Names* with groups of teachers.

The latter half of my course, roughly, is Japan since 1800. Because I dislike textbooks, I assign a non-textbook, Ienaga Saburo’s *The Pacific War*, and then spend much of my time disagreeing with it. My lecture presentations take issue with Ienaga, and for the final paper the students have to compare and contrast Ienaga and Minear. The next-to-last paper concerns *Lost Names*.

The *Lost Names* paper focuses on ethnocentrism in the Japanese treatment of their Korean subjects (*Lost Names* is the



students’ only source) and on how to evaluate the evidence Kim presents. *Lost Names* is not a history book; but how do we process the information Kim offers? Students find the first part of the paper—how ethnocentrism affects the narrator and his family and the Japanese officials—very easy and the second part very difficult. The sheer power of Kim’s prose makes it difficult for them to step back and criticize—even though this is late in the course and we have been criticizing sources all semester.

But close reading and criticism are what the course is about, and despite the fact that many students complain that *Lost Names* is all they know about the subject, I insist that they can and must *criticize*. It is not a matter of liking the book or not liking the book; with rare exceptions, students are bowled over by it. It is a matter of processing the material.

So where to begin? As always, with the author’s biography. Clearly, the narrator’s life and Kim’s overlap. But how do we deal with autobiography? What are the advantages and disadvantages of hearing things “straight from the horse’s mouth”? Some students find it impossible to believe that the narrator was so utterly invincible, so right in all the major choices he makes. The “Author’s Note” at the end of the new edition states artfully (too artfully?), “Perhaps I should have included a disclaimer [in the first edition]: all the characters and events described in this book are real, but everything else is fiction. . . . It is for me a happy predicament. On the one hand, a book I created as fiction is not accepted as such. . . .” In sessions with teachers, Kim has come close to stating that things happened essentially as he recounts them in the book, except that he combined events from separate days into one day or changed a daytime event to nighttime.

At war’s end, Kim the author is thirteen years old, the age of the narrator. But Kim wrote *Lost Names* twenty-five years later, in 1970, when Kim the author was thirty-eight. Between 1945 and

1970 Kim had continued his education in Korea, fought in the Korean War (on the side of South Korea), attended Middlebury College, and written several novels about the Korean War; in 1970 he was teaching in the English Department at the University of Massachusetts (he wrote *Lost Names* in English). What is the relation between Kim in 1970 and the narrator in 1933 or 1940 or 1945? That is a real question.

Most if not all students note that Kim the author cannot have remembered the scenes from 1933, at the beginning of *Lost Names*. After all, he is a baby in his mother's arms. Fewer raise questions about the scenes of 1940 (the loss of names, when author Kim was eight years old) or 1945 (the liberation, when author Kim was thirteen). *Lost Names* is seductive in part because it purports to be a child's recollection, but are we reading the thoughts of an eight-year-old Korean schoolkid (1940) or the thoughts of a war-hardened and cross-culturally sophisticated 38-year-old (1970)? At the end of the "Lost Names" chapter, the narrator speaks: "Their pitifulness, their weakness, their self-lacerating lamentation for their ruin and their misfortune repulse me and infuriate me. What are we doing anyway—kneeling down and bowing our heads in front of all those graves? I am gripped by the same outrage and revolt I felt at the Japanese shrine, where, whipped by the biting snow and mocked by the howling wind, I stood, like an idiot, bowing my head to the gods and the spirit of the Japanese Emperor." Are these the words of an eight-year-old? Fortunately, some students have a family member or know a neighbor of that age.

If the thoughts are, in part at least, the thoughts of a 38-year-old, what were the influences on him? When teachers asked author Kim about favorite reading when he was young, he mentioned the great Russian novelists (in Japanese translation). Is Kim's narrator perhaps part Tolstoyan hero?

Is the narrator's experience representative of the Korean experience? *Lost Names* is useful in my course in part because much of what the students hear from me (especially in contrast with Ienaga's book) is sympathetic to the Japanese—not in their treatment of Koreans but in relation to their struggle with American power. To hear a Korean viewpoint is enormously useful. But is Kim's viewpoint *the* Korean viewpoint or *a* Korean viewpoint? This is a tougher issue for students, but some acknowledge that the narrator and his family are exceptional in terms of wealth, prestige, nationalistic activity and religion, that one of the narrator's classmates—Pumpkin, for example—might have written a very different book. On occasion I have given them a quotation from an essay by Bruce Cumings to underline the point that not all Koreans think alike. Speaking in 1950, a Korean industrialist commented that the return to Korea after the war of "numerous revolutionists and nationalists" had stirred up anti-Japanese feeling, but today "there is hardly any trace of it." Korea and Japan "are destined to go hand-in-hand, to live and let live," so bad feelings should be "cast overboard." Today "an economic unity is lacking whereas in prewar days Japan, Manchuria, Korea and Taiwan economically combined to make an organic whole."

Almost to a person, the students are appalled at the Japanese treatment of the Koreans that *Lost Names* describes. It reinforces what they read in Ienaga, and I offer them no contrary evidence.

(A former colleague of mine, growing up on Taiwan at the same time, was sure at the end of the war that he was Japanese, not Chinese. Was Japanese colonialism the same everywhere and for every person subject to it? That is material for an entire course.) Could *Lost Names* happen only in Korea, or are there echoes in the histories of other countries, perhaps even our own? This is a tough one. A number of students come up with Ellis Island and the changing of names; but that was by and large voluntary—a simplification, not the forced purging of a past. A very few mention the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the schools it ran, which outlawed the use of native languages and insisted on "Christian" names. These events do not excuse the Japanese acts we read about in *Lost Names*, but they provide a context that the book does not.

We do not discuss *Lost Names* in class; the students read it on their own. Here are excerpts from two papers from Fall 1998 (I have made no changes):

Lost Names is a work of fiction, and it can not be construed otherwise. . . . [t]he narrator's family counters each insult from the Japanese in a glorious manner, which gives the story an element of unrealistic magnificence often found in fiction. . . . Events described in the book may have happened to Koreans, but it is implausible to have one family continually shake the foundations of Japanese occupation in one town without being ousted or "disappeared"—especially when the Thought Police knew the narrator's father organized a resistance in the past. The story is perfect. It was obvious that the narrator would save the Japanese Shinto priest—everything falls into place, and the family reclaims their dignity at every step. But these elements exist only in fiction.

—a junior majoring in History

Kim did not write Lost Names as a journal, as events happened. Instead he wrote the story when he was in his late 30's as a subjective reflection on what happened. The story was subjected to his experience and his views of the occupation and later events that shaped his life.

—a sophomore majoring in Political Science

It was clear from both their papers that *Lost Names* had moved these students, but they had been able to keep their critical faculties intact. And that, I suggest, should be one major goal of our teaching.

Lost Names is a work of high art. It deserves the most serious consideration. In my course, we use it in significant measure to problematize the Japanese master narrative. But just as there are American and Japanese master narratives, so there is a Korean master narrative. We need to be as leery of the Korean master narrative as of the other two. We may not know much about Korea, but there, too, we need to problematize the master narrative. ■

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