

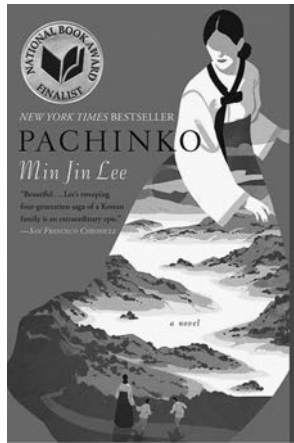
## Pachinko

BY MIN JIN LEE

NEW YORK: GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING, 2017

512 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1455563920, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Charles Newell



**P**achinko, a game of chance not skill, is a rather curious Japanese amusement. It can best be described as a combination of pinball and a slot machine. Players purchase small silver balls that they drop or launch into the vertical pachinko machine. The balls bounce off pins and bumpers, and players hope the balls land in cups or slots that will win them prizes or money. However, the game usually ends with the balls dropping out the bottom of the machine, lost to the player forever.

The game is tilted toward the house. Most players lose, but they keep playing thinking they will be the one to strike it

rich. This form of gambling has been popular in Japan for almost 100 years. But oddly enough, the majority of pachinko parlors are run by ethnic Koreans. The Japanese refer to them as *zainichi*, literally meaning “foreign visitors staying in Japan.” These oppressed minority members, the subject of Lee’s novel, are the descendants of people who came to Japan during the colonial period.

These Japanese–Koreans have a long and complicated history with their former colonial overlords. And in many ways, the game of pachinko is an accurate metaphor for their experience. Like the pachinko balls themselves, the many generations of the Korean family in the novel bounce off the pins and bumpers of life, without much say in the direction of their lives. Forces like colonization, World War II, wealthy gangsters, and a prejudiced Japanese society exert control over the characters’ fates. They are all left to circumstances beyond their control as they try to scratch out an existence in a country that sees Koreans as dirty criminals not worthy of any status in society. Even when some later generations of the family become wealthy and successful, they are never truly part of Japanese society. By the end of the novel, it becomes apparent why the pachinko business is run by Koreans. The Japanese themselves see it as a shadowy enterprise often linked to *yakuza* (gangsters). Thus, it is often the only place outsiders can find a toehold to earn a livelihood.

This novel covers some familiar territory for those who have read about and studied the Korean peninsula. Lee shows the scope of twentieth-century Korean history: the colonization by Japan, World War II, the Korean War, and the current partition of the two Koreas. However, Lee’s novel brings a unique perspective because, for the majority of the novel, her Korean characters are living in Japan. Their lives are certainly affected by these global events, but the historical context remains on the periphery. The real driving force of the plot is a family’s will to survive in a country often hostile to their very existence. The opening chapters begin in 1910 in a small fishing village in the south of Korea, and the book ends in Tokyo in 1989. Like many novels dealing with the modern world, the reader can see a great change in the culture and the behavior of the characters in a relatively short timespan. Thus, a major theme in the novel is how these characters from a traditional culture deal with the demands of the

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modern world that reject tradition for immediacy. Should tradition and family values be ignored for survival and success? This question runs as an undercurrent throughout the novel. This burden/question falls most heavily on the women in the family, who are the keepers and sustainers of family life and culture.

Despite its focus on modern themes, such as the destruction of traditional values, this novel is written in a very conventional and linear narrative style. Each chapter of the novel is a sort of vignette of a character’s life at a moment in time. To cover a seventy-nine-year time period, Lee often skips years ahead from one chapter to the next, focusing on the next major conflict in a character’s path. And though later in the novel Lee often jumps from one character to another in successive chapters, the forward-moving chronology is never broken.

This traditional concept of the novel is reflected in Noa, one of the main Korean characters. He rises above his humble origins and attends a top Japanese university in Tokyo. There, he studies English literature and reads the great Victorian novels of the previous century. He devours the novels of Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Jane Austen, etc. Lee’s novel, in many ways, is a reflection of these sprawling nineteenth-century novels that deal with family drama, romance, and a quest for a proper place in society. And like many of those Victorian heroes and heroines, tragedies befall many of the characters as they try to reach beyond what society will allow them. While Dickens seems to be Noa’s favorite author, the downfall of many of the book’s characters reminds one of the bleak novels of Thomas Hardy. The characters in this novel are neither Japanese nor Korean. They are not accepted in their current country and would be rejected or looked down upon if they tried to return to the homeland of their ancestors. There is no place for these *zainichi*. Their downfall is certain and inevitable.

Despite its very Korean subject matter based on broad historical events, don’t expect to use this novel as a launching point to discuss the two Koreas and how the peninsula came to be divided. It would not be a good text to broach the subject of reunification or denuclearization, even though those are the first things that come to mind when Korea is mentioned today. And even though North Korea is mentioned, this book also does not address the human rights tragedy that continues in that country to this day. This book is about a forgotten group of people in a foreign land. This is a human drama more than a political one. Like the Victorian novels mentioned earlier, this is a great work to use for character analysis. Why does Sunja (perhaps the novel’s main character) make the choices that she does? She could have become the mistress of a wealthy gangster but chooses to be the wife of a sickly, poor Christian minister. Her two sons, Noa and Mozasu, so different yet so similar, take diverging paths in life. Why? How do the restrictions placed on the Koreans by Japanese society affect their actions and choices? There are many possibilities in an upper-level English classroom for this novel. Because of its critical acclaim and multicultural subject matter, this book is certainly a candidate to be included on an AP Literature reading list. This would be a perfect novel to draw from to write the theme analysis essay that is always the last question on an AP exam. The novel includes endless themes and complex characters to draw from.

A unique feature of this book that could be used in a classroom is the author's use of Korean and Japanese words and phrases. There are over 100 italicized words and phrases that Lee chooses not to translate for the reader. Having students define unfamiliar words from their context is always a worthwhile exercise. However, many of the untranslated Korean words deal with names for family relations. Students could analyze these words and how they are used to express Korean family structure. This could also lead to a deeper discussion of the influence of Confucianism on Korean culture, even when they are living in a foreign land. Many of the Japanese words in the novel tend to deal with unique places or aspects of Japanese life. Interesting research projects could be done on both groups of words to help students learn more about a foreign culture.

This book begins with the memorable phrase "History has failed us, but no matter." This is true. The *zainichi* living in Japan are a forgotten people. Lee shines a light on the struggles of a group of people that most of the world did not realize existed. However, this novel, like any great work of literature, goes beyond that narrow focus. The characters' searches for love, success, and a sense of home and belonging are universal themes that transcend time and place. No one wants to be the pachinko ball that drops out of the bottom of the machine to be lost and forgotten by the rest of the world. ■

CHARLES NEWELL is an English Teacher at Notre Dame High School in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and has published articles and curriculum materials on Korea. He has recently become fascinated with Korean *sijo* poetry. He has videos on how to teach *sijo* in a high school classroom published on the *Sejong Cultural Society* website.

## A Brief History of Indonesia: Sultans, Spices, and Tsunamis

*The Incredible Story of Southeast Asia's  
Largest Nation*

BY TIM HANNIGAN

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288 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0804844765, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Paul A. Rodell



When planning my fall 2017 Modern Southeast Asia course, an introductory survey intended for undergraduates with no prior background, I decided to explore new textbook options. On a whim, I looked through Tim Hannigan's *A Brief History of Indonesia* and was immediately taken with this highly accessible volume with its decent font size for easy reading and even a centerpiece of colorful plates of historical significance. While there are more detailed and academically sophisticated books out there, I was struck by the author's engaging writing style and his ability to explain

complex issues clearly with engaging "hooks," such as the life of a minor historical actor whose personal story links otherwise-disparate events. I was also impressed that the author could tell Indonesia's complex story in under 300 pages.

Part of Hannigan's not-so-secret "secret" is that he is an award-winning novelist and writer of articles for newspapers and magazines, many on travel. It is his job to communicate with large audiences who have a wide range of knowledge and interests rather than writing for academe. This means that his book should be useful to educators and students at the university and high school levels as a resource on Indonesia in global survey courses such as world history or human geography. Another part of his success comes from the heart. Hannigan first came to Indonesia as a young backpacker, landing in Bali after having spent a year in India. His youthful experiences and love for both countries have continued, and he lived in Indonesia for almost twenty years. This close association with the country and its people infuses his writing with cultural sensitivity and affection.

For students whose grade depends in part on their textbook reading, this task is made easier by the volume's organization into ten brief chapters of roughly equal length that are further divided by lines separating subsections that seem to drift effortlessly from one topic to the next. In addition to the book's organization, the author also has a wonderful sense of humor. One example is the chapter title "Spice Invaders" to describe the arrival of Europeans desperate for the pungent products that would make them rich back home, while "Rust en Orde" is the title for the chapter detailing the creation of the Dutch East Indies. "Saints and Winners" serves as the title for the arrival of Islam into the archipelago. This chapter places strong emphasis on preexisting folk beliefs that combined with Islam to smooth the world religion's emergence in the region. The role of early indigenous belief systems is continued in the fifth chapter, which discusses the Dutch entry into the archipelago and is supplemented by an intriguing discussion of how the Dutch used the Enlightenment as a justification for their colonial expansion.

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I mentioned the author's use of hooks in his writing style; usually, the hook is a representative character of an era and at least one of the chapter's interpretative themes. One example is found in the book's prehistory opening chapter "From Hobbits to Hinduism." Here, readers join some early Melanesians who stop at a cave for the night and one of their group has a chance encounter with a now-extinct "hobbit," the early half-human, half-animalistic creature *Homo floresiensis*. This sudden chance encounter sends each humanoid screaming into the night, and the reader is hooked into a discussion of early man in the islands. Hannigan frequently repeats this writing strategy, sometimes with odd characters such as the American Frank Carpenter, an early twentieth-century writer of travel literature, who starts chapter 7, which details the rise of Indonesian nationalism.

What is so striking about Carpenter is how seemingly oblivious he was to the changes in Indonesian society happening all around him—"tectonic rumblings," Hannigan calls them (163). In fact, these rumblings are the real story. In the early twentieth century, the major Islamic organizations, the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama, are founded; the secular