



Ten Thousand Sorrows

By Elizabeth Kim

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They called it an "honor killing," but to Elizabeth Kim, the night she watched her grandfather and uncle hang her mother from the wooden rafter in the corner of their small Korean hut, it was cold-blooded murder. Her Omma had committed the sin of lying with an American soldier, and producing not just a bastard but a *honhyol*--a mixed-race child, considered worth less than nothing.

Left at a Christian orphanage in postwar Seoul like garbage, bleeding and terrified, Kim unwittingly embarked on the next phase of her extraordinary life when she was adopted by a childless Fundamentalist pastor and his wife in the United States. Unfamiliar with Western customs and language, but terrified that she would be sent back to the orphanage, or even killed, Kim trained herself to be the perfect child. But just as her Western features doomed her in Korea, so her Asian features served as a constant reminder that she wasn't good enough for her new, all-white environment.

After escaping her adoptive parents' home, only to find herself in an abusive and controlling marriage, Kim finally made a break for herself by having a daughter and running away with her to a safer haven--something Omma could not do for her.

Unflinching in her narration, Kim tells of her sorrows with a steady and riveting voice, and ultimately transcends them by laying claim to all the joys to which she is entitled.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Ten Thousand Sorrows starts with its young narrator watching her mother's murder; improbably, things go downhill from there. "Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood," Frank McCourt famously wrote in *Angela's Ashes*. But McCourt's hardscrabble youth looks like a walk in the park compared to the experiences of Elizabeth Kim. The child of an illicit union between a Korean mother and an American father, Kim grows up the object of disgust and contempt in rural Korea. As a *honhyol*, or mixed-race child, she isn't considered a person at all.

Yet her mother refuses to sell her into servitude, and for that show of compassion she pays with her life. In the harrowing scene that opens the book, Kim watches from a hiding place as her mother--the victim of a so-called honor killing--is hanged from a rafter: "All I could see through the bamboo slats were her bare feet, dangling in midair. I watched those milk-white feet twitch, almost with the rhythm of the *Hwagwan-mu* dance, and then grow still." Left alone in the world, without so much as a name or date of birth, Kim ends up in an orphanage where she spends hours on end locked in a crib that resembles a cage. Things ought to look up when an American couple adopts her. Instead, one form of abuse merely replaces another, as the pastor and his wife tell Kim that her mother "left her to die in a rice paddy" and immediately take away any toy or pet to which she develops an attachment. Later, Kim escapes into a young marriage (arranged, naturally, by her fundamentalist parents), only to find no refuge there either. Surely there is a special place in hell reserved for her husband, the kind of pathological sadist who becomes aroused only by inflicting pain.

By this point, the reader begins to feel like something of a sadist herself. It's a tribute to Kim's skill as a writer that we can't look away from her pain, even when it might feel more comfortable to do so. True, she *does* leave her husband, make herself a new life with her daughter, begin a journalism career without benefit of training or degree--all of which demonstrates an amazing tenacity and inner strength. Yet the latter half of the book employs the familiar vocabulary of healing without doing much to convince. Reconciled with her experiences, Kim doesn't necessarily seem to have finished processing them. Her book has all the raw urgency of a call to 911: it feels written for the author's very survival. --*Chloe Byrne*

From Publishers Weekly

In a transcendent account of one woman's refusal to yield to the oppressive dictates of religion and custom in two vastly different cultures, Kim traces her evolution from a traumatized childhood in postwar Korea to her emotional awakening as a young abused wife in America. Currently a journalist based in California, she re-creates her uncle and grandfather's gruesome "honor killing" of her rebellious mother, who returned to her village with the baby of an American GI--a grim event that launched Kim's painful life as a tainted "half-breed" in a society that reveres its ancestry and traditions. Eventually, Kim was left at a Christian orphanage where disinterested American missionaries provided a steady diet of hymns, biblical parables, small bowls of rice and little else. Desperate to be loved despite her forbidden mixed-race heritage, Kim hoped her fortune would change when she was adopted by a white, fundamentalist American couple. However, their pious tyranny was matched only by the harsh, racist abuse Kim endured at school from her classmates, described in simple heartrending prose. Seeking to escape, she married the young deacon at her parents' church, who turned out to be an abusive schizophrenic. Fortunately, Kim avoids melodrama in chronicling her flight with her daughter from her tormentor, instead rendering her arduous climb to emotional and spiritual renewal with unflinching honesty. While this skillful, understated narrative may not quite live up to its publisher's comparison to *Angela's Ashes*, it is a stirring account of one woman's hard-earned victory over prejudice and tragedy. Agent, Patti Breitman. (May)

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From Library Journal

California-based journalist Kim recounts her life—the horror of witnessing her birth mother's "honor killing" in Korea, her emotionally sterile childhood in a Christian fundamentalist household in America, and a quasi-arranged marriage to an abusive husband. She conveys the almost soap-operatic quality of these events in a simple but powerful reportorial style that puts the events in even harsher focus. Yet this is also a story of hope, redemption, the healing power of motherhood (daughter Leigh contributed short passages), and self-acceptance. Kim's work has profound implications for the practice of international adoption and the unexamined problems adoptees may face, such as exotic diseases, debilitating culture shock, and incompetent parenting. It also provides inspiration and coping strategies for those facing similarly harrowing life experiences. An emotionally stirring work, this book is recommended for public libraries.

Antoinette Brinkman, SW Indiana Mental Health Ctr., Evansville

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Eric McDonald:

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Megan Lapointe:

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