

*ALL WOMAN  
AND  
SPRINGTIME*



A Note from the Author

Questions for Discussion





## A Note from the Author

I began writing *All Woman and Springtime* in early 2009, after a year of listening to a gnawing impulse in the back of my mind saying, “Write! Write! Write!” Like a mantra, it kept chanting, becoming incrementally louder and louder until finally I had no choice but to reply, “Write what? What? What?” It became a call and response, almost a tug-of-war, between my inner drive and my self-doubt: “Write!” “What?” “Write!” “What?” I had been trying to sustain a custom metal art business, making gates and fountains and sculptures of all kinds for a dwindling clientele in the growing tide of the global financial meltdown. Suddenly there was really nothing for me but time and no excuse to continue avoiding the demands of my literary compulsion.

I had been mulling over something that had not been sitting well with me for quite some time, which was the seemingly arbitrary assignment of North Korea to an “Axis of Evil.” For all of my many misgivings about such bald judgments, the statement did have the benefit of highlighting for me an uncomfortable gap in my understanding of the world: I knew almost nothing about North Korea, or the history that created the gash across the thirty-eighth parallel. So I began to read, and watch videos, and comb the Internet to take in as much as I possibly could about the region. The more I learned, the more fascinated I became. North Korea is a living Orwellian nightmare, a stark reality so bizarre that it seemingly defies all logic: How could this be happening?

Most of the available media on North Korea (with a few stellar exceptions)—and, relative to information on other nations, the available media is quite limited and full of conjecture—focuses on political issues such as the nuclear threat, the military standoff at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the chest pounding of Kim Jong-il. Even the ongoing famine is reduced to its political causes and ramifications. The humanity of North Koreans is often lost in the telling of North Korea. So I began my book with a question: How do I find in myself the correct empathy to understand the people in North Korea—people who are simply human, who fall in and out of love, who yearn and ache and strive and succeed and fail just like everyone else, and yet who do it under unimaginable scrutiny, threat, and control? Then I followed it with another question: How can I deliver that empathy to an audience that is, like I was, mostly unaware of the human details north of the DMZ? How do I bring it home?

That is how I met my protagonist, Gi, an orphan girl who condensed out of my growing concern and compassion for the people living within the “Hermit Kingdom.” Gi, having lost her sense of self while growing up in dire trauma, comes alive most within the context of her friendship with Il-sun, an irrepressible, mischievous girl at the dawn of womanhood. They are, first and foremost, teenagers, simultaneously reaching for and trying to dodge the lessons of maturity that all young women face. This reaching and dodging places them unwittingly in the hands of human traffickers—a very real problem surfacing in North Korea.

Issues of human exploitation and the regularity with which human beings are bought and sold are a cause of great sadness for me. It is easy to think of slavery as an issue we have overcome, one left to decay in our past, but in reality it is still flourishing, even within our own borders. Though we no longer sanction it with our laws, we sanction it with our collective denial. Human trafficking is a global multibillion-dollar industry, a looming shadow of greed and cruelty. I wanted to inspect this problem from all angles—through the eyes of those who are trafficked, the motivations and justifications of those who traffic, and (though less exposed in my novel) the complicity of those

who enable it—and shine a light on it in hopes that spreading greater awareness will erode the ability of those who would perpetrate such abuse.

Though my novel deals with very real places, issues, and situations, much of the journey is metaphoric. For instance, physically crossing the DMZ is unlikely (though there are documented cases), but my characters simply must cross that boundary. The real challenge for them is in crossing it psychologically, transcending the veil of propaganda that is the DMZ lodged within themselves. I see it as a hero story, in which our heroine must eventually face and conquer the darkness within, even after her physical oppressors no longer have a hold on her. To survive she must learn to redefine not only herself but her core beliefs about the world in which she lives.



## Questions for Discussion

1. The author has said in interviews and essays that *All Woman and Springtime* is about crossing boundaries of all kinds.” What does he mean by that? What boundaries are crossed, and by whom?
2. The protagonist, Gyong-ho, is more commonly known as Gi, which is a nonsense syllable in both Korean and English. Why did the author choose this name? How does this name shape her as a character, and how does it add to or subtract from her personal development in the story?
3. Gi is fascinated by her best friend, Il-sun. Why? Why does this fascination begin to express itself as sexual desire? Does this speak to Gi’s basic sexual orientation, or is there something else at play?
4. Why do you think Il-sun puts herself so much at risk by engaging in rebellious behavior? Is she by nature self-destructive?
5. The characters of *All Woman and Springtime* start their journey in North Korea, are taken across the DMZ into South Korea, and then ultimately end up in the United States. Why did the author choose this particular path for the story? Was it important for the story to change settings?

6. The image of teacups appears at various points throughout the novel, first when the orphanage mistress meets Gianni, and then in a tense scene between the orphanage mistress, Il-sun, and Gi. Cho also uses the word *teacup* as a term of endearment when talking to Il-sun, and then in the epilogue when talking with Gi. What is the significance of the image of teacups, and why would the author have Cho use it as a pet name?

7. Jasmine is an important character who helps Gi, Il-sun, and Cho make the transition to the world of prostitution and pornography. In the end, she suffers for trying to help her North Korean friends. Why did the author develop such a sympathetic character only to have her disappear suddenly and without follow-up?

8. Strong secondary characters, such as the orphanage mistress, the factory foreman, Mr. Choy, Mrs. Cha, are used to help tell the story. Some of them are the book's villains. How did you feel about their narratives? Do you think it was important to hear from these characters? Would the story have been more or less effective if told from only one perspective?

9. *All Woman and Springtime* is a coming of age story in which young women are imprisoned and manipulated when they are on the brink of womanhood, the moment when they are just beginning to figure out who they are. Do you think the characters hold on to their identities, or do they lose themselves along the way?

10. Loss of innocence is an important theme in the novel. Each character experiences it in a different way, even the villains of the story. How does the loss of innocence in Mr. Choy and Mrs. Cha compare to that of Gi, Il-sun, and Cho? Do we also see loss of innocence in the orphanage mistress and the factory foreman? Are there any moments of redemption?

11. The leadership of North Korea is often referred to as a “personality cult.” How does the North Korean leadership shape the lives of Gi, Il-sun, and Cho? How do they respond to it, and ultimately leave it, differently? How do you imagine the lives of Gi and Il-sun would have turned out had they remained in North Korea?



MICHELE HOLLEY JONES



Brandon W. Jones lives in Hawaii.



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Pete Dizinoff has a thriving medical practice in suburban New Jersey, a devoted wife, a network of close friends, an impressive house, and a son, Alec, now nineteen, on whom he's pinned all his hopes. But Pete never counted on Laura, his best friend's daughter, setting her sights on his only son. Lauren Grodstein's riveting novel charts a father's fall from grace as he struggles to save his family, his reputation, and himself.

“Suspense worthy of Hitchcock . . . [Grodstein] is a terrific storyteller.”  
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*Pictures of You*, a novel by Caroline Leavitt

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Two women running away from their marriages collide on a foggy highway. The survivor of the fatal accident is left to pick up the pieces not only of her own life but of the lives of the devastated husband and fragile son that the other woman left behind. As these three lives intersect, the book asks, How well do we really know those we love and how do we open our hearts to forgive the unforgivable?

“An expert storyteller . . . Leavitt teases suspense out of the greatest mystery of all—the workings of the human heart.” —*Booklist*

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***In the Time of the Butterflies***, a novel by Julia Alvarez

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In this extraordinary novel, the voices of Las Mariposas (The Butterflies), Minerva, Patria, María Teresa, and Dedé, speak across the decades to tell their stories about life in the Dominican Republic under General Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's dictatorship. Through the art and magic of Julia Alvarez's imagination, the martyred butterflies live again in this novel of valor, love, and the human cost of political oppression.

**A National Endowment for the Arts Big Read selection**

"A gorgeous and sensitive novel . . . A compelling story of courage, patriotism, and familial devotion." —*People*

"A magnificent treasure for all cultures and all time." —*St. Petersburg Times*

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***Water for Elephants***, a novel by Sara Gruen

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As a young man, Jacob Jankowski is tossed by fate onto a rickety train, home to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. Amid a world of freaks, grifters, and misfits, Jacob becomes involved with Marlena, the beautiful young equestrian star; her husband, a charismatic but twisted animal trainer; and Rosie, an untrainable elephant who is the great gray hope for this third-rate show. Now in his nineties, Jacob at long last reveals the story of their unlikely yet powerful bonds, ones that nearly shatter them all.

"[An] arresting new novel . . . With a showman's expert timing, [Gruen] saves a terrific revelation for the final pages, transforming a glimpse of Americana into an enchanting escapist fairy tale." —*The New York Times Book Review*

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***Mudbound***, a novel by Hillary Jordan

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*Mudbound* is the saga of the McAllan family, who struggle to survive on a remote ramshackle farm, and the Jacksons, their black sharecroppers. When two men return from World War II to work the land, the unlikely friendship between these brothers-in-arms—one white, one black—arouses the passions of their neighbors. In this award-winning portrait of two families caught up in the blind hatred of a small Southern town, prejudice takes many forms, both subtle and ruthless.

**Winner of the Bellwether Prize for Fiction**

"This is storytelling at the height of its powers . . . Hillary Jordan writes with the force of a Delta storm." —Barbara Kingsolver

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