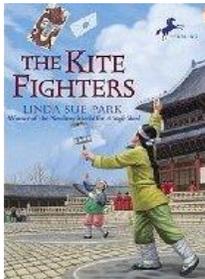


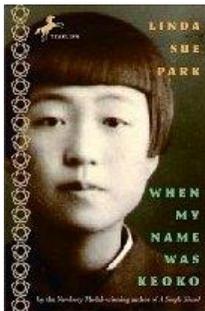
Children's Book Review

The Wise, Beautiful, and Fascinating Korean World of Linda Sue Park



Park, L. S. (2002). *The Kite Fighters*. New York: Clarion Books. 144 pp., ISBN: 978-0440418139 (pbk). \$5.99.

Park, L. S. (2003). *A Single Shard*. New York: Clarion Books. 192 pp., ISBN: 978-0440418511 (pbk). \$6.99.



Park, L. S. (2004). *When My Name Was Keoko*. New York: Clarion Books. 199 pp., ISBN: 978-0440419440 (pbk). \$6.99.

Park, L. S. (2009). *Seesaw Girl*. New York: Clarion Books. 96 pp., ISBN: 978-0547248882 (pbk). \$5.99.



Reviewed by Constance Vidor, Friends Seminary, U. S. A.

"Scholars learn to read the great words of the world. But you and I must learn to read the world itself" (Park, 2003, p. 7). This is the wise advice of the character Crane Man to his unofficially adopted son, Tree Ear. Crane Man is an aged beggar who must stand on one leg like a crane because of a crippling birth injury. Young Tree Ear, whose name recalls a type of mushroom plant that grows on trees, has no one in the world but Crane Man to guide him and give him a parent's affection. These two appealing characters are among the chief actors in author Linda Sue Park's book, *A Single Shard*. It was the first book by a Korean American author to win the Newbery award (2002) and is still one of only a few titles with an Asian theme to have won the prestigious award. Although Korea has been present in a small but high-quality group of young readers' titles for at least the past decade, it really lit up the sky of children's literature with this title. The appealing characters and involving plot draw the reader straight into the world of ancient Korea—a time and place that is completely unknown to most young Western readers.

Park (2003) describes the little village that sits between the sea and the rice fields, the bridge under which Crane Man and Tree Ear live in the summer, and the field burrow in which they shelter in the winter. She lets the reader

discover the wonder of Korean celadon ceramics through the eyes of Tree Ear, as he crouches behind some bushes to watch a master potter creating works of art on a potter's wheel. The reader also discovers the harshness and hardship of life in 13th-century Korea through Tree Ear's experiences as an apprentice to the master potter—hauling heavy loads of wood to fire up the great kilns where the vases are fired and frequently going hungry in order to share his food with Crane Man. The importance of the royal court and the thrill of gaining royal patronage unfolds as the story describes how royal emissaries visit the villages where celadon craftsmen vie to create the most perfect wares.

Woven throughout these experiences is the evolving relationship among Tree Ear, the orphan who so wants to gain the master potter's respect and affection, the bitter and mistrustful master potter, the gentle wife of the master potter, and the patient and encouraging Crane Man. The story turns up the adrenalin in the final chapters as Tree Ear is entrusted with the task of carrying a single perfect celadon vase to the emperor's court and an encounter with bandits brings disaster—a disaster which Tree Ear must use all his courage and hope to surmount. With the ingredients of great characters, evolving relationships, interesting setting, and good plotting, *A Single Shard* would deserve the Newbery Award, but it has one thing more—wisdom. Crane Man's admonition to "learn to read the world itself" is imparted with a gentle touch, but it encapsulates what we hope to share by exposing young readers to multicultural literature. By reading the words of books like *A Single Shard*, one hopes that children will be able to learn to "read" a much bigger world than the one they inhabit in their own time and space.

Reading a great story set in a particular place cannot help but make a reader curious to know more about that place. Fortunately, Linda Sue Park has written three more books set in different periods of Korean history, each one telling both a human story and a historical and cultural story of equal interest. *A Single Shard* is set in the Koryo period and emphasizes the Koryo period's devotion to artistic excellence through the example of celadon ceramic making. *The Seesaw Girl* (2009) and *The Kite Fighters* (2002) are set in 17th-century and 15th-century Korea respectively during the Choson (also transliterated as Joseon) period. One unfolds the experience of living in Choson Korea through the eyes of a girl, the other through the eyes of a boy. These stories convey both the importance of Confucian values and the challenges of figuring out how to accommodate traditional family expectations with a young character's emerging sense of individuality. In *See Saw Girl*, young Jade Blossom yearns to see the sights outside her family compound—forbidden to women. One day she succeeds in sneaking out of her home hidden in a bundle of laundry but must return in disgrace when she is discovered. Nevertheless, through conversations with her mother and father and through her own reflections Jade Blossom finds that she can be true to herself while still accepting the role that her family and her society have given her. *Seesaw Girl*, unlike many other books set in traditional cultures and written for American readers, does not resolve in a way that caters to present-day American preferences. It offers the reader a much more authentic

literary moment: acceptance of tradition and understanding of the beauty of a different way of living.

The Kite Fighters, like *Seesaw Girl*, is a complex and colorful story packed with depictions of life and manners in 15th-century Korea that is neatly and adroitly folded into a slender, easy-to-read book. In *The Kite Fighters* we meet two brothers. The older brother is the only one who has the right to compete in the annual kite fighting contest. While he excels at making kites, it is his younger brother who has the skill to win the contest. The younger brother chafes at his subservient role in the family to his older brother. The older brother's responsibilities look like special privileges to the younger one until the younger brother slowly begins to appreciate how heavily the responsibilities of being an older brother can feel. An unlikely friendship comes about between the two brothers and a young prince who meets them in a park and joins them in playing with kites. All of the events of the story are based on careful historical research, and even the young prince is based on King Songjong, who was known for his egalitarian tendencies and his interest in seeking out the views and ideas of commoners. *The Kite Fighters* helps readers to imagine the experience of growing up in the milieu of traditional Confucian family values, with explicit roles and expectations for each person in the family. It also takes readers through the thrill and excitement of kite-fighting and considers with authenticity and sympathy the age-old universal issue of brotherly rivalry.

When My Name was Keoko (2004) moves to an era much closer to the present as it portrays the experiences of a young Korean girl and her family during the occupation of Korea during World War II. Kim Sun-hee is forced to adopt the Japanese name of Keoko, to speak only Japanese at school, and to submit to the humiliations and privations of life under Japanese occupation. The reader feels the fear and injustice as soldiers chop down the family's beloved Rose of Sharon tree, forcibly cut off the grandfather's topknot (a proud sign of scholarly attainment), appropriate the family's possessions, and force the children at school to spend hours on bayonet practice. In a particularly chilling scene, 16-year-old girls are summoned to volunteer for a special assignment laundering clothes for soldiers at a location far from home. Kim Sun-hee instinctively apprehends that the true purpose of this assignment is evil, and an author's note confirms what the adult reader recognizes as a scene in which young girls are being taken into the notorious enslavement of the "comfort women." The story is told in the alternating voices of Kim Sun-hee and her brother, Tae-yul. Tae-yul has his own experiences to recount including being conscripted into the Japanese military, where Korean soldiers died in the thousands either through maltreatment or through suicidal bombing missions.

When My Name was Keoko, like the other titles discussed in this article, places the reader inside a particular time of Korean history and shows the reader how different Koreans experienced, reacted, and created their own historical narrative. And like the other titles, it creates a story full of emotion and insight, told with eloquent clarity.

These four titles by Linda Sue Park give readers an authentic glimpse of Korean history, values, wisdom, and artistry. Reading just one of them will give a glimpse of to the complexity and uniqueness of Korean culture and history. Equally important, they offer wise insights into universal human conditions that can help young readers toward "reading the world" with sympathy and discernment.

Resources for Multimedia Enrichment

A Single Shard Voicethread: <http://voicethread.com/share/584594/>

The Kite Fighters Voicethread: <http://voicethread.com/share/631151/>