
To Swim Across the World

by Frances Park and Ginger Park



About the Book

In Nabi?our word for butterfly?we accepted each passing day as a blessing in our palms, for it meant we had survived on what little food we could afford. Now summer was here and it brought a burst of butterflies, good omens for a better time...

Korea in 1941 is a nation defined by oppression. The Japanese Occupation has stripped the Koreans of their land and their identity, and yet it cannot claim the spirit of a people determined to preserve their heritage.

In a small village in the south, Sei-Young Shin struggles to help feed his family and dreams of a life of freedom. Grandfather reminded me of who I truly was. Night after night he would recite, 'Your name is Sei-Young, which means 'to swim across the world.' Someday you will do just that.' For Heisook Pang, the daughter of a prominent minister, life in the north is gentler—until she looks beneath the surface of her seemingly privileged existence.

World War II alters both Sei-Young and Heisook's lives as Korea, once again denied the chance to shape its own destiny, becomes a country divided. The Russians establish Communism in the north, and the Americans establish democracy in the south. As Heisook states, In time I would learn the difference between the two. While Sei-Young experiences freedom for the first time in his life, attends college, and discovers a talent for public speaking, life for Heisook becomes even more harsh. With Communism taking hold in the north and her future in peril, Heisook makes a daring escape to join her father in the south. Here she meets Sei-Young, and their lives and souls interlock in a way that neither ever imagined.

The narrative spans nearly fifteen years with Heisook and Sei-Young's stories unfolding in alternating chapters. Based on the lives of the authors' parents, *To Swim Across the World* is told in lyrical prose that magnifies its story of sacrifice, tragedy, and love. It is an illuminating portrait of a country in turmoil and an extraordinary tribute to a remarkable family.

Discussion Guide

1. Sei-Young's grandfather tells him that his name means to swim across the world. How does this influence Sei-Young as he grows up? Why do you think the authors chose this phrase as the title? How does it reflect the story as a whole?
2. What was your initial perception of Heisook? How would you describe her? Did your opinion of her change as the story progressed?
3. How would you describe Sei-Young's relationship with Grandfather? A pivotal moment for Sei-Young occurs when he witnesses Officer Akoto beating Grandfather. How does this experience alter Sei-Young's thinking and his life? How does it affect Grandfather?
4. Faith is a concept that resounds throughout the novel. What does it mean to Heisook, Sei-Young, and the other characters?
5. When he leaves his family at the train station as he goes off to war, Changi says to Heisook, Don't be afraid to take steps on your own. For otherwise, you will always be a helpless little girl (pg. 109). Does Heisook heed Changi's advice? How so?
6. After World II, the Americans institute democracy in South Korea. For Sei-Young, it was a time of promise, tinged with peril. My people were free. But after nearly a half-century of oppression, freedom was a foreign word that was hard to understand. How were we to speak and behave, how were we supposed to live when we were no longer silenced by the sword? (pg. 140). How does life change for Sei-Young after the end of World War II? How is it different for Heisook?
7. In one instance Sei-Young says, I was lucky. Grandfather taught me how to dream (pg. 148). What does he mean by this statement?
8. A momentous experience for Heisook occurs when she discovers her mother's diary. After reading it, is she able to better understand her mother? Does it alter her relationship with her mother in any way?
9. What are the similarities and differences in Heisook and Sei-Young's lives and stories? What is it that attracts them to one another?
10. Were you knowledgeable about Korea's history prior to reading this novel? What did you come away with after reading **To Swim Across the World**?

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"Harris populates his novel with marvelously written, complex characters who engage readers on many levels."

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