

## Ep. 93 | Asian Women in Translation

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Sachi Argabright. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And this is episode 93, where we're talking about books by Asian women in translation.

[00:00:26] **Sachi** You can find a complete transcript and a list of all the books mentioned today linked in our show notes. And don't forget to subscribe, so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:36] **Kendra** Well, Happy Women in Translation Month, Sachi!

[00:00:40] **Sachi** Whoo! Happy, happy Women in Translation Month.

[00:00:42] **Kendra** It is a great month. I look forward to this every year. But before we get into that, we have some news. So August is Women in Translation Month, and this was started by a woman who wanted to read more books from around the world. And she realized that to do that, you have to read women in translation. So that's what happened. And that started, I think, in 2014? 2015? And so now it's been going on for several years. And of the big sads that she puts out is that according to a study done in 2016, approximately 30 percent of new translations into English are books by women writers.

[00:01:25] **Sachi** Mm.

[00:01:25] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:01:25] **Sachi** So. This is something that I need to also. . . . Every year, Women in Translation Month comes up, and I'm like, oh, I need to read my translations. And I need to do a better job of reading them throughout the year. But when you had put in the doc that stat, I was kind of surprised that, you know, only 30 percent of translations into English are from women writers. So we've got to read all those books and boost them up so, hopefully, more women get translated in the future.

[00:01:56] **Kendra** Yeah, definitely. And I think you and I are more aware of women literature, literature written by women.

[00:02:04] **Sachi** Yeah.

[00:02:05] **Kendra** So I, you know, I have Olga Tokarczuk that I have had on my list for a couple years now, even before she won the Nobel. And I just haven't. And there's even audio for those.

[00:02:16] **Sachi** No, okay.

[00:02:17] **Kendra** And, you know, even with 30 percent of new translations into English being books by women writers, even a smaller percentage of those make it to audio, which obviously limits the accessibility of their work. And that's something that I've really been struggling with the last few years, because only a small percentage of those books become audio. And so that was what I was limited to today. So when I asked a friend of mine to recommend me books by Asian women in translation, he was like, "On audio?" I was like, "Yes." And so he had like six? And I was like. . . .

[00:02:52] **Sachi** Oh, gosh.

[00:02:56] **Kendra** And I mean, granted, that's off the top of his head. But still, like, you know, it's definitely a limitation. And so I hope that Women in Translation Month, as it has over the years, increases that awareness so there could be more women in translation on audio as well.

[00:03:13] **Sachi** That's a good point. Yeah, I feel like, you know, to be as accessible as possible isn't always at the forefront of publishers' minds. So add translation on top of that, and it makes it even more difficult.

[00:03:27] **Kendra** Yeah. And we don't often talk about factors in publishing that are in and of themselves a marginalization. So like being in translation, for example, makes it more difficult to get published. And being a woman, you know, being a woman writing a particular language. . . . Like Eastern Europe. There are so few books from Eastern Europe that are coming in translation. I mean, I've only come across one book written in Romanian. I think it's BOTTLED GOODS, you know, that I really made a splash. And so I think there's a lot of things to think about when we think about women in translation, factors that we just don't discuss when we're talking about books written and read in their native languages.

[00:04:12] **Sachi** Yeah, that's so true.

[00:04:15] **Kendra** So we'll talk a little bit more about that next time. But today we have our six picks that we have, and all of them are from Asian women, mostly East Asian women. And it was really interesting being able to compare and read all of these books.

[00:04:31] **Sachi** Absolutely.

[00:04:33] **Kendra** So, Sachi, you have the first one.

[00:04:35] **Sachi** Yep! So my first pick today is KIM JIYOUNG: BORN 1982 by Cho Nam-Joo, and this is translated by Jamie Chang. And it's out from Liveright. And this is from a Korean author and was originally published in 2016 and translated to English in April of this year, 2020. And I think what I didn't realize, you know, until I started reading and focusing on Women in Translation Month and started reading for Women in Translation Month in August is that a lot of the books that are "new" to us . . . you know, some of these stories were written many, many, many years ago. And they're new to us. But, you know, the story might be decades old, right? So I think some of our picks today were originally written in the '90s or something. And so it's just interesting to look, you know, at the publishing dates of when it was published in the US versus when it was originally published in the native country. So I think in this episode, we'll be outlining some of the originally published dates versus the translated dates, which I think is really interesting.

[00:06:08] **Sachi** So a quick synopsis of this book. This story follows Kim Jiyoung, a woman who was pressured by her family to become a full-time mother and later suffers from depression. And this book really focuses on the everyday sexism that's present in Korean culture, in areas such as parenting, school and education, and the workplace---in particular, kind of the corporate environment. And the book is really, I would kind of say, it's not sectioned off, but has three main parts that follows her life and talks about how gender inequality and sexism takes place in the various stages of a woman's life. So in her

childhood, she has a sister and a brother. And the brother is very much favored over the two sisters. And even they talk about how, like, you know, finding out that you're pregnant with a daughter is something that is not celebrated. Sometimes, you know, it's seen as acceptable to have an abortion if you know that the child is going to be female, which is, you know, just awful.

[00:07:20] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:07:21] **Sachi** Yeah, and like . . . and that is not limited to Korean culture. A lot of these themes are present in other Asian cultures as well. But there is obviously specific examples kind of set in the Korean space because that is where this story is held. You can see throughout that the brother is very highly favored. After their grandmother passes away, he gets his own room, even though he is the youngest. And the two older sisters have to share a room and such.

[00:07:54] **Sachi** And then the book kind of moves into early adulthood and to the high school, college type part of her life, let's say. She talks about being sexually harassed not only in high school, but also in college and as well as in a job interview, which was shocking to me. Some of the questions that they asked were extremely kind of sexist. The book is interesting because it footnotes a lot of facts, which I've read that a lot of people think that's a little clunky that, you know, you've got your prose, then you've got some facts and footnotes and things like that, which might take you out of the storyline. But I found them to be very helpful and fascinating. One of the things that was called out in the book is that the amount of high-achieving accolades a woman must have to enter the workforce needs to be ridiculous in Korea. You have to have like the best credentials, and they're often lower paid. And I didn't know this, but Korea has the largest wage gap in the entire world.

[00:08:54] **Kendra** Wow.

[00:08:55] **Sachi** Yeah. Yeah. It's wild. It's mostly in countries that make up, like, I think 80 percent of the global wealth. The average Korean woman makes 65 percent of what an average Korean man does.

[00:09:09] **Kendra** Wow.

[00:09:09] **Sachi** Which is shocking. I think the article I read is like, that's like comparing a salary of \$32,000 a year to \$50,000 a year.

[00:09:19] **Kendra** Wow.

[00:09:20] **Sachi** Yeah. So they talk about that a lot in the book, just about her being in the workplace and and trying to find a job out of college and finding out that the men that she started with at the same time that she's grown close to, you know, she finds out how much they made starting out versus what she did. And they had the pretty much exact same resumé. And so those things, like especially because I work in a corporate environment in the States, like it's just so infuriating to read that. And so that was I feel like really eye-opening. I did a lot of Googling after reading that portion.

[00:09:53] **Sachi** And then it kind of shifts into adult and motherhood and talks about how most Korean women are forced to quit their jobs after they become pregnant. And as a result, you know, most corporate jobs don't even hire women because they know that

they're going to leave after they're pregnant. And then a lot of women don't even make it to leadership positions. So then those leadership positions, like there's no women advocating for other women in the workplace. And Kim Jiyoung, she experiences this when her family is pressuring her to have a child. And her husband ended up just saying, "Well, let's just have one, just so we don't have to hear about it anymore." And then they start doing the math on how much time it takes to take care of a child and how much daycare costs. And they live in Seoul. And it's so expensive that he's like, "Well, you know, you might as well just quit your job because I make enough money. And then you can just take care of the child. And I can help sometimes."

[00:10:52] **Kendra** Wow, yeah.

[00:10:52] **Sachi** It's like, uh, what? And she would say, like, "Well, I love my job. I don't want to quit." And he was like, "Well, then who's supposed to take care of this baby?" And she's like, "We don't have to have it right now." And he was like, "Well, that's what our family wants, and I'm sick of hearing it. And like, I'm the head of the household." So it's just like it's wild. But this stuff happens. Like this is, you know, very prevalent in Asian cultures, and you get it firsthand.

[00:11:18] **Sachi** You know, it's not to say like. . . . When you're reading it, the intent isn't to be like, oh, look how backwards Korea is. And like, look how, you know, these women don't speak up for themselves and all these things. I think it's mainly the purpose is to show that things need to change. It's not to pity the women in those countries, which I have read certain books, at least ones that are set in an East Asian countries. And I've seen reviewers from America saying like, oh, you know, these poor women; they're just so oppressed, and this is terrible, and I'm so glad we're not like that. And it's just like that is not the point of putting these books out there! It's to show that there is injustice happening, and there needs to be something done. Like, I was just so angry and frustrated. And I think that is the reaction that you're supposed to get to understand, like, there's still so much injustice in the world. You know, there's even injustice in our country, in the United States. But like, we . . . often we've talked about some on the podcast, who just like, we live in our bubble, right? And all this stuff. And it's like, in some other countries, these injustices and inequalities are even more amplified. And this book, I felt like really illustrated that in a way that really came across in less than 200 pages, I felt, in a very powerful way. So that's kind of my high-level thoughts around the book. I learned a lot just about Korean culture. And I've read a lot of books set in Korea, but this one very much puts into light the specific lens of gender inequality. And I very much enjoyed it.

[00:13:00] **Kendra** And it is a very . . . I mean, the book itself, as it exists, is a woman speaking up about her own community. And Sumaiyya talked about this last month, you know, about how a lot of people think Muslim women never speak up or stand up for rights or activists, et cetera. And that's very much not the case. And I think, you know, this book is an example of a Korean woman standing up and saying, you know, hey, own community. These are things going on. And so I'm glad it's coming to the US, so that we can read it as well. But also, I mean, good for her for writing it. And you said there was a movie that was made of it?

[00:13:36] **Sachi** Yeah! Yeah, I was just about to mention. It was well received, and they made a movie about it last year. And so I saw a trailer for it with English subtitles. I think it was produced and made in Korea. So hopefully that brings to light, you know, in the Korean culture and society some of the injustices that are really still happening to women. Like I'm still so shocked about the wage gap and how it's the highest in the world. I would

have never guessed that. Hopefully, you know, this book and this movie really motivates and gets traction for change in Korea, hopefully. So that was my first pick. It's called KIM JIYOUNG: BORN 1982 by Cho Nam-Joo. And that's translated by Jamie Chang. And that's from Liveright? Kendra, what is your first pick for today?

[00:14:30] **Kendra** So my first pick is NOTES OF A CROCODILE by Qiu Miaojin, and this is translated by Bonnie Huie. And is out from the New York Review of Books, like Original Classics, Classics Original. They published a lot of works in translation that may not make it to bigger publishers or whatever. And that's the case for this book. This book originally came out, I believe, around 1994 or 1995. The author Qiu Miaojin died by suicide. And I believe this book was originally published posthumously. And this book was translated in 2017 and came out to much acclaim because it is an amazing story about a queer woman who's going to college in the late 1980's in Taipei, Taiwan.

[00:15:22] **Kendra** And it is the story of her falling in love with a woman and feeling the societal pressure of, you know, she's fallen in love with this woman, but when she comes to actually physically touch her girlfriend, she can't. And she kind of self-destructs and does all this really self-destructive behavior. And then she meets other queer people, both men and women who fall in love with people of the same gender and struggle with that. And the way that she follows all four years of college and the way that it's split up in notebooks. And like, it's very much like this character writing their confessional. It's such a beautiful story and a very heartfelt story.

[00:16:11] **Kendra** I've read very few books by a Taiwanese people. Most of the books I've read are by Taiwanese American people. So I really enjoyed reading this. And, you know, the translation is so nimble and beautiful. It's like, I couldn't believe that it was a translation. And I listened to this on audio. And I was so happy to be able to find more books on audio in translation. And the narrator does an amazing job. I'll put the info for the audiobook in the show notes. But this book apparently became a cult classic in Taiwan because it was like this very anti-establishment kind of story. And it looks at the role of women in society and how they're expected, you know, to be with men. And men expect them to do certain things. And there was just a lot of really practical discussions about queerness and what happens to people when they resist that part of themselves or try to bury it or try to force themselves to be straight or whatever that case may be. And to see that in a different cultural context, it reminded me a lot of CANTORAS in that way. And, you know, queerness has happened all over the world. And we don't really see much of the history of queerness in other countries here in America. We mainly focus on our own histories, so seeing this was was pretty great.

[00:17:40] **Sachi** That's awesome. And to have a book that was originally published, you know, twenty-five years ago and covering these themes that are still, you know, so resonant to you as a reader today, I think is really awesome.

[00:17:58] **Kendra** I think there's just something about the book that really is just part of that college experience. It definitely focuses on college students and the emotional journey that they go on with those four years, how much change happens in those four years. And it's called NOTES OF A CROCODILE because of the crocodile, throughout the book, has their own little sections. And you're learning about this crocodile. And at first you're not quite sure why this crocodile is sitting in a bathtub, trying to hide from humans. But you realize it's like this analogy for a queer person.

[00:18:34] **Sachi** Yeah.

[00:18:35] **Kendra** And the crocodile finds other crocodiles in their crocodile clubs, and they wear human suits. And it's just a way . . . a metaphor of otherness that's used throughout the whole book. And it's very well done. It could have been very cheesy or. . . .

[00:18:50] **Sachi** Hokey.

[00:18:52] **Kendra** Yeah. Right. But I think it worked out really well, especially with the whole style of the notebooks, and it being confessional and very meta. Like I wrote this first notebook from my memories. But all of the other notebooks are from like my actual journals. It was really clever. And I mean, it's very upsetting in parts of it. Just FYI, trigger warnings for suicidal ideation and some homophobia. The protagonist themselves considers suicide from the their experience of, you know, internalized homophobia. And so the author themselves does eventually die by suicide, which is why this book was published posthumously. So just a heads up on that. But it is a very . . . it's a very beautiful book. It's a very angsty book in all the best ways. And I was so impressed with the translation. I'm just going to go look up the translator and just read books that she's translated.

[00:19:52] **Sachi** You're like, "Bonnie! Good job."

[00:19:55] **Kendra** I mean, I could gush about this book forever, but I will spare everyone. But definitely go check out NOTES OF A CROCODILE by Qiu Miaojin, translated by Bonnie Huie. And Sachi, you have our first discussion pick.

[00:20:10] **Sachi** All right! Yeah. So my first discussion pick is THE MEMORY POLICE by Yoko Ogawa, and this is translated by Stephen Snyder. And it's out from Pantheon Books. And this book is by a Japanese author. And it was originally published in 1994 and then translated to English in 2019. The synopsis is. . . I just love this book because I every time I like give a pitch to someone on the synopsis, they're like, oh that sounds so interesting. And I just feel like it has an air of sci-fi that I feel like, at least for me, I haven't found a lot of translations that do that.

[00:20:48] **Sachi** So the synopsis is it's centered around an unnamed female novelist who lives on an island controlled by The Memory Police. And The Memory Police, or this group that controls this country, they periodically disappear . . . certain parts of society. And The Memory Police are tasked with removing all items and memories related to the thing that has disappeared. And at first, you know, small things disappear. Like examples that are given in the book are like emeralds and harmonicas and things like that, that are probably things that won't necessarily be missed, not part of everyday life. Right? But then in the story that we're reading, more prevalent things start disappearing like birds and like photographs that literally hold memories, right? When they start getting marked for disappearance, you know, our protagonist starts to fear for what does that do to culture and our memory? And you know what if there's nothing left to disappear when all the things start disappearing so quickly.

[00:22:02] **Sachi** I just love the premise for this book. I'm one of those people. . . . I don't know. Like people think that this is weird when I tell them this. So if you judge me, that's fine. But I'm one of those people that, like, I want to know the least amount about a book as possible because I love just being surprised as I'm reading things. And then some people are like, you're crazy because you're reading something that you have no idea if you're going to like or not. But a lot of the books that I read, I get recommendations from

people that I really trust or from publishers that I really enjoy or whatever. And a lot of people had told me that this this . . . coming from a Japanese author, a lot of people funnel Japanese books to me. And I heard from a couple of people about how good this was. And so I, honestly, I saw that the cover looked beautiful. I knew that memory was involved in some way, shape, or form. But honestly, I didn't know much about this book before I came into it. And you had thrown it up for this theme as we're doing Asian in Translation for August. And I was like, well, this would fit in that. And I opened it up, and I started reading it. I was like, this is so cool! Like I probably would have picked it up sooner if I would have read the jacket and known what it was about. That's the other thing. That's like the downside is like I sometimes have books on my shelf that if I would have read the jacket, I would've picked it up a lot sooner. And then I do read it, and I'm like, what took me so long? It's like, probably because you didn't even know what it was about.

[00:23:32] **Sachi** But I just loved the premise for this book. I really liked the writing style as well. Like it felt like an eerie type of book that I was in the middle of watching a sci-fi movie. Like when things start disappearing---and we're going to talk about this in the discussion---so I'm not going to go in too much detail. I don't want to, like, ruin the next episode. But like, when things disappear, people are super nonchalant about it. They're just like. . . . Like, even if it's tied to their fondest memories or their job. . . . Like this guy worked on a boat. I forget if he was a fisherman or something, but boats were his life, right? And he's like, you know, when boats disappeared, I just found a new job. It's like, what? That was your life! And your thing got disappeared. Like, it doesn't make sense. There's lore that goes into the reasoning behind it. And I'm not going to give all that away. But like, it's just weird when, you know, people are like, well yeah, this thing disappeared, and we'll just throw all that stuff away now. It's like, oh my god, this is so scary and everything.

[00:24:40] **Sachi** And just like you can feel the censorship and oppression, like The Memory Police are inflicting on their people. Right. And so, like a lot of the tactics reminded me of things like out of a World War Two setting with the Nazis burning a lot of books and paintings and culture, things that would, you know, center the people in their society, so they could control people. Also felt like things like Fahrenheit 451. And I think this book is often compared to like George Orwell and his book. And so, you know, we'll go into discussion everything. But I really enjoyed it, and after I finished it, I texted Kendra. And I was like, I can't wait to talk about this, which is always a good making for like a great discussion pick. I really enjoyed this. I don't know, Kendra, if you have any, like, high-level thoughts. But I very much enjoyed it.

[00:25:39] **Kendra** Yeah, it reminded me of that eeriness that enclosed societies give you. Like in THE GIVER.

[00:25:45] **Sachi** Yeah.

[00:25:45] **Kendra** You have this like. . . . You know, they're on an island in THE MEMORY POLICE. So, like, they're cut off from the rest the world. And the fairies disappeared and like all this stuff. And so it's like they have no way of escaping this regime either. She doesn't really explain why things are disappearing. And there's just a lot of, like, loose ends that are well-done loose ends. I mean, not in a bad way. It's like she doesn't explain why this is happening. It's all about the philosophy and the relationships. And stuff like that.

[00:26:20] **Sachi** Yeah, like I feel like that's a very Japanese thing. It's like I feel like in Western and American media and stuff, we want to explain everything and be like, I to

know exactly how this happened. And I want to know exactly how it went from point A to point B. And I feel like, at least in Japanese stuff, they're just like, yeah, we're just not going to explain that. We're just going to focus on where we are right now. And like I remember watching "The Leftovers" on HBO, and a lot of people were like, when are they going to explain why two percent of the world disappeared? And it's like, yo, I really don't think they're going to do that. And they never did. And people were upset. People were like, what do you mean we're never going to find out why everyone disappeared? And it's like, because the focus of the story is the people who are left behind. Like, that's like . . . the focus is not to explain every single piece.

[00:27:09] **Sachi** And I feel like this feels like that, too. Like, a lot of things aren't explained. But, you know, the core of it is where we are at this certain point of time, even though, like for decades, things have been disappearing. We're focusing on this part of it that is really, you know, having its largest impact on the world or on their country. So, yeah, I enjoyed it. I liked it. So that was my discussion pick for this month. We'll be going into more detail on this title in the next episode. But that was THE MEMORY POLICE by Yoko Ogawa. And that's translated by Stephen Snyder. And that's out from Pantheon Books. And Kendra, what is your discussion pick for this month?

[00:27:54] **Kendra** So my pick is a book from Europa, and that's BREASTS AND EGGS by Mieko Kawakami, translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd. This is also a Japanese author. And so it's pretty great to be able to discuss two Japanese authors who are, you know, women writers doing the thing, which is great.

[00:28:16] **Sachi** Oh, yeah.

[00:28:17] **Kendra** And this was originally published in its full form in 2019. And it was translated in 2020, so like right off the bat. And actually, this is two books kind of bound up in one. So if you think of BREASTS as the first book, that is about a woman who is a novelist. And her sister and her niece come to Tokyo from Osaka to . . . well, her sister wants a boob job. And so there is like pamphlets of all the different ways. And being working class people, it's like, how are you going to pay for this? And then there are these little snippets of the niece from her journal and all of her angst about being a woman and periods and like all of this woman-y stuff. And it all is very fascinating.

[00:29:06] **Kendra** And when that book ends after 150 pages, we go into the second part, which is about the narrator and her asexuality, but still wanting a child. But what does that mean when you get a sperm donor? Because she doesn't want to have sex with anyone, so how do you have a child? And there's complications with Japanese law, and she'd have to go international or have a random volunteer donor, which is like. . . . So there's that on one hand and also being a working-class artist, a woman who writes and trying to maneuver the world without a lot of money and coming from a very difficult background. There's also a bunch of other women characters and artists. And I was absolutely fascinated by this book, especially the second book. And so it really looks at what it means to be a woman in Japan, in contemporary Japan. And I was just blown away. I can see why she's now like this big literary star in Japan because, oh my goodness. It's just so fascinating.

[00:30:17] **Sachi** Yes, I very much enjoyed this too. And like, I don't know, I feel like I was so impressed by this book because, like, similar to what we were talking about with KIM JIYOUNG: BORN 1982, is that women are still very much oppressed in Asia and Japan as well. You know, people talk about Japan as like this idealic society, but they



have so many problems too, like every country does. Like gender inequality is one of the biggest issues, and that's one of the biggest reasons why my mom left Japan to move and immigrate to the States is because she was definitely very independent and, you know, a free thinker and didn't go with the normal gender norms that are so pushed on people in Japanese society.

[00:31:09] **Sachi** And knowing what I know about Japanese culture and how women are still very much objectified and don't have leadership positions in companies, you know, are still treated like they're just secretaries and are expected to make tea for everyone at the beginning of the meeting, for all the men in the room and things like that. . . . Like this book being so focused on the female experience and talking about things that are so shuttered away of like, you know, breasts and eggs, like talking about our eggs that are in our bodies as women and our female bodies, like, you know, the breasts and the boob job thing like. . . . That, I feel like is so not even just something that like we talk about very openly in the States, but like they definitely don't talk about that in Japan. So to have this book be so focused on that and be published in Japan, like I felt like claps for Mieko Kawakami! Like this is huge, and I'm glad that it's getting praise, and she is being recognized for this great piece of work because, like, they need this stuff out there, and they need to focus on this. Like similar to the previous book that I picked, like, nothing's going to change if these stories don't get highlighted and if these experiences aren't examined and shown that gender inequality still exists.

[00:32:40] **Sachi** And so I had talked to my sister about this, as I was reading it. She's like, what are you reading today? And I was like, this book. And she's like, BREASTS AND EGGS? She's like, what is that? And I was like, it's from a Japanese author, and it's super progressive for women. And I love it so much just because it's so not like that over there right now. I really appreciated that. And we'll obviously talk a lot about it in our discussion episode. But, you know, I'm so glad that you brought this book to my attention. You know, you're the one who first told me about it. And I loved it so much because of everything that it highlights and stands for, so. . . .

[00:33:17] **Kendra** I'm so excited for it. I'm so glad Europa snapped it up. And also the audiobook rights sold, which it's narrated by Emily Woo Zellar. We stan.

[00:33:27] **Sachi** She's the best.

[00:33:29] **Kendra** She's so . . . she's so good at what she does. I love her. And also Nancy Woo, if you're looking for also Asian American women narrators for Asian woman-written books, definitely go check those out. Huge favorites. You can DM me for any more favorites. I have so many.

[00:33:51] **Sachi** Kendra's got a list of great narrators.

[00:33:56] **Kendra** I do. I'm just like, oh, my word. This book is thirty hours. But at some Soneela Nankani. Of course I'm going to listen to it.

[00:34:03] **Sachi** Love it.

[00:34:05] **Kendra** But this book is longer. It's what, over 400 pages? Is that right?

[00:34:09] **Sachi** It's like 430 pages, I believe.

[00:34:11] **Kendra** Yeah. So it is a bit longer. But especially when we got to the second book, I didn't feel that it was that long because I was so fascinated by the characters. And this is such a character-driven book in so many ways. And there are so many different women interacting. And I mean, it passes the Bechdel test with flying colors.

[00:34:32] **Sachi** Oh yeah.

[00:34:32] **Kendra** Like every every page basically does. And I was obsessed, am obsessed with it. And I keep thinking about it, even though I read it like a month ago at this point. But so, yeah, I'll quit spoiling our discussion of this book. We obviously are obsessed. So we will talk about BREASTS AND EGGS by Mieko Kawakami, translated by Sam Bett and David Boyd next time for our discussion episode.

[00:34:59] **Sachi** Yes.

[00:35:00] **Kendra** This month we have Joce, who is here to recommend two books about women in translation. And I'm very excited. I love, love, love Joce's recommendations. And she always has such insightful comments. So without further ado, here is Joce.

[00:35:17] **Joce** Hi, my name is Joce. I am mostly a BookTuber on hiatus at my channel, Squibbles Reads. I can also be found blogging at thequietpond.com. And I'm also on Twitter and on Instagram (@squibblesreads).

[00:35:33] **Joce** My first pick is called ALMOND by Won-pyung Sohn, and it is translated by Joosun Lee. So first of all, I will give a content warning for some graphic violence. There is a scene with cruelty towards a butterfly, and there is also some abuse in the book as well. So this is a book about a young boy named Yunjae. He has alexithymia, and this is a condition where he is unable to experience emotions due to both of the amygdala in his brain being very small. The book opens with him as a child, and he witnesses the brutal and violent murder of his grandmother and a violent attack on his mother, which leaves her in a coma. He's singled out at school for both his alexithymia and also because he was the sole survivor of his family from this attack.

[00:36:24] **Joce** But however, because he is shy, quiet, and obedient, people don't necessarily view him as threatening in any type of way. And in contrast with that, he is contrasted with another boy that we meet in the book whose name is Gon. And he is kind of like the "bad kid" at the school. He kind of acts out behaviorally. He gets into physical fights with both kids and the staff at the school. He throws things around the classroom. He uses insults against the teachers and the staff. However, later on, we get to see Gon's family trauma and kind of how his trust has been destroyed towards everyone, no matter kind of who they are. And at this school in particular, it seems like who people think the students are and the labels that people cast on them have a large bearing on how they see themselves. And of course, this is true in real life too. And it's kind of like a like a self-fulfilling prophecy in some ways.

[00:37:25] **Joce** ALMOND also talks about how the ways that mothering and the effects of different parenting styles and parent behaviors can have on kids, including a lot of intergenerational trauma. So we see a lot of the effects of intergenerational trauma, both on the kids in Yunjae and Gon's generation as well as their parents' generation. So let me give you an example. So for one, Yunjae's grandmother insulted and shamed his mother a lot. And we kind of see the effects of that on her own mothering of Yunjae. A part that I really enjoyed about the book was that it is from Yunjae's close third-person point of view.

So we got to like celebrate and normalize his neurodiversity, and we really get to see his worldview rather than "other" him. I know there are a lot of books that are written from the perspective of a person who is neurotypical in relation to a person who is neurodiverse. And while those books can definitely be interesting, I feel like these books that come from a neurodiverse person's perspective are extremely valuable.

[00:38:33] **Joce** So I personally have never read a book with a character who has alexithymia. So as someone who does work in mental health, I was super interested in reading about his experience, like from his own lens rather than from someone else's. And further along in the book, I realized that this book is so much more than, you know, someone who doesn't experience emotions. It's about mothering. It's about the ways that we hold shame. The ways that we cast our perception of others, labeling children from the get-go and the ways that teachers and staff at school can kind of mold the people that they become. It's also about the behaviors that kids display and how, you know, kids sometimes don't have, like, humongous vocabularies. So the ways that they behave are really communicating different things to us. It's the way that they communicate. And finally, it's really special to me because it's about found family. And that's literally one of my favorite things because kind of in my own life, I've had to kind of bring people in who are really valuable to me that I share a lot of love and care for to kind of build my own found family. So any books that have that are particularly special to me.

[00:39:48] **Joce** I would recommend ALMOND to anyone who wants to read a book with a main character who is neurodiverse and is from their own perspective, obviously anyone who wants to read a book with a main character who has alexithymia, people who want to read more translated fiction by Korean authors, and enjoy books that talk about intergenerational challenges. And that book is called ALMOND by Won-pyung Sohn, and it is translated by Joosun Lee.

[00:40:16] **Joce** The second book that I picked today is called BRIGHT by Duanwad Pimwana. And it is translated by Mui Poopoksakul. So BRIGHT is about a five-year-old boy. His name is Kampol. And his father abandons him one day, tricking him into believing that he will be back after leaving him in front of some apartment complexes who are owned by this woman who lives in their village called Mrs. Tong-Jen. Kampol eventually realizes that his father is not coming back. And kind of through his process of realizing this, he needs to rely on his own, I guess, created family and the community with the people that he's surrounded by to kind of meet his basic necessities and just like that feeling of belongingness. So these people include shopkeepers and the other kids and parents who live in the village.

[00:41:13] **Joce** So the book is told in a collection of small vignettes. But they are all very linked. And it reads like a cohesive story. And I think a major theme here is the resilience and the imagination of young children. So let me give you an example. For example, so Kampol, he figures out a way to earn money and other basic necessities like food, clothing, shelter by helping out shopkeepers that live in the village. One of them, his name is Chong and is a grocery store owner and has this phone in the store. And basically what Kampol would do is that when someone would call the store, they would be looking for any one of the people who live in this village. And Kampol would run from the store to the person's home or, I don't know, their store front or wherever they were working to kind of deliver the message that they had a call waiting for them. And that was one way that he got some goods and his basic needs met by this grocery store owner. And as well, Chong also becomes like a parental figure for him.

[00:42:16] **Joce** One of my favorite vignettes was called "Crickets," and Kampol, being the cute little five year old that he is, he raises a bunch of crickets. And he closely watches things like their health, their growth, kind of how they interact with one another. And he grows attached to every single one of them. And the way that he kind of watched the crickets and, you know, the way that they were with one another and who these little crickets were spending time with kind of was a parallel to him and his own journey in meeting everyone in the village, creating this community around him. It kind of was like a mirror between me reading about him and him watching the crickets. I thought that was a really kind of cool way that the author brought me into the story in that way. And through this, obviously, Kampol, he goes through a whole range of emotions in the story. It's just so sweet. And it made me kind of feel everything that he was experiencing.

[00:43:13] **Joce** This book is actually really special to me because last year I went to the Bay Area Book Festival with one of my friends, Sue. I met her through the book community on the internet. So speaking of found family, she is totally a part of my found family. Shoutout to Sue. Basically, she kind of like took me in and kind of like mothered me in a way that is really special. And like, it's something that you don't find every day. I literally, like, took my family to her house for Thanksgiving. Like she's literally like my found family. Big shoutout to Sue. But anyways, at the event, we met people who were at the booth from the publisher of this book, which is Two Lines Press, a great indie press. Love them. And they told us about BRIGHT. And what they let us know is that it's the first book by a Thai woman that is translated to English and published in the USA. And Two Lines got to publish this book. And they were super stoked about it. They had a huge poster about it. And I was like, you know, I got to read this book.

[00:44:19] **Joce** I also chose it because there are some similarities in themes as the other book that I chose, called ALMOND. And one of the similarities, obviously, is kind of creating your own community and getting to know your own needs through the people that you meet and that you choose to remain in your life. Another similarity is the effect that our family of origin and our parents' choices have shaped us into who we are. But one difference, I guess, is that ALMOND is definitely a lot more violent and melancholy in tone, whereas BRIGHT is a lot more hopeful. And it is kind of playful because there are several characters who are really young children, like five years old and under. And it's just so cute. I love it. I would recommend BRIGHT to any readers that are looking for books, particularly about working-class characters. I think this really celebrates working-class characters, you know, what they do every day, what the day to day looks like. I would also recommend this to readers who enjoy found families and uplifting books with heartwarming characters. And obviously readers who want to read more works by Thai authors.

[00:45:29] **Sachi** Thanks so much, Joce, for your recommendations. Both ALMOND and BRIGHT sound like awesome picks for our listeners. And can't wait to pick them both up myself. I have a copy of ALMOND that is just sitting on my nightstand that I still need to get to, so I'll definitely have to move that up on my list.

[00:45:49] **Kendra** And yeah, so those are our six picks. We're very excited about all of them, if you couldn't tell. But now, Sachi, what are you currently reading?

[00:45:58] **Sachi** Currently, I just picked up SAVING RUBY KING by Catherine Adel West. And that's out from Park Row Books. I believe we recently hosted a giveaway for this book. And I have heard great things on Bookstagram about it, so I just started the audio, and I'm kind of going back and forth between the audio and print versions because I also have a print copy. What are you reading?

[00:46:25] **Kendra** I am reading *RUNNING* by Natalia Sylvester, and this is out from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. And this is about a young woman whose dad is a politician. And she is coming to the point in her life where she realizes she disagrees with some of her father's platforms and the things that he campaigns on and different things. And so it's just that coming of age for her. And we here at Reading Women are huge Natalia Sylvester fans.

[00:46:57] **Sachi** Yes.

[00:46:57] **Kendra** Her book *EVERYONE KNOWS YOU GO HOME* was shortlisted, I think, in 2018.

[00:47:01] **Sachi** I believe you're right.

[00:47:03] **Kendra** For the Reading Women Award. And I love her work.

[00:47:07] **Sachi** She's the best. She's also just a wonderful human. Like, follow her on social media because she is just awesome. I love Natalia Sylvester.

[00:47:16] **Kendra** I will link that down in the show notes, so everyone can go check it out. She has also adorable fur children.

[00:47:23] **Sachi** Yes, she does.

[00:47:25] **Kendra** Which, we stan.

[00:47:29] **Sachi** Yes.

[00:47:29] **Kendra** All right, Sachi, where can people find you about the internet?

[00:47:32] **Sachi** People can find me on Instagram (@sachireads).

[00:47:33] **Kendra** And you all can find me around the internet (@kdwinchester). And that's it. That's our show. If you haven't yet, please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. Especially right now, this gives us a boost in the algorithm. It's incredibly helpful. We would be so grateful if you all did that. And thanks to all of you who have already done that. Of course, many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. To subscribe to our newsletter or to learn more about becoming one of our patrons, visit us at [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com).

[00:48:13] **Sachi** Be sure to join us next time when we'll be discussing *BREASTS AND EGGS* by Mieko Kawakami and *THE MEMORY POLICE* by Yoko Ogawa. In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thanks for listening.