

# EXCAVATIONS

A NOVEL

HANNAH MICHELL

DISCUSSION  
GUIDE



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe Sae and Jae’s relationship? How does Sae’s perception of her husband evolve throughout the book?
2. How do themes of oppression and activism play out in the story?
3. In school, Sae becomes politically active. “It dawned on her that events had been distilled, facts buried. If they did not know what was happening in the country, then they had no grasp of history. If they had no grasp of history, they did not know who they were.” Discuss this passage. Have you ever had a similar awakening?
4. Compare the passage above to the Chairman’s assertion to his ghostwriter: “I am only telling you the truth. History as it happened.” What did you think when you read these statements?
5. What did you make of the Chairman’s autobiography sections, especially knowing that he may be an unreliable narrator? How did they add depth to the novel? Did learning about his childhood give his later actions any clarity?
6. Sae and Myonghee are both skilled at gathering information—including secrets—from their sources. How do their methods differ? How are they similar?
7. What does *Excavations* have to say about motherhood? What about the bonds between women?
8. “Sometimes we don’t see the people closest to us,” Tae-kyu tells Sae. Do you agree with this quote? Discuss.
9. Do you think Jae should have told Sae the truth—about who he was, about his work, about everything? Do you think he ever planned to?
10. “On some level, she had known,” Michell writes of Sae. “The information was available to her but she had not interrogated it. She had willingly turned her back on the truth.” Do you agree with this?
11. What did you think about the end of the novel? Do you think Sae and Myonghee got justice?

# Q&A WITH HANNAH MICHELL

## **How did the idea for *Excavations* originate?**

I had the idea that I wanted to write a novel about an unreliable narrator—the testimony of a Chairman who personified the rags to riches story of the Korean economy (South Korea went from being the second poorest country in the world at the end of the Korean War to the 11th largest economy in 2010). I read the autobiography written by a famous Korean chairman of a now bankrupt company (the company went bankrupt because the chairman was charged with fraud and embezzlement) and I was struck by his charismatic and inspiring voice.

I wanted my own fictional Chairman to be likable but full of distortions in narrating his story. It started as an intellectual project but I really struggled to write it given what was going on in my life at the time—I had just had my second baby and all the childcare I had planned kept falling through. I couldn't put myself in the head of a CEO character who was as far removed as you can imagine from reproductive labor (nursing, wrestling children to nap).

Initially I imagined that the interview between the journalist and Chairman was a conversation between two men. I was completely stuck. I would sit in a cafe with my allotted three hours while a babysitter was with my baby and I was in agony, unable to move forward with writing but determined and yet also worried that leaving such a young baby with a babysitter would somehow disrupt our attachment. It was only when I decided to mine the tension between trying to do something professionally and honoring the kind of mother that I wanted to be that I started to make headway with the book.

However, it was a long road, disrupted, in part because of politics. After Trump became president, I found myself going to some very bleak places in the story. I was in immigration purgatory myself as I was in a stalled green card application process and though objectively I was in a very privileged position compared with most, I felt so trapped and helpless. My poor three-year-old somehow absorbed both my immigration stress and what was happening with family separations at the border and was absolutely terrified whenever I dropped him off at preschool. He was convinced that Trump was going to take me away and that I wouldn't come back. The spirit of that fraught time made it into the book. Ultimately, this book is about Korea, but I am hoping that the reader will also make some connections between the unreliable and corrupt Chairman and the Trumpian era of fake news.

### **How long did you work on this book? Did it involve special research?**

I worked on this book for 8 years. It did involve substantial research on Korean economic history as well as the history of student involvement in the Korean democratic movement of the late 1980s. I began teaching a class on Korean pop culture at UC Berkeley in 2011, but it was actually teaching a class on Asian American film and looking at Korean American scholars' work on the Korean War and the effects of U.S. militarism, as well as learning about the history and experiences of those who experienced Japanese American internment that really helped me to better articulate what was emerging as a major theme for this novel—the dissonance between an individual's memories and that of written (official) history.

### **What do you hope readers take away from the book?**

I want readers to view this as an invitation to challenge dominant historical narratives authored by those who have social, economic, and political power, and perhaps even see that it is only in collaboration with others that we can start to chip away at these histories to reveal a different story. I hope that I have been able to convey the human cost of compressed development and rapid modernization. I think it was also important to show that there can be a cost in speaking truth to power. I think it is important to convey that everyone has a breaking point in their activism. Sae was ultimately brave but it almost broke her.

I hope that readers can reflect on the different types of intimacy and love in the book. So much of the book is driven by Sae's love and desire to recover Jae, who she never knew fully, if at all, while the person who really saves her is another woman. I think a certain generation of women have been raised by narratives that instructed them to expect to be saved by men, and through heterosexual romance. This is problematic in many ways, such as the way it obscures the importance of other relationships—like sustaining and nourishing friendships between women.

Fraught motherhood is an important theme in the book, as well as the theme of chosen families. Ultimately, Myonghee—whose story resembles that of the Greek goddess Demeter—finds happiness and peace not by reuniting with her own biological daughter but in “adopting” Song-mi and Sae.

# FASCINATING FACTS

1. At the end of the Korean war in 1953, South Korea was the second poorest country in the world. It is now the 10th largest economy. How was such rapid growth possible? Through huge amounts of international aid from the U.S. and other countries and the development of an export-oriented economy.
2. In the early days of postwar reconstruction, anything that could bring in U.S. dollars was sold. Women sold their hair, which were made into wigs and exported to the rest of the world. Early in the 1970s, wigs became the number two export and accounted for almost 10% of the economy. The drive to bring in foreign currency also meant that South Korean soldiers enlisted to fight in the Vietnam War or emigrated as coalminers or nurses in places like West Germany to perform labor to fill a labor shortage. The film *Ode to My Father* (2014), directed by Yoon Je-kyoon, beautifully renders the human toll of the rapid economic development and war on ordinary families.
3. South Korea's ambitious plan for economic growth meant there were no social services available for the poor or struggling families. According to Deanne Borshay, an adoptee and documentary filmmaker, and the scholar Jodi Kim, the more children orphanages had, the more money they received in the form of international aid. By the 1960s, the overseas adoptions increased at an unprecedented rate. What began as a humanitarian gesture right after the war became big business in the decades to follow. An excellent documentary which shows the emotional cost of this is Deann Borshay's *In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010).
4. As the dictatorship wore on and news of violent acts of government suppression began to spread, college students began to stage protests. After a democratic free election was announced in 1987, some of these students graduated and became filmmakers—a reason why social critique is so prominent in many South Korean films. The director of *Parasite*, Bong Joon-ho, for example, was a student protestor during his college years. The films *1987* and *Taxi Driver* capture the high drama, emotion, and turbulence of this historical period of student protest and civil unrest.
5. In 1995, the government pivoted to investing in culture after learning that the Hollywood blockbuster *Jurassic Park* was as profitable as the foreign sales of 1.5 million Hyundai cars. South Korea's first blockbuster film was *Shiri* (1999) and borrowed many action sequences from Hollywood.
6. A decade after the pivot to support cultural exports, the melodramatic romance *Winter Sonata* became a hit in Asia—the beginning of the so-called Korean Wave.
7. In 2010, President Lee Myung-bak began a cultural policy which saw cultural projects not only as profitable exports, but a means of improving South Korea's "brand" or image, and "soft power," in part to further differentiate South Korea from North Korea. One can see how North and South Korea are often held in stark contrast in South Korean productions such as *Crash Landing on You* (2020).
8. BTS, South Korea's most beloved and prominent pop culture export, is said to represent 0.3% of the South Korean economy.
9. In 2021, South Korean cultural exports surpassed the export values of home applications and electric vehicles. The South Korean government is aiming to more than double content exports to \$25 billion by 2027.

# SAE'S READING LIST

***What Is History?*** by E.H. Carr

***What is to Be Done?*** by Vladimir Lenin

***Das Capital*** by Karl Marx

***The Communist Manifesto*** by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

***A Collection of Essays*** by George Orwell

***Lady Chatterley's Lover*** by D.H. Lawrence

***The Unbearable Lightness of Being*** by Milan Kundera

***Baek Seok: Poems of the North*** by Baek Seok