

## Banned Book Club

**Kim Hyun Sook**

**Ryan Estrada**

**Ko Hyung-Ju, Illustrator**

Iron Circus Comics (Feb 18, 2020)

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Kim Hyun Sook and Ryan Estrada's gripping graphic novel *Banned Book Club* is based on the true story of a South Korean student who learned the costs and rewards of standing up to tyranny.

Though often seen as the antithesis to North Korea's totalitarian regime, South Korea has its own complicated, and at times unsavory, political history. That history is recounted here, beginning in 1983 as Kim Hyun Sook prepares to leave her poor family and their struggling steak restaurant to attend Anjeon University with the goal of studying literature. Once there, she sees protesters calling for South Korea's President Chun to step down; she's invited to join a club that discusses books that the current government has banned. She assists as the club publishes secret newspapers to spread the truth. Their members are tracked by government agents and, in some cases, tortured.

The book's final chapter jumps forward to end with a striking parallel, as a new generation protests the 2016 corruption scandal that forced South Korea's President Park from office. The scene is an opportunity for the main characters to reunite and share their experiences; it is a powerful reinforcement of the book's emphasis on how democracies must be constantly safeguarded through education, vigilance, and action.

Relatable and appealing, the text tackles complex and nuanced aspects of political control, including the power of fear mongering and the dangers of pacification through entertainment, evidenced in the Chun regime's "3-S" policy: sex, sports, and screens are used to distract citizens from political corruption.

The book's manga-style art emphasizes and sometimes exaggerates facial expressions, helping to convey the emotions that drive its characters' actions. Combining real-life political intrigue with an appealing cast, *Banned Book Club* is an exciting, thought-provoking graphic *bildungsroman*.

PETER DABBENE (January / February 2020)

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