



No Couches in Korea

Kevin M Maher

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Maher's book will prove pleasurable and informative reading for anyone interested in Korean culture as observed through Western eyes.

Kevin M. Maher's *No Couches in Korea* tells the tale of the author's extended period in South Korea during the late 1990s, teaching English in the city of Pusan. In general, Maher's memoir does a good job of portraying the shocks any Westerner might expect to encounter with such a dramatic shift in geography and culture, and how one acclimates.

Maher did not know what to expect when he signed a one-year contract to teach English at a private academy in Pusan. He'd never taught before and had never been to Asia. What did he find? A brace of fellow teachers from the West, all characterized by various degrees of cynicism and frivolity—with a minimum of dedication thrown in—and what he himself describes as an expat “bubble,” which sometimes seemed hard to break out of.

Maher excels at characterization, displaying an ability to paint a portrait with just a few descriptive jabs accompanied by strong doses of dialogue. In this manner he portrays fellow teachers (both Western and Korean), a rich assortment of Korean students, and other characters with great skill.

The author's eye for the telling detail is keen, as when he describes the neighborhood where he resides as being anchored by a popular dog meat marketplace, which he at first finds disturbing but eventually comes to understand as part of an old and dying version of Korean culture. Nearly all the customers he sees appear to be senior citizens.

One thing that slows down the narrative is Maher's insistence on relating various flirtations and love affairs within the community of teachers, as well as his own false starts with Korean women and his on-again off-again long-distance relationship with his stateside girlfriend, Sasha. These detours do little to enhance or advance his story. This is particularly the case in a forty-plus-page interlude describing Maher's final experience of breaking up with Sasha following his return home after having spent two hundred pages in Korea.

The narrative takes quite a long time to get back on track. After a brief return to South Korea, Maher migrates to Brazil for a short stint and then winds up living in Washington Heights, Manhattan, working a low-level position creating presentations for Wall Street investment bankers. On stray weekends, he occasionally dips his toes into Korean enclaves such as that found in Flushing, Queens. But all of this seems extraneous to the tale Maher originally set out to tell: that of his life in Pusan.

Maher re-engages with his mission when he relates several visits to Seoul beginning in 2000, and finally a 2016 return to Pusan bearing “four bulky bags” of the first edition of *No Couches in Korea*.

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EDWARD RENEHAN (April 25, 2017)

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