

Somebodys Daughter

Marie Myung-Ok Lee

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With the name Sarah Thorson, a girl must be a fair-skinned, blue-eyed blonde Lutheran who loves *lutefisk* herring. Or so the young protagonist of this delicate novel once thought. Yet, mirror glimpses remind her that she has “black, straight hair, eyes the shape and color of apple seeds.”

Adopted from Korea by well-meaning but unenlightened parents, Sarah never fit in her family’s Minnesota Norwegian culture. Her mother smears her with sunblock in summer to prevent her skin from darkening further, while the couple’s biological daughter runs free of zinc oxide. The family never mentions Korea, never teaches Sarah about her ethnic heritage; they say her birth parents died in a car accident. In a recurring dream, Sarah almost—but not quite—meets her birth mother.

To cope, Sarah invents a fragmented, imaginary self: “The Fabulous Sarah Thorson, I knew, tans a honey-gold, which makes her look even blonder, her seaglass eyes paler. I depended on her to get through the day.” However, the Fabulous Sarah Thorson can’t get the girl through all the years, and when she reaches college age, she signs up for a year in Korea, initially to learn the language and culture of her native land, but ultimately to learn the story of her birth mother.

The author, a Brown University graduate, has published four young adult novels, including *Saying Goodbye* and the acclaimed *Finding My Voice*. In the Author’s Note for this first adult effort, she explains that she had been writing Sarah stories for years (winning an O. Henry honorable mention for one adaptation of a chapter from this book, plus awards from the Friends of American Writers and the American Library Association). Eventually, she realized that the finished work needed to include the birth mother’s point of view. Awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, Lee went to Korea to take oral histories of women who had placed their babies for adoption. These interviews inform the authentic voice of Lee’s Korean characters, especially Sarah’s birth mother.

Kyung-Sook is a country girl seduced by a young American Peace Corps worker with promises of a prosperous married life in the Beautiful Country. Lee intersperses Kyung-Sook’s story, told in third person, with Sarah’s first-person narrative. The device works: the reader identifies with the daughter, yet gets to know the mother intimately.

Intimacy is a poignant theme in this fine novel. Mother-child relationships are intimate, but can shift with adoption, just as the intimacy between lovers can change because of location and pregnancy, and the intimacy of a family can be affected by the insecurities inherent both in being different and in accepting one who is different. Lee explores all these relationships in straightforward, yet ardent language.

Recurring reference to Sarah’s recurring childhood dream would have made her decision to seek her birth story seem more natural, but overall *Somebody’s Daughter* is both heart-warming and heart-breaking.

KAREN MCCARTHY (August 18, 2009)

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