

THE PICTURE BRIDE

Lee
Geum-yi

translated by
An Seonjae

Reading Group Guide

Praise for The Picture Bride

“Lee Geum-yi has a gift for taking little-known embers of history and transforming them into moving, compelling, and uplifting stories. I loved Willow from the first page to the last. Loved her courage, and her tenacious, yet caring, beautiful soul. *The Picture Bride* is the ultimate story of the power of friendship—a must read!”

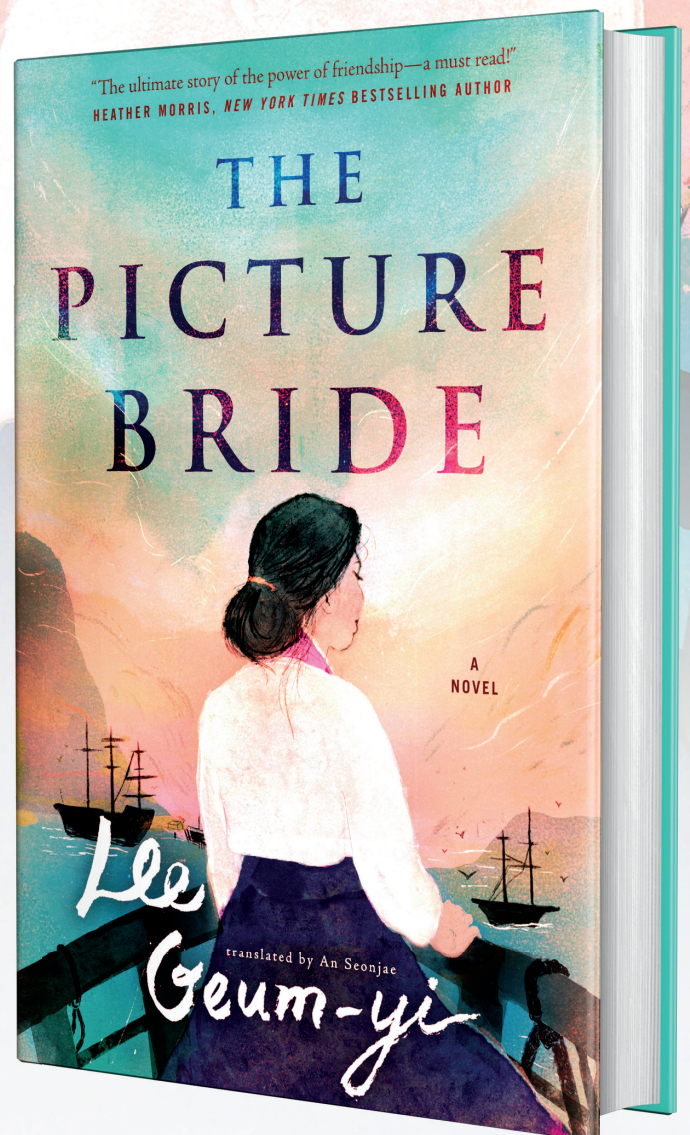
—HEATHER MORRIS,
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Tattooist of Auschwitz and *Three Sisters*

“A fascinating journey into the world of Korean ‘picture brides’ whose lives take unexpected turns as they land on distant shores. A beautiful testimony to those women bold and determined enough to leave behind all that was familiar, seeking a better life.”

—LISA WINGATE,
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Before We Were Yours* and
The Book of Lost Friends

“A transporting and immersive story that will enthrall historical fiction readers. Poignant and moving, its unforgettable characters will stay with you long after you’ve finished reading.”

—CHANEL CLEETON,
New York Times bestselling author of
The Most Beautiful Girl in Cuba



Discussion Questions

1. What motivates the three girls—Willow, Hongju, and Songwha—from the same village but of disparate social and economic status to leave their family and go to Hawai'i to pick husbands about whom they knew nothing, except the fading photos of the men that a matchmaker shows them?
2. On the voyage to Hawai'i, the girls were held back for a few weeks in Japan in order to take literacy and medical tests. What does this indicate about the US immigration policy and ideology thereof at the time? How is it the same or different now?
3. Willow and Hongju overcome their prejudices against Songwha for her lowly social origin as they travel together as picture brides. How do Willow's social relationships and racial outlook change and expand as she moves from Korea to Hawai'i via Japan, and from a sugar plantation to the city, going through different jobs and businesses?
4. The Korean migrant workers in Hawai'i had waited over ten years before they were allowed to bring picture brides, which was after 1910 as Japanese subjects. As such, the men were much older than their brides and the marriage brokers deceived the girls regarding the men's ages. How did the three girls cope with the deception once they landed in Hawai'i as indentured?
5. What does Taewan's scar reveal about the system of servitude that controlled the Asian laborers at the sugar plantation? How did that episode and the circumstance surrounding it impact Taewan's relationship with Willow?
6. At the graves at Ewa, Taewan and Willow exchange stories of their past for the first time, which becomes a pivotal point in their marital relationship. What brought them together to forge solidarity, if not affection between this married couple? What about this moment allowed them to bond in a way they'd be unable to so far?
7. Pusan Ajimae painted a picture of Hawai'i as a paradise and showed staged but faded photos of young men on plantations or riding automobiles. When the girls arrived, they faced the harsh reality of abject poverty. In the end, however, Hongju drives a car and Willow owns a farm without the help of their husbands. Did they realize their dreams? What did the women gain and what did they lose in the process?
8. How did the friendship and bonding among the three women help build each other up and overcome the hardship and challenges? What were some of the risks these women took in order to maintain that relationship?
9. What roles did Christianity and the church play in the lives of the first generation Korean immigrants in Hawai'i beyond caring for their spiritual welfare? How did the ethnic Korean church impact the three women who were not Christian?
10. The first generation Korean immigrants in Hawai'i appear to be persistent and innovative in their efforts to appropriate Americanization for their own national, communal and individual interests through the education of their children. What were some of the ways and how were they successful?
11. How does Taewan's participation in the armed resistance in China affect his wife and children back in Hawai'i? What is the heaviest cost for his lengthy absence?
12. When Hongju's husband, Doksam returned to Korea with their son Songil, she chose to stay behind. Songwha on the other hand returned to Korea alone leaving her daughter in the care of Willow. These two women made difficult decisions on their own even though that means they would never see their respective child again. What were the reasons for such decisions?
13. When Pearl discovers the secret of her birth, she doesn't seem shocked or affected in any dramatic sense. What do you think was the reason? The title of the novel in Korean is *Aloha, My Mothers*. Would that title provide a clue? If so, in what ways?
14. Pearl's maternal genealogy shows transgenerational signs of shamanic spirit possession: from Kumhwa, the shaman, to her daughter Okhwa who went insane presumably due to spirit possession; her granddaughter Songwha is touched by the illness of spirit possession (mubyong); and Pearl, who seems to have inherited the dancing spirit. Why do you think the author makes the power of spirit diminish in the case of Pearl?
15. David wants to join the US military to fight in the Asian Theater during WWII. His decision was not out of patriotism for America necessarily but to fulfill the duty of the first son of the household. What is the chain of logic behind his decision and what does this say about the position of Korean Americans at the time?
16. Today many industrialized countries including South Korea attract a large number of marriage migrants whose paths are not too different from the picture brides in this novel. How might this novel help us see the risks that women marriage migrants might take, and help educate them and prevent possible perils?

Recommended Further Reading

Beechert, Edward D., *Working in Hawai'i: A Labor History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1985).

Chang, Roberta with Wayne Patterson, *The Koreans in Hawai'i: A Pictorial History, 1903-2003* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

Ch'oe, Yong-ho, *From the Land of Hibiscus: Koreans in Hawai'i, 1903-1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

Patterson, Wayne, *The Ilse: First-Generation Korean Immigrants in Hawai'i, 1903-1973* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000).

Song, Cathy, *Picture Bride*
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

Sunoo, Sonia Shinn, *Korean Picture Brides: 1903-1920: a Collection of Oral Histories* (Indiana: Xlibris, 2002).

Guide written by Chungmoo Choi, a professor of Korean literature and culture at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Healing Historical Trauma in South Korean Film and Literature*.



About the Author

Lee Geum-yi was born in 1962, in her grandmother's house in the small, mountainous village of Chungcheongbuk-do, Korea. She became enthralled with the charms of storytelling early on, having spent her childhood under the influence of her grandmother's bedtime stories. Since then, Lee has published over fifty books in South Korea, and her work has been translated around the world. Beloved by readers and literary critics alike, many of her books have been adapted into TV series, musicals, and webtoons. Lee Geum-yi lives in Seoul, South Korea, with her husband, son, and her old rescue dog, Lulu. *The Picture Bride* is her first novel to be translated into English.

You can find out more about her at: www.leegeumyi.com.

Photo courtesy of the author