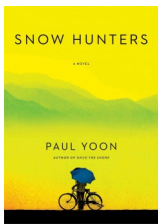


A North Korean Emigré to Brazil



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Want to read a novel but feeling pressed for time with all the craziness of back-to-school and fall a-coming? If so, try this new one, the highly lyrical *Snow Hunters* by Korean-American Paul Yoon. It tells the story of a North Korean prisoner of war who refuses to return home after the Korean War. Instead the administrators of his prison camp finds him a placement in Brazil. Yohan boards a cargo ship where the sailors befriend him and they set sail for South America. Yohan arrives at a small unnamed town in the rain as a young girl on a bicycle rides past. She gives him her umbrella. Yohan shelters himself under it as he goes in search of the tailor Kiyoshi who has agreed to give him an apprenticeship.

The former Japanese tailor and Yohan develop a relationship that is at first wordless. Neither speaks the same language. But Kiyoshi is both very kind and very observant. When Yohan wakes in the middle of the night with nightmares, Kiyoshi prepares him a bath and makes him hot tea. This ex-Japanese tailor also notices how Yohan returns from delivering the clothes with odd objects found in the alleys: ?a cup, a pocketknife, a shaving brush, a new handkerchief in its box.? At one point, Kiyoshi asks Yohan, what did you find today.

Two orphan children, Bia and Santi, also visit the shop: they come for days on end and then suddenly disappear for months. Kiyoshi allows the boy to store his small prize possessions in a cigar box in the tailor shop.

Flashbacks take the reader back to Yohan's life in the prison camp where Yohan's childhood friend suffers from painful wounds to his eyes that have blinded him. One Christmas one of the American nurses invites Yohan to dance. Other historical scenes include a few with Yohan's father before he died.

Yoon's writing has a poetic, dreamlike quality to it. There's one scene where his father dances wildly during the year's first snowfall, and another when he juggles balls when he thinks no one is watching him. In fact, acrobats and jugglers people both Yohan's past and his present Brazilian life.

Yohan bonds with the young children. He looks out for them and offers them gifts of food. He becomes friends with the church groundskeeper too who shares with Yohan surprising facts about Kiyoshi's past.

In a small space, this novel explores the dark repercussions of war on a young man's psyche as well as the deep loneliness of a newcomer to a foreign country. The writing is beautiful and clear as it transports you to other places, other times.

For two additional books featuring North Koreans, try Blaine Harden's nonfiction *Escape from Camp Fourteen* and Adam Johnson's beautiful novel, *The Orphan Master's Son* ..

Posted by Dory L. on September 3, 2013

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