



Everything Asian

a novel

by Sung J. Woo

Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press

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Book Summary:

You're twelve years old. A month has passed since your Korean Air flight landed in lovely Newark Airport. Your sixteen-year-old sister is miserable. Your mother isn't exactly happy, either. You just met your father for the first time, and although he's nice enough, he might be, well – how can you put this delicately – a loser.

You can't speak English, but that doesn't stop you from working at *East Meets West*, your father's gift shop in a strip mall, where there are not only customers to wait on but neighboring stores to visit. Everything is new. Nothing is the same.

Welcome to the wonderful world of David Kim.

Everything Asian weaves together two compelling stories: a dramedy of the Kim family, reunited for the first time in America, and of Peddlers Town, a depressed, second-class mall where the Kims have their store. Told in alternating chapters, my first novel offers a distinctive slant on the immigrant story.

Set in early-1980's suburban New Jersey, *Everything Asian* is narrated by David Kim, who details the family's first year in the U.S. together with equal amounts of humor and pathos. They encounter competition in the mall; they literally have to fight fire; they attempt to befriend Americans. They celebrate a birthday at a bowling alley and cook a turkey on Thanksgiving. Through it all, the Kims try to understand what it means to be a family in their new country.

While David's observations take center stage, they alternate with chapters told from different perspectives, including the other members of the Kim clan and the various merchants in the mall. These multiple points of view flesh out the picture of life at Peddlers Town as well as show the Kims through outsider's eyes, offering a broadened understanding of the family.



Back Story:

The story of *Everything Asian* is the story of my own life. Like the protagonist David Kim, at 10, I immigrated to the U.S. from South Korea with almost no knowledge of the English language to reunite with my father. I spent most of my adolescence working in a similar gift shop. Of course just about everything in the novel is fictitious. For example, one key element of *Everything Asian* is the relationship between David and his father, and if someone were to compare the facts of my life to the novel, they would find a great disparity. Check out the *Lives* column I wrote for The New York Times Magazine (<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/17/magazine/17lives-t.html>).

I believe this to be the most gratifying power of fiction, to reimagine a different past, to relive certain moments of your life through characters you've created.

Related essay: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/nyregion/long-island/04Rgen.html?ref=new-jersey&pagewanted=all>

Early Reviews:

***Kirkus Reviews* (Starred Review):**

Cleverly concatenated stories about the experience of Korean immigrants make up Woo's loosely structured novel.

The story initially concerns a brother and sister, Joon-a and In Sook Kim (aka David and Sue), revisiting Peddlers Town, a "sad-sack of a strip mall" where a quarter of a century before their parents owned an intermittently successful gift store, which has since been torn down to make way for a Home Depot. After this brief opening we're whisked back into the past, to the time when their father set up shop, trying to become successful before sending for his wife back in Korea. David becomes one of the primary narrators, as he recounts with both humor and pathos his growing up and gradual Americanization. Along the way we meet other shop owners in Peddlers Town, including Mr. Hong, the only other Korean, who owns In the Bag, a luggage store, and Dmitri, owner of HiFi FoFum. Everyone's trying to make it, of course, not necessarily to strike it rich but to own a small piece of the elusive American Dream. Woo eventually shifts to a more neutral narrative voice, one that advances our understanding of characters who exist on the periphery of David's world. The Kims decide that to become more authentically American they should speak English, so they enroll in an evening ESL class, where they discover that the usually deferential Mrs. Kim is falling for her American instructor. The bemused tone shifts when an American detective puts out his shingle in Peddlers Town and then follows Mr. Kim, only to discover that on his shopping trips every Monday he's been cheating on his wife. A novel that both delights and instructs.



Publisher's Weekly (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6621933.html>):

In this charming tale of family, community and the struggle for understanding, young Korean immigrant David Kim learns to acculturate to a new American life. After five years on their own in Seoul, 12-year-old David, his big sister and mother reunite with his father in Oakbridge, N.J. Now known as Harry, David's father has a gift shop in a rundown strip mall called Peddlers Town. Though told largely by a grown-up David, some chapters switch to a third-person voice to examine other characters, including members of the Kim family and the other store owners at Peddlers Town (including an American with a cross-dressing son and a down-on-his-luck detective). Woo eschews immigrant clichés to focus on complicated familial relationships and surprising, sympathetic characters; alternating between humor and melancholy, Woo's text strikes a true chord while drawing readers into its strange, strip-mall world.

Booklist:

Newly arrived in the States from Korea in the early 1980s, Dae Joon, 12, does not know his dad and does not want to. Father left five years ago to make a home for his family in New Jersey. Now Dae Joon ("David" in America) and his older sister must adapt to a new world, working after school in Dad's Asian gift store in the shabby Peddlers Town mall, attending ESL classes with their embarrassing parents, and discovering secrets and betrayal. Told in sharp, immediate vignettes, mostly from the boy's viewpoint, this debut novel captures the contemporary immigration struggle, but it is also an elemental family drama of fury and tenderness, affecting all the characters. Dae Joon's mother cannot speak the language and remains angry that her husband left her behind so long. But what about Dae Joon's loneliness? Woo also shows the ironic satisfactions that come with speaking a second language: the joy of insulting locals to their faces without their understanding. A great addition to the titles listed in Booklist's "Core Collection: The New Immigration Story" (August 2005). — Hazel Rochman

School Library Journal (May 2009, "Adult Books for High School Students" column):

Adult/High School—David Kim, formerly known as Dae Joon, has just turned 12 years old and moved to New Jersey from Korea. After five years of living with his mother and his older, moody sister, he must reconnect with a father he does not remember and get used to his American life, which consists of going to school and working at his parents' shop, East Meets West. In a series of interwoven short stories, Woo captures both the difficulty of transitioning from adolescence into adulthood and the additional challenges of making that transition in a new country. The author presents, through the boy's perspective, a chapter about an American acquaintance who experiments with wearing pantyhose under his clothes. Woo imbues the story, like others in the collection, with David's overall sense of



confusion about this man's American ways. With a mix of humor and drama, *Everything Asian* makes a fine addition to recreational reading lists and a good companion to Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (Roaring Brook/First Second, 2006).— Sarah Krygier, Fairfield Civic Center Library, Fairfield, CA

Advance Praise:

A. Manette Ansay, author of *Vinegar Hill* and *Blue Water*

Everything Asian is a tender, funny, beautifully written novel-in-stories, each a sparkling step in the coming-of-age journey of a boy straddling two cultures with remarkable humor and grace. First-time author Sung J. Woo has created both lasting characters and a timeless portrait of a community.

Stewart O'Nan, author of *Last Night at the Lobster* and *Songs for the Missing*

In its clear-eyed take on family and community, *Everything Asian* is *Everything American*. The proprietors of this roadside New Jersey shopper's village are by turns dreamy and despairing as their fortunes—like the local economy—change. Sung J. Woo has crafted a debut rich in character and event.

Min Jin Lee, author of *Free Food for Millionaires*

Everything Asian is a wonderful debut novel about the birth and growing pains of today's new Americans. Woo's marvelous characters embody truth, tenderness and yearning.

Brian Morton, author of PEN/Faulkner Award finalist *Starting Out in the Evening*

In this lovely first novel, Sung Woo explores the sweetness and pain of family life, the awkward glory of growing up. *Everything Asian* glows with delicacy, compassion, and wit.

Chuck Wachtel, author of PEN/Hemingway Citation winner *Joe the Engineer*

Wise, unsparing, poignant, devastating, funny: few writers, new or otherwise, attempt to achieve what this remarkable novel does. In a varied, compelling constellation of chapters, in a voice possessed of a grace that can make the complex simple, its central character witnesses the unsolvable mystery of his own life in the concentric circles of people that surround him, beginning with family and community and extending to something universal.

Alexander Chee, author of *Edinburgh*

Funny, smart, and affecting, *Everything Asian* takes on the heartbreak of being the less than ideal Korean American immigrant with a laugh. I was won over right away. Sung J. Woo shows himself to be an astute satirist in this debut novel, with this story of a young man trying to live up to his ideals for himself first before he makes anyone else happy with who or what he is.



Brief Bio:



Sung J. Woo's short stories and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *McSweeney's*, and *KoreAm Journal*. A graduate of Cornell University with an MFA from New York University, he lives in Washington, New Jersey. (photo: Sandra Nissen)

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