

The price they paid

Chang-Rae Lee's latest novel follows survivors of the Korean War



The Surrendered
by Chang-Rae Lee, Riverhead Books, 2010, Hardcover, 469 pages, \$26.95

BY: ELLIOTT BRONSTEIN
STREET NEWS SERVICE

"I can't go on, I'll go on."
That was Samuel Beckett at the end of his 1953 novel, "The Unnamable." But it might have been June Han and Hector Brennan, the two main characters in Chang-Rae Lee's "The Surrendered," his massive novel about war and peace. June and Hector meet in 1953 in the first months of Korea's uneasy ceasefire. They have both lived through hell; what neither of them realizes is that war has ruined both of them for living anywhere else.

"The Surrendered" is Lee's fourth novel, and by far his most ambitious in theme, scope and intricacy. Ranging from Manchuria in 1934 to Korea in the early 1950s to New Jersey, New York and Italy in the 1980s, "The Surrendered" measures the weight of war on soldiers, civilians and children alike. When June meets Hector, she is a teenage orphan who's lost her entire family to the fighting; Hector is a young man who's merely lost his soul. When they reunite three decades later in the United States, both are staggering under the load of their memories: of the war of course, but also of Sylvie Tanner, the missionary wife who ran the Korean orphanage where June and Hector washed up after the fighting stopped. Both of them loved Sylvie and both believed she could save them — though beautiful, frail Sylvie, the childhood victim of Manchuria's bloody conflict two decades earlier who learned to use a needle to keep her own demons in check, offered up her own surrender.

Lee's somber, lumbering novel contains long sections of extraordinary power. His sequences of war are a triumph of storytelling. The young June's desperate long walk to save her tiny brother and sister; Hector's moment of truth with a young Korean prisoner of war — Lee renders these episodes with brutal, mesmerizing clarity. In one scene, Lee describes a children's soccer game at the Korean orphanage that suddenly takes a turn:

"... Whereas June was June, someone to avoid, or at least to give a wide berth to. But now June was bringing the action right to her. If Mi-Young was near, June would bump



With her brother on her back a war weary Korean girl trudges by a stalled M-26 tank, at Haengju, Korea. June 9, 1951. MAJ. R.V. SPENCER, USAF (NAVY)

her, and whenever she had the ball June would lean into her roughly and fiercely kick at the ball ... By the end of the match they had gouged jagged little cuts into each other's ankles and calves with their toenails ... Sylvie announced that the next goal would be the winner. By this point Hector had ceased cleaning the tools, caught up, too, in the action."

I read this sequence propped up in bed, long after my own lights-out, unable to put the book down. I was there, I was frozen at the edge of the field waiting breathlessly for the game — and the scene — to end.

And here is a brief, indelible glimpse of Hector years later, just before his life would fall apart once again:

"After he paid for the jams and some fresh hot fried bread he went to the liquor store across the street and spent what was left ... The warmed, dampened sidewalks reminded him of certain sweet hours of childhood — well before he was much of a man, well before anyone had found him out."

Sadly, like so many 400 page novels, "The Surrendered" would have been better served by 100 fewer pages. Most of the scenes that form the present-day climax of the novel lack the focus and power of what passed before. The storyline itself — June's dying search in Italy for her son who had abandoned her — fails the promise of the earlier sections. It is as if Lee had lost sight of his own strengths as a novelist. He is a brilliant storyteller, but a poor explainer. When he falls back on exposition, the novel

goes flat.

Yet despite a mostly forgettable and occasionally preposterous last hundred pages, June, Hector and Sylvie are fierce, unforgettable characters. They can't go on, they go on.

What Matters

by J. Thiemeyer

I consider
the folderol, the hurley-
burley and delight
in it, so in it, the chaos that drove me
carried me for what seemed
forever
or the forever that mattered
I forget
why I was invited
with my soul to be here
today
in this place for this
moment
and what matters, why?
who I am,
who we are,
and all the rest
that comes with it
the folderol, the hurley-
burley

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