INTERVIEW

On Inspiration and Identity — An Interview with Juhea Kim

by Andrea Färber



Juhea Kim © Nola Logan

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The first time I encountered the name 'Juhea Kim' was in the English section of my local bookstore. I know we're not supposed to judge a book by its cover, but the colorful artwork of *Beasts of a Little Land* drew me in. I left the bookstore without a purchase, thinking of all the unread books still waiting on my bookshelf, but out of sight wasn't out of mind. Two weeks later I purchased a copy. Almost a year afterwards, *Beasts of a Little Land* has gained immense popularity, and it seems to still not have peaked in its success. Juhea Kim has since become a guest editor for Tint Journal's first anthology *Tinted Trails: Exploring Writings in English as a Second Language*, finished the script for her second novel, and serves as an executive producer as *Beasts of a Little Land* has been optioned for a TV series. In this interview, conducted in written form, she discusses writing in multiple languages, how her Korean heritage influenced the creation of *Beasts of a Little Land*, and her work as editor-in-chief of the online magazine *Peaceful Dumpling*.

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Andrea Färber: You were born in South Korea and moved to the United States at age 9. *Beasts of a Little Land* is a historical novel that follows the Korean independence movement. Obviously, the (hi)story is deeply connected to your own roots. When did you start writing creatively? How did you decide on the topic of the novel, and how much of your creative writing in general is influenced by your heritage?

Juhea Kim: I started writing very early. Family legend has it that I learned to read and write when my older sister entered first grade at age seven—which means I was just two. I do remember starting creative writing in earnest when I was around age four. I wrote these philosophical essays on "the meaning of life" using brush-tip pens for calligraphy. I was a pretty strange and serious child! Eventually, writing became an intermittent channel for creativity in my life that was more dominated by classical music and ballet. But I wasn't talented enough to pursue music or ballet as a career. *And* I didn't get any early encouragement in terms of writing, either. It just so happened that I believed in myself more with writing. There was somewhere inside me a voice that always said, "I disagree, I *can* write."

After some years of struggle, I finally had my big break when literary agent Jody Kahn agreed to represent me. I was elated—but then I asked her when she'd be able to sell my short story collection, and she told me that she wants me to write a novel instead. I was devastated: I was extremely poor and surviving on oatmeal and canned beans. I didn't have time to sit there and write a novel for a few years, I needed money for rent and food right away. So I went running outside to clear my head. As I was jogging in the snow-covered

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Fort Tryon Park, this hunter lost in the woods came into my head. A vision of a tiger leapt into the scene, too. My mind filled with images from some of the last chapters of the book, too. I ran back home and wrote what became the prologue of *Beasts of a Little Land* in one sitting. So, I guess you could say that I didn't find the topic, the topic found me—a little like getting a wand at Olivander's.



'Beasts of a Little Land' © Andrea Färber

So much of my creative writing is influenced by my Korean heritage. But this wasn't always the case. Back when I worked at a New York publisher in the early 2010s, the vast majority of the books I saw getting bought and praised were by white people, for white people, of white people. I didn't think I stood a chance with my heritage, my background, my identity. But things only started really clicking for me when I owned who I am. It's because your identity (also language) shapes your values, and your values shape your book. My Korean identity and my Korean language shaped the values that inform *Beasts of a Little Land.* Without my identity and language, I couldn't have written it.

Andrea: You speak Korean and English fluently, and graduated from Princeton University with a degree in Art and Archeology and a certificate in French. Do you write exclusively in English, or do you write in Korean and French as well? What makes you decide on the language you choose to write in, and do your ideas come to you in a specific language?

Juhea: It's funny you should ask because I have written exclusively in English for decades now, but I just attempted my first Korean creative writing as an adult. This was for the pilot episode of *Beasts of a Little Land* series adaptation, and I needed something to discuss with the producers. I was surprised by how well it turned out—but novel writing is much more complex than screenwriting, so I don't think I'll attempt to write a novel in Korean. And I certainly am not good enough to do that in French! However, my knowledge of my two other languages deepens my understanding of my own soul, which in turn increases my capacity to understand other souls. And yes, some ideas come to you in a specific language. A few weeks ago as I was close to finishing my second novel, I kept wanting to write *frémissement* and couldn't think of a suitable corresponding word in English. Novel writing is a form of problem solving, and your brain likes to pull out all the tools from the toolbox and try this and that. Having a second or third language is like having different wrenches and screwdrivers in your kit. So, at that moment my brain pulled out a French screwdriver.

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Andrea: Do you perceive any differences between the original English version of *Beasts of a Little Land* and the Korean translation? I understand that you have been involved with the translation of the novel into Korean as well. On Instagram you said that "it felt like I was writing the novel from scratch in another language". Can you elaborate on that? How has this experience been for you to help bring your novel alive in your native language?

Juhea: I used to tell people that it took 6 years to get *Beasts* out into the world: 2.5 years to write, 2.5 years to revise, and some months to edit with my US publisher. But now I tell people it took 7 years, because I spent a year reviewing the Korean translation from the very first page to the last page, several times over. First they sent the translator's (the incomparable Park So-hyeon) manuscript. I reviewed it and sent it back. Then they had a copyeditor review it and returned it to me. I reviewed it again—comparing all versions so far! And then I returned it to the publisher. Then they sent a final version (reviewed and edited by yet another copyeditor). (This happened a few more times leading up to the publication with the "to printer" PDF.)

As you can imagine, it was an incredibly intense and stressful process. But the rewards have also been incredible. I know that it's the best Korean edition that I could ever have had; so many Korean readers have commented on the extraordinary quality of the translation. There are sentences in the Korean language that have become new favorites—and it's extraordinary to see another dimension of beauty made possible due to my native language. Korean is extremely rich in onomatopoeia. It's also a highly relational language, due to many different forms of speech—not just formal v. informal, but between ages, sexes… If you listen closely, you can also discern the form of speech spouses will use toward one another, which they wouldn't use against anyone else. So, this adds so much relational complexity, warmth, and fondness to prose. It's an honor to see all this made possible.

Andrea: *Beasts of a Little Land* was a finalist for the 2022 Dayton Literary Peace Prize, an award that recognizes "the power of the written word to promote peace". Your novel undoubtedly leaves a lasting impression on your readers, so I am curious to know - which works of fiction have left a lasting impression on you?

Juhea: I probably sound like I don't read a lot because in every interview I answer this question the same way. But it's very hard for me to find replacements to *Anna Karenina* —the perfect novel, in my opinion. I love *The Master and Margarita,* which is a stupendous work of art. I love Kafka's short stories. Maupassant's short stories are like Schumann, a touch insane, elegiac, and tender… In fact I love when you can *hear* the music of the book. These are very different works, but I think they share a consciousness of life's tragedy and profound compassion in spite of it all.

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Andrea: You are co-founder and editor-in-chief of **Peaceful Dumpling**, an online magazine that was founded in 2013 and intersects sustainable lifestyles, ecological literature and reportages. Can you tell us more about this project? What is its creation story?

Juhea: Back in 2013, I was working as an editorial assistant in New York and really needed an outlet to feel more in control of my work. So I decided to start a vegan website, because being vegan is the best thing an individual can do to reduce their contribution to the climate crisis: it reduces your carbon footprint by 73%, which means an average vegan produces about ¼ of emissions that an omnivore produces. I wanted to promote a compassionate lifestyle in a non-intimidating, joyful way. We cover recipes, fitness, sustainable fashion, clean beauty, yoga, holistic health, environment, travel, and more. We also accept submissions for fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. Our writers live and work from countries around the world, and I'm so proud of the community we've built.

Andrea: You are a guest editor for Tint Journal's upcoming anthology *Tinted Trails: Exploring Writings in English as a Second Language*, which we are very excited about! What made you decide to cooperate with Tint when you first found our proposal in your mailbox?

Juhea: First, you asked very nicely. [Laughing] I try to say yes to everyone who asks politely, as much as I can. Your mission also spoke to me on a personal level. I can't even imagine what a journal like *Tint* would have meant to me when I was growing up as an immigrant. I learned the alphabet at age 9. I wasn't fluent in English until a few years later. A platform like this would have given me so much encouragement.

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Tint Journal is acknowledging the current lingua franca of the world while also upholding the richness of other languages in our imagination and our art. It's unique and, I think, quite visionary.

Andrea: Since the release of your book, you have been tremendously busy - you participated in readings and conferences, taught an environmental fiction workshop, went to South Korea for book promotions, and surely have much more going on behind the scenes. What do you do in your free time in order to recharge your energy?

Juhea: So it is true that I have run myself down to the ground. I was just thinking about this today—and the first one year post US publication was filled with promotion. It's certainly a blessing—many authors lament the very short half-life that most books have. As soon as that

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quieted down, I sprinted to the end of my second novel draft. Afterwards I felt like all the nerve endings in my brain had burned off. I couldn't think or move out of bed for a few days. So I'm trying to be a low-functioning human being for the next few months. I love to do ballet, and I am going to practice my cello more. I relax by indulging in other forms of art. Also, nature. Going on a walk or a hike is simply the best.

Andrea: Finally, considering the huge amount of success that *Beasts of a Little Land* has received, many readers must be looking forward to your future publications. You probably cannot give too much away at this point, but can you tell us where you hope your literary journey will take you in the future?

Juhea: Well, I'm waiting to hear back from my agent what she thinks of my second novel manuscript. I have an idea for a third book, which will be again very different from the first two. I'm also serving as an executive producer for the *Beasts* series, which will be another creative challenge. And I'll be funneling whatever I achieve with these projects into my animal and environmental advocacy. I am continuing to support the Phoenix Fund and I know what cause my next book will support, too. This probably sounds chaotic but to me, it all makes sense together.

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