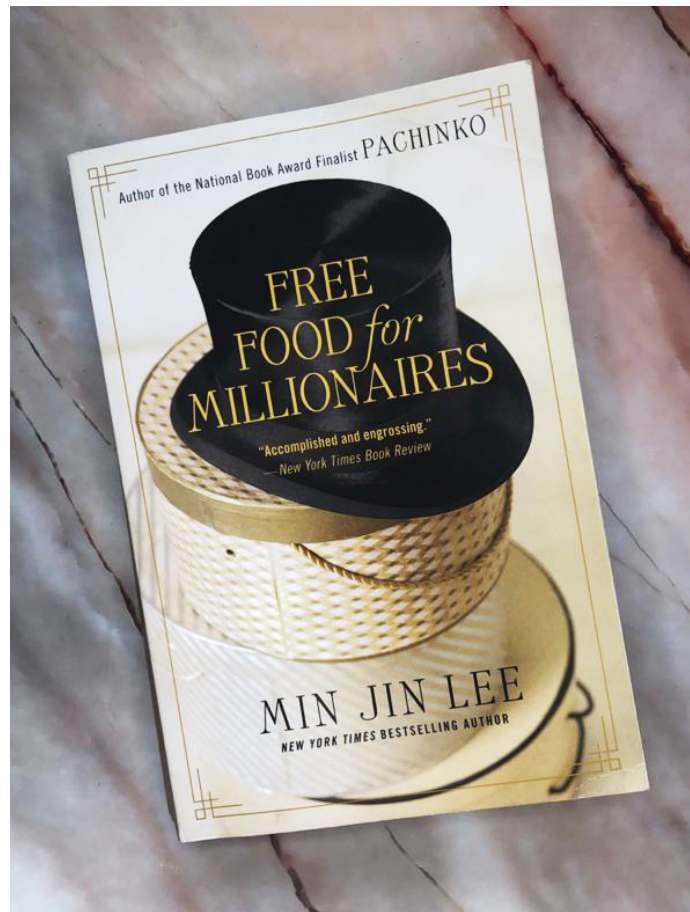


REVIEW

A Thought-Provoking Literary Feast: "Free Food for Millionaires" by Min Jin Lee — A Review

by Vanessa Cervini



‘Free Food for Millionaires’ by Min Jin Lee

In her novel *Free Food for Millionaires*, Min Jin Lee explores the roles and struggles of individuals in a society that hardly leaves room for alternative paths. She questions the traditional model of success and opens new points of access to a story that is too often exclusively considered to be about the American immigrant experience only.

When Min Jin Lee decided to leave her career in law to pursue literature, she didn't imagine the twists and turns life had planned for her in the years to come. Her path in the world of words was far from what authors nowadays consider traditional: She had no money for an MFA or the connections that allow a big break; what she did have was an unyielding sense of purpose and a deep-set New York rise and grind state of mind.

'Free Food for Millionaires' by Min Jin Lee

"Free Food for Millionaires" by Min Jin Lee ©
Vanessa Cervini Rios

Much like her favorites — great 18th-century classic authors like Tolstoy, Flaubert, Dickens and the Brontës, amongst others — her desire to write

words worth the reader's time primed over anything else. Since she was a child, learning English in the public schools of Elmhurst and Maspeth Queens and reading her hours away in the public libraries of the most ethnically diverse urban area in the entire world, she knew deep inside that the books she wanted to write were those she wanted to read again and again.

In her 11-year-long self-guided “apprenticeship” until *Free Food for Millionaires*, her first novel, was published, Lee crafted her own approach to research, and found her voice. And so, what started as an idea for a short story about the ironic habit of rich people to be the first in line to get free stuff ended up being a best seller in the US, and one of the 10 best books of 2007 for the *Times* of London, NPR's *Fresh Air* and *USA Today*.

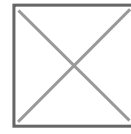
For readers looking to know more about the Asian-American experience, those who relate to the strife of adulting in the modern world, and are in for a not-so-gentle reminder to embrace the struggle, this 660 page-turner is a must-read.

Navigating Societal Expectations

The blueprint for an average young adult goes a little like this: get accepted into a good university and graduate from a career that will bring stability; find a job at a renowned company and fill your bank account; get married, have children, buy a house; become a well-respected member of society; grow old and content with the bed you made for yourself

and enjoy your time lying in it until you close your eyes... for good. Sounds about right. But ask yourself, when does life go as planned?

Enter Casey Han, who the readers meet just after her graduation from Princeton, and right before a painful confrontation with her dad that sends shock waves across their lives, both present and future. Not particularly beautiful, smart, or accomplished, it's safe to say that she is by no means a well-respected member of society, but from all the curious characters in the book — most of whom divert from the proverbial blueprint — Casey is the one tying the narrative together. More interestingly, she plays the role of a benchmark that the author sets as means for others to compare how messed up they actually are, both in and outside of the printed pages.



Min Jin Lee © M.J. Lee

In her path from a fancy dorm room to her childhood bunk bed, to homelessness, and then an actual place to call her own, the book's main character goes through many ups, downs, and circles to find out what she really wants to do with her life. In what seems like a tango number with herself, she keeps spoiling her efforts of finding stability and reaping the fruits of her labor at the last minute. One would think that in this never-ending loop readers might feel compelled to just give up on Casey completely, but Min Jin Lee masterfully hints at a challenging question that prevents them to put the book down: Do people self-sabotage, or are they fighting the idea of themselves that society force-fed them?

This question along with many others brought up by this novel is for the reader to find out. What one will certainly discover in these pages is much-needed solace from a routine. As disconcerting as seeing so many lives go awry is, thanks to the well crafted omnipresent narrative the author extends an irresistible invitation to a game of "If it were me, I would've ..."

When Worlds Intertwine

Looking at this book exclusively through the lens of the American immigrant novel genre would be extremely reductive, as its pages create a tapestry of what modern struggles look like beyond the Han family and the Korean diaspora in Queens. But the thread of race and immigration undeniably traverses the experiences the different characters face, and the expectations they have to live up to.

The author's personal experience coming from Korea as a child as well as her academic background in history cue us to question why immigrants have had such a hard time shaking a sense of "otherness" in countries like the United States. Naming it "the American complex," Lee describes colonization as an event that impregnated the American mind; as

the original colonists and the generations that followed felt profoundly inferior intellectually and culturally to those in the motherland. In her view, the term “immigrant” equates to “colonist,” affecting the social fabric for generations, perpetuating the notion that immigrants constantly have to prove themselves and should be thankful for the opportunity to be there in the first place, regardless of the cost.

What happens then when a newcomer arrives with heavy baggage — both literally and figuratively — to a melting pot where millions of dynamics and ways to see the world mercilessly clash? How much can you absorb before the foundations upon which you built your whole life collapse?

As the characters in the book reveal, otherness is manifested in the stereotypical language barrier and aspects of cultural dissonance. Still, it’s the more nuanced everyday experiences they face that shape their notions of self radically. That is especially evident in Joseph and Leah Han’s lives, imbued in strict gender roles and dutifulness, but most of all, a self-imposed aura of sadness that makes everything dull around them. Through their tortuous relationships with their children and acquaintances, the author paints a picture as meaningful as its backstory, which Lee explained in an interview with Grand Central Publishing:

“The word han can be loosely translated as a uniquely Korean sentiment of lament — an inexpressible anguish or suffering of a people from a divided nation whose national history is one of humiliation and loss. The meaning of han is considered by some to be a national cultural trait, reflecting historical oppression and isolation. That a young woman growing up in America with such enormous freedom and advantages could somehow carry with her this unconscious sense of historical suffering was something I considered throughout the writing of this book.”

Different Types of Hungry

Although the link between the content of the book and its title might not be evident right away, it comes as a sort of epiphany in its own time. Particularly in Casey's story, food is a synonym of power: Its lack indicates that you are at the bottom. As ironic as it seems, the richer you are the more free food you get and the more entitled you feel to reject it.

The characters coexisting in the pages of this novel seem radically different when it comes to money and their relationship with it: You have the douchey investment banker that lives for it, the rich daddy's girl with the golden heart who doesn't really want it, and the smart but uninspired gambler that throws it away, amongst many others. In the end, it's fascinating to see how they all rotate on the same axis, going through life as a balancing act in their roles of sons, daughters, partners, mothers, fathers, bosses, or employees. They're all hungry for more, but who isn't?

Many studies show that our brains are mostly to blame for dissatisfaction as most possess something called the optimistic bias, which is the tendency to think that the future will be better than the present. It comes as no surprise that Lee created characters based on one thing: flawed humanity. As she puts it in the foreword, "My goals for this novel were embarrassingly lofty, but at the minimum I wanted the characters to be imperfect and to be gifted, too, because I believe that is how we are all made."