



# Reading the World

Having come so far, Korean–American author MIN JIN LEE suddenly realized she had never really traveled beyond the books she had read. That’s all changed now. *Illustrated by* WASINEE CHANTAKORN

**T**WO DECADES AGO, I was a pragmatic history major at Yale. As such, I’d been apprehensive about taking an advanced writing seminar filled with lissome and clever English majors. I was a public school kid from Queens, New York, whose immigrant parents

worked in a dismal wholesale trinket shop in Manhattan that was open six days a week, 52 weeks a year. My quiet childhood was spent behind the covers of borrowed books, not that I understood everything I’d read. My new journalism course was taught by an esteemed professor and working journalist, and I felt

lucky to have been accepted at all. In class, we analyzed vintage Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and John McPhee, and Calvin Trillin even stopped by to chat with us baby writers.

Class was held once a week in the upper room of a residential college on the neo-Gothic-style campus, and about a dozen of us longhair aspirants sat around a monastic wooden table in the limestone-walled classroom. This was the kind of setting I'd read about in my favored 19th-century novels, the kind of school Thomas Hardy's character Jude Fawley would have wanted to attend but could not because of his birth, except that this wasn't England, but New England. One afternoon, when it was my turn to comment on a fellow student's paper, I made some glib remarks about its structure, then mentioned that Stonehenge should be defined explicitly in the work, because I had no idea what it was.

If I had ever felt unworthy when I was accepted into the seminar; if I had felt clumsy about speaking in the first few meetings; and if I had eventually merited my place by doing the reading diligently and being attentive; I had lost all at that moment, because every face turned to me with surprise and unwanted pity. How could I not know of England's great megalith? Many had been to Wiltshire to see it, naturally. I had not. In fact, I had never gone on a trip with my family.

That's not entirely true. I was seven plus change when our parents told my two sisters and I that we were moving to America for good. In the spring of 1976, the five of us boarded a plane at Gimpo Airport in Seoul and never looked back.

The family lore says that I barely slept on the transpacific flight because I was so busy practicing my English and enjoying the exotic American inflight meals. My father, a talented linguist, had taught me to say "Juice, please," and apparently the foreign words had enchanted me so much that I repeatedly made this request to the kind flight attendants—ultimately accumulating a near six-pack of juice cans before my parents put a stop to my begging. Whenever our meals and snacks were served, I was the only one of our group to relish the brown meat in gravy, roasted potatoes and red Jell-O, while quaffing bottomless cups of fruit juice as my family looked askance at such blandly spiced dishes. I was a young traveler excited about going and getting somewhere.

Once we landed at JFK, I was disappointed. In Korea, I had read every available fairy tale, and in my confused little girl brain, I had assumed that

American men would wear powdered wigs, women put on corsets with hoop skirts and everyone rode carriages drawn by ponies. Fairy tales had made a 7-year-old Korean girl anticipate the look of 18th-century European life in 20th-century America, no different than how Thomas Hardy had partially prepared a kid from the boroughs of New York for an ivy-covered university in New Haven, Connecticut. Alas, I was learning that places turned out to be different than books.

For the first 10 years in our new country, my family did not budge except to commute daily to work or school. We settled in a blue-collar, working class community in Queens, and my parents became small-time merchants in Manhattan. My sisters and I were latchkey kids with two working parents, and after school, before they returned home from work, we were told to stay put in our apartment and never to let anyone in. The world was a dangerous place, we were told.

They weren't wrong. In that decade, my parents' store was robbed and burgled. One Saturday morning when I went to help out, I had a gun held to my head. My father and older sister were mugged on separate occasions. My gentle mother, a former piano teacher, nabbed a pickpocket. These things happened to lots of people we knew.

As a girl, I had to be extra careful, my mother said. A man exposed himself in a subway car in the Bronx, and another did the same on Hillhouse Avenue in New Haven. Both times, I was able to run away, and nothing worse happened than the display of the depraved. This was the late 1970's and 80's in New York and New Haven, and my sisters, girlfriends and I found this sort of bad behavior commonplace. You learned not to make eye contact with sketchy characters on the bus or train. If you saw rowdy drunken men in your path, you focused on your shoes and kept on strolling. At Yale, students met at midnight to pointedly walk down the streets of New Haven to "Take Back the Night"—illustrating that we would not live or walk in fear. It was a beautiful idea, but I also knew that there were places a girl couldn't go, and if something horrible happened, there would be more finger-wagging than sympathy.

In college, I had not known what Stonehenge was, and what I felt then was the shame of being a proud kid from a modest background. There were kids on campus then who had it much worse than I did, but few readily admitted this lack of travel knowledge—this lack of, well, money and leisure and parents »



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who had formal vacation time and could read guidebooks and take you places—because there was one prevailing wish most of us snot-nosed Ivy League kids shared: We wanted to be viewed as educated, sophisticated and even a little cosmopolitan. Now, as a 40-year-old lawyer-turned-writer, I think being an immigrant kid from a different culture, race, class and religion did make me a kind of worldly little person. Nevertheless, in that snug, limestone seminar room, my innocence-cum-ignorance taught me that being educated went beyond books, for being educated also meant an ease and familiarity with the significant settings of the world. Reading Tolstoy was not the same thing as going to St. Petersburg.

As a little girl, I had wanted to taste new things in life and toddle off to places, and then as a young woman, I had learned fear. Nevertheless, I still wanted more education.

As expected, I graduated then went to law school at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and it was good. In my second year of law school, I met Christopher. He was born in Kobe, Japan to an American diplomat father and a Japanese aristocrat mother. A well-mannered and modest person, slowly, I learned that as a boy, he had stayed at the Georges V in Paris and spent summers in Maui with his parents. In prep school, he'd snuck out to Manhattan clubs, smoking Dunhills to look older. He had read a

lot and been everywhere a few times. I might have been envious of his experiences—of having become a young but seasoned traveler—except that Christopher sought to share what he knew with me.

When we met, he was 25 and starting out as a young salesman at a bank in New York, and I was a 22-year-old law student. In our courtship, if we had any extra money, we would go somewhere. For US\$150, we'd rent a car and stay overnight at a bed-and-breakfast in St. Michael's Island on the Chesapeake Bay, or for less money, take a day trip to eat oysters in Annapolis. Once, when we put together a couple of hundred dollars, we drove all the way to Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia where I got to time-travel and finally see Americans wearing the outfits I'd expected them to wear when I first landed on American shores. Christopher taught me about guidebooks, and they were unlike any books I had read. They inspired you to open the front door, get out of your house and see for yourself.

After law school, when we married, we went to Italy for our honeymoon, and as I stood in front of *The Last Supper*, I realized that I had joined a lucky community of those who had seen such a painting up close—and like them, I felt the awe and gratitude of such a vision. Yet I also felt the guilt for those who couldn't. It's a curious thing, but every trip is tinged bittersweet in a way, because as you witness something wondrous, you know others who would have liked to be there, too.

Over the 15 years of our marriage, Christopher and I have been to many fabled places, and we have taken our now 11-year-old son with us. He thinks nothing of throwing a pair of swimming trunks, a change of clothes and a book into his green overnight bag and going to the airport whereas I still fumble with my packing and write long lists to calm my jitters. Like Christopher, Sam sees the beautiful blue globe marked with fascinating places to visit, and together they are teaching me about the grace of travel. Last year, when we moved to Tokyo from New York, I found myself returning to Asia for an indefinite stay—reversing the course of my immigrant life to make another major one-way trip. Naturally, this is also another travel adventure, opening even greater vistas for the three of us.

Since my first plane trip to JFK, I have hardly become the brave woman explorer—more like a competent traveler who wants to learn more. To date, I've yet to make the trip to Stonehenge, but it is on my wish list along with Angkor Wat and the pyramids, and it is a hopeful thing to know there are so many places to wish for. ✚