

Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies
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Review

Kwon, R.O. *The Incendiaries*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2018. 224 pp.
\$26.00 Hardcover.

The narrator of R.O. Kwon's spare and sharp novel *The Incendiaries* is the studious Will Kendall, a second-year transfer student at the prestigious Edwards College in the fictional town of Noxhurst in upstate New York. Will is out of place in Edwards' polo-shirted surroundings: he hails from a dingy San Francisco suburb, and he is attending the school on an academic scholarship. Will supplements his scholarship by waiting tables at an Italian restaurant deliberately chosen for its remove from campus. He invents a glamorous backstory for himself in the sunshine and old wealth of the Hollywood Hills to blend in with uniformly upper-class colleagues.

However, Will also suffers from something deeper than class estrangement. In the early pages of the novel, Will observes an anti-abortion protest from his dormitory bedroom window. Through the haze of a hangover, he perceives the crowd marching on the expensively landscaped grounds of the university wielding Christian placards and a grotesque foam and cloth baby lofted above on poles. His response to the surreal scene is a surprise to the reader expecting a standard secular campus novel: "I watched the protest pass, sick with longing" (17). Will reveals his past as a teenage Christian evangelist, devoted and full of purpose. Having since lost his faith, he grieves it, envying those like the protesters who "still believed they were picked to be God's children" (17). Kwon's novel intertwines a familiar story about the self-invention of young adults on a college campus with a sensitive exploration of faith and religion. Kwon probes faith's ability to empower its believers with a sense of belonging, purpose, and certainty; and she explores the fallout of its loss. With a cast that includes multiple Korean-American characters and a story that involves Korean-American Christianity and North Korean political prison camps, Kwon's exploration of faith also intersects with her exploration of Korean-American identity. *The Incendiaries* would thus make an excellent text for a college-level Asian American literature course.

Loss and grief are at the core of the novel and its characters, and they are what ultimately drive the novel's action. Grief links Will to the novel's

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second central character, Phoebe Lin, the alluring Korean-American piano prodigy at the center of the Edwards social scene. Phoebe secretly grieves the recent death of her mother for which she feels responsible; she explains that her socializing, drinking, and promiscuity are attempts to fill the void left by her mother's loss: "I ate pain. I swilled tears. If I could take enough in, I'd have no space left to fit my own" (68). As Will and Phoebe become romantically entangled, Will's love for Phoebe turns desperate, seeming to replace his own lost faith. However, Phoebe soon comes under the influence of the mysterious John Leal, a former Edwards student who has survived imprisonment in a North Korean camp, and who has returned to Noxhurst as the head of a violent extremist Christian cult, Jejah (meaning "disciple" in Korean). John successfully recruits Phoebe, offering her what she has not found elsewhere: a means to instrumentalize her guilt and pain. As the novel hurtles toward its explosive conclusion, Will's attempts to wrest Phoebe from Jejah's hold are complicated by his own deep longing for the comfort and ecstasy of religious belief.

While the novel is remarkable in its nuanced portrayal of religion, it also seems timely in light of the #MeToo movement with its examination of sexual harassment, sexual assault on campus, and sexual violence within relationships — the hazards of living in a female body. Kwon's choice to make the novel's main narrator Will, a sympathetic but, as it turns out, only selectively thoughtful white male, presents an opportunity to explore the implications of *whose voice* is heard. Will's failure to acknowledge the various privileges afforded to him by his race and gender create lacunae in his otherwise contemplative account; his reliability as a narrator becomes increasingly suspect. For instance, while working at an internship in Beijing, Will is drawn to a young woman he sees at a street-food hawker's cart. He pursues the young woman for several blocks, adjusting his step to keep up with the girl's quickening pace. Sensing her fear, Will rushes to assure her, only for her to break out into a hobbling sprint the rest of the way home in response, too panicked even to fix a wayward sandal strap. Will is insulted by her reaction and its implicit accusation, and he is unable or unwilling to imagine the threat that his physical presence holds. He weakly explains, "I'd wanted to follow the girl for just a few moments" (92). Similarly, the violent act that threatens to sunder Will and Phoebe's relationship is narrated through the lens of Will's self-obscuring desperation: "If I pretended I didn't

understand, I could postpone letting go," he offers (158). It's not until Will hears an account of the same event from a friend that he begins to confront his own culpability. The nesting of Phoebe's narrative within Will's — the mediation of her voice by Will — further highlights the gendered dynamic of power explored by the novel. Narrative point-of-view and the potential unreliability of the narrator in the context of gendered violence thus could present compelling topics for discussion and analysis in a literature class.

The novel also portrays the interaction of gender, race, and class in the workplace in scenes potentially rich for discussion. Will presents himself at first as a working-class outsider at Edwards, alienated by the wealth of Phoebe and their fellow classmates. As a waiter at Michelangelo's, however, he is valued for looking like a "college kid" and passing in the "bizarrely colorful regalia of the ruling class" (40). He excepts himself from the machismo culture of the kitchen and builds camaraderie with Isabel, the sole female employee at the restaurant who admits to being troubled by the environment. However, one evening, with his desperately needed job on the line, Will participates in the staff's misogynistic discourse to endear himself to his manager, wondering aloud whether a patron's female companion is an escort. Will's calculation pays off, and the male employees spend the evening leering at the woman and placing bets on her "price." Will is eventually promoted to assistant manager while Isabel and the women that follow her "keep quitting" (192). Students may find it illuminating to analyze Will's performance of class and gender in his scenes at the restaurant and to trace the shift of his identity and alliances in response to different situational contexts.

Will also ascends into the glittering world of finance at a summer internship, finding himself in increasingly luxurious surroundings. At a firm-wide party at a fund principal's home in Beijing, a woman shares a story about her recent vacation in Thailand:

Since I'm as you can tell, Asian, she said, while Matt, he's white, Thai people kept mistaking me for a bargirl. It's, well, a kind of prostitute. So, one night, the hotel night clerk tried to prohibit me from going in. He shouted at me in Thai. You should have heard Matt yell. It was hilarious.

She laughed, uncertain, then inhaled from a cigarette. (89-90)

The irony that the woman attempts to exploit for amusement is an uncomfortable one: despite her apparent wealth, she is read by outsiders primarily through a gendered and racial lens. The sexist and racist stereotype she is assigned draws on the perceived power dynamic between her and her white male partner, a dynamic, she seems to understand, that extends beyond the economy of sex tourism in Thailand. This gendered and racial structuring of power in the white male/Asian female pairing, of course, underlies Will's relationship with Phoebe, and it also underlies Will's stalking of the young woman from the street-food cart, which occurs shortly after this scene. Astonishingly, the parallels seem to evade Will completely. These interracial pairings in the book, and Will's obliviousness to their underlying power structures, may provide an effective way to explore the concept of the racial, gendered gaze in the classroom. Advanced students may want to delve into how the white male gaze may distort Will's narrative and the voices — especially Phoebe's — contained within it.

As the effect of Will's control of the narrative becomes more evident, readers and students will find themselves re-reading passages and looking at the edges of his story for more truth — searching as Will does for a glimpse of Phoebe. This mode of reading that the novel encourages becomes a model of the search for fulfilment and certainty that the novel's characters undertake. In Kwon's skillful hands, this plunge into uncertainty is wholly pleasurable — for the reader, if not for the novel's characters.

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