

SOJU: A NOVEL

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By

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ABSTRACT

Soju: A Novel is a study in love addiction. Set in Seoul, South Korea, it follows the journey of Cormac Nash — a journalist and a drunk — as he falls in love with a girl named Hana. The deeper in love he falls, the farther he travels along his arc of addiction. A work of “dirty realism,” Soju: A Novel is written in a neo-minimalistic style that focuses on showing and not telling the reader about Cormac's experiences as a stranger in a strange land. By eliminating as many “thought” verbs as possible and focusing on active, bouncing, vivid verbs, the aim was to pull the reader into Cormac's world. A world foreign to most readers. This cannot be accomplished by using active verbs alone. No. Limiting the amount of adverbs, extended metaphors and internal dialogue, being economical with words, focusing on surface details and “on-the-body” writing were all stylistic choices made to engage the reader on a more visceral level. The voice chosen to tell this story was in first person because it lends immediacy to the narrative while being able to draw the reader closer to the character.

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Thanks also my classmates and friends (far too many to name here) who read copy after copy of this book. Their opinions, input and editorial remarks were vital to this project. I owe you, one and all.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Raymond Carver, Jim Thompson, Dennis Johnson, Amy Hempel, Charles Bukowski, Ernest Hemingway, John Fante. These are the writers I grew up on, writers I looked up to, writers who were masters of literary minimalism. They were also the writers I had in mind when setting out to write *Soju: A Novel*. It's not that I wanted to mimic their styles or simply write a minimalistic book. No, it was nothing like that. What I wanted to do was take the way they employed minimalism in their writing and apply it to my book.

In no way, shape, or form is *Soju: A Novel* solely a minimalistic text, nor was it meant to be. But I did want to use many of the techniques of that writing style in order to sharpen the story, strip it down, and make the words cut and bounce across the page. It wasn't an easy task. See, the trouble with minimalist writing is this: so much of the action happens below the surface, down where the reader can't see so they're forced to do some of the heavy lifting themselves. Which, as a reader, can be fun. It allows you to be creative, to read between the lines, make up certain parts of the story and colour certain characters as you see fit. Working through a book like this can be a wonderful exercise if the reader accepts the challenge. But as a writer it's tricky. The hard part comes in knowing what to leave out, where to leave it from, and how to do it without confusing or losing the reader. So I did what any young writer would do. I wrote the first draft in a fevered frenzy, locked it in my desk drawer, walked away from it for a couple of weeks, then promptly took it out of the desk and cut the ever-longing heck out of my story. Killing your babies, I think that's what it's called.

But it wasn't just an exercise in fat trimming. At the same time as I was editing out the editorializing in my story, I was also trying to get rid of thought verbs and adverbs, trying to tell my story through nouns and verbs (as much as possible), attempting to “show not tell,” and trying to focus on surface description as much as possible while letting the scene unfold. Again, this was no easy task. However, if there's one thing I learned in the past two years in this MFA program is that if at first something isn't working, don't worry. There's always time to edit. Then edit some more. In fact, this novel — which started out as a loosely based account of my life and times living in Seoul, Korea — was edited so much, read by so many good, keen, sharp-eyed people, that it barely even resembles the first draft I locked in my desk so long ago.

So that was the difficult part — taking what began as a lump of coal, putting pressure on it, whittling it down, compressing it to the point that it, even remotely, resembled a diamond. The easy part was finding a structure to suit the book and themes to hitch my story to. The reason I chose to write a story about love addiction was two-fold. On one hand, I longed to write a love story that no one had written before. On the other hand, the different stages of love addiction rise, converge, and fall in nearly a perfect story arc. As for the themes, well, from the outside I wanted to deal with big things. Things like love and fidelity, jealousy and betrayal, friendship and revenge. But more than all that, the thing I wanted to examine in this book — the thing that compelled me to write it in the first place — was a question I needed answered. To wit: What happens to a person when everything comes crashing down around them, when the curtain is pulled back only to expose that life, as they know it, isn't what they thought it to be?

My novel, from inception to completion, was a journey towards an answer. And on this journey, I tried my best to not make my narrator stop and stare too long. Yes, at times, scenes were

unpacked for dramatic effect. But for the most part, I wanted to set a torrid pace with my story and the way I used words. I wanted to pull the reader into a world completely foreign to them, and yank through an adventure of a different kind of love. In short, I wrote the book I've always wanted to read.

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