

Utilizing Richard Kim's *Lost Names* in the Junior High Classroom

By Peter R. Wright

I first was introduced to the novel *Lost Names* during a recent postgraduate fellowship I participated in entitled *Imperial Japan—Expansion and War, 1892 to 1945*. Sponsored by the Five College Center for East Asian Studies, the seminar was conducted at Mount Holyoke College. Our preconference assignment included reading this novel, and we actually had the opportunity to meet its author, Richard E. Kim, during the conference. He helped us analyze our feelings and reactions to his powerful story. In announcing its reprinting, scheduled for 1998, he previewed our group with his own Author's Note for this new edition in which he states that he is proud of the fact that his work is often taken as a factual memoir, not fiction.

Fast-forward one year, and I am now teaching Seventh Grade Social Studies at the Brimmer and May School in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. Brimmer is a small, coed private school and a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools. The philosophy of this coalition promotes a collaborative education encompassing the values of independent thinking with group oriented problem solving and analytical skills, community, individual responsibility, citizenship, and respect.

In this collaborative setting, I found myself team teaching these students with Joseph Iuliano, who taught English in addition to being Head of the Middle School. Interestingly enough, when we met over the summer, we were both new teachers to the Brimmer community. Our initial course curriculum goal was to meld writing skills with the study of geography and culture of the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. We also planned to incorporate a student project



entitled "Family History—A Short Story." Questions to be addressed included: what resources can students use to learn about their ancestors and other cultures; and how can factual events be used to enhance a fictional work? For this project, we required both accurate historical and cultural information, along with a solid narrative model, which the students could relate to and emulate. We also wanted to ensure that this experience would be academically enriching for them as well as being personally satisfying.

In August, I had given Joe my copy of *Lost Names* as potential curriculum material for his English class. He rediscovered the book while cleaning out his office prior to this term and began reading it. Simultaneously, I realized that we were doing the students a disservice in not studying the cultures of Asia. In discussing this lapse with him, we realized that this novel would be a perfect fit for our project. When both Joe and myself had initially read *Lost Names*, we did so without realizing that it was a work of fiction because of its personal intensity. We hoped that our students would assume the same until they read the Author's Note at the end, thus subliminally impressing upon them the literary style we were looking for.

In addition to reading the book to appreciate its composition, we also wanted our students to glean the significance of the actual history. *Lost Names* contains pronounced anti-Japanese sentiment expressed from the black vs. white/good vs. bad viewpoint of a young boy. In order to counterbalance this one-sided view, I also chose to incorporate excerpts from other works such as Saburo Ienaga's *The Pacific War: 1931–1945*, Norma Field's *In the Realm of a Dying Emperor*, and films like Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies*, which all added critical insight into this study. My fear was that if I presented *Lost Names* on its own, my students would walk away with a biased opinion of Japan instead of a variety of perspectives from which they could judge Japanese culture and political actions themselves. We did not believe our seventh grade students had been exposed to a strong enough background in World War II history to prevent a bias if the book was taken on its own.

Some initial student comments regarding *Lost Names* follow:

We learned a lot about war and life in it. After we read the book we watched a video about life in Japan during the war. I found out that life was no picnic there either.

Lost Names was a really moving story. I think Lost Names was the perfect book to read before we did the Family History Short Story Project.

. . . it was a great example of an autobiography and dealing with hardships. Lost Names is a lot easier to



Peter Wright works with students at Brimmer and May School. Photo courtesy of Peter Wright.

understand than many other World War II references. It is also rare to find a book with a Korean point of view.

I am the same age as the narrator, but we have some huge differences in our lifestyles. I can play football and use computers and do a lot of different things. He was forced to work on building an airfield.

*Before reading *Lost Names*, I always had thought of books based on history as being boring, but after finishing it and writing the short story on my family history, I realized what I had thought wasn't necessarily true.*

My great grandfather, the person I am writing about, also suffered through a lot of persecution because he was Jewish. Reading about this boy's experiences helped me to understand what might have happened to my great grandfather.

*The real events in *Lost Names* make it a great research tool as well as a great book that teaches different writing styles.*

Many of the students' projects on family history coincidentally involve that same period of time illustrated in

Lost Names. I think this novel gave them an added perspective on the political changes erupting at this time. The novel also illustrated to them that persecution and political unrest exists across all cultures and age groups. They not only learned what factors affected their recent ancestors' choices in life, but that these factors are in a way universal.

Lost Names is a multidisciplinary novel; it goes beyond the confines of social studies or a history course; I plan to incorporate it into my United States History courses in the future. I hope my seventh graders will have the opportunity to study *Lost Names* at some other time in their educational career with an insight gained from their Family History Short Story Projects. ■

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Teaching *Lost Names* in an American High School

By Susan Mastro

In a currently popular world literature text of 1,442 pages, there are a total of four pages on Korean literature. An entire country's literary heritage is condensed into two poems. Until I read *Lost Names* by Richard Kim, my only contact with Korea had been to watch my mother cry as my older brother set off for the Korean War. Then later I encountered some opinions and allusions to the country through study of Japanese language and culture. None of these led me any closer to what might be the heart and soul of the Korean people—the essential quality to which I wanted to expose my students in world literature. Then I read *Lost Names*. I knew immediately that this text would help my students discover that a small country across the world from America, with customs and traditions very different from theirs, is a place with warm, friendly people who share the same hopes and dreams as they do.

The student body at W. G. Enloe High School is very diverse. There might be a dozen different national backgrounds in any given classroom. A student sitting side-by-side with a friend who speaks English fluently may have no idea that his classmate's home life is based on assumptions and ideas quite different from his own. Until they are introduced to world cultures and world literature in tenth grade, our students often have little idea of the value and richness of other cultural heritages.

It is the personal lives of others that draw students into literature, that make them want to know and understand more about another culture. Literature is the perfect key to open the curious



minds of adolescents and help them to understand that for all of our differences, human beings share the same basic needs and desires and values. *Lost Names* is one of those rare texts that appeal to all ages. Seeing World War II through the eyes of a boy growing up in the midst of the chaos puts the war in a completely different perspective for our students who have no understanding of genuine hardship or sacrifice.

Before my students begin to read *Lost Names*, they have studied the cultures, religions, and literatures of India, China, and Japan. They have looked at World War II through the eyes of Japanese survivors of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. They are empathetic and sympathetic to the suffering of the Japanese people. Then they look at another non-American side of the war—not just what Japan suffered, but also the suffering Japan caused. They triumph with the small victories of a young boy and his proud father trying to retain their self respect amid the indignities of occupation and war. The story that Richard Kim weaves encircles them and draws them into the pain and daily victories of survival, into the courage and determination to persevere in the face of great danger. They see the Confucian values of family hierarchy and duty, not as abstract characteristics to memorize, but as a way of life that, when they are practiced well, supports every member of a society. They see filial piety and duty as two parts of a whole. They see the boy practicing these values as a son and then as a leader of his group at school.

Until American students see how these values work in everyday life, it is hard for them to understand how anything but being a “rugged individualist” can be a good way of life. When, in chapter three, the boy challenges a classmate to a race, knowing the classmate will win, students can see that losing can be a different kind of victory. From reading this novel students can begin to develop an understanding of the tragedy of war in general and civil war in particular. In addition, they can vicariously experience the triumph of the human spirit, something common to all mankind.

At the end of last school year, when I asked which works in the curriculum should be taught again and which replaced, there was a great outcry for the continued inclusion of *Lost Names*. For further information, see *Teaching More about Korea: Lessons for Students in Grades K-12*. The lesson plans are published by

The Korea Society as an outcome of the Tenth Annual Summer Fellowship in Korean Studies Program. The booklet includes “A Study Guide for *Lost Names* and Discussion Questions for Various Short Stories,” all by Korean authors. For more information about the publication, contact Yong Jin Choi, Director, Korean Studies Program, The Korea Society, 950 Third Avenue, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10022; phone: (212) 759-7525, ext. 25. ■

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Lost Names, Master Narratives, and Messy History

By Richard H. Minear

“**P**roblematize the master narrative!” These were the words some years ago at an NEH summer institute for teachers. The speaker’s language wasn’t mine then (it is now), but I realized that that’s what I’d been doing in my teaching for years: making an issue of the dominant interpretation (usually that of a textbook). It is what more of us need to focus on, at all levels and in all subjects. Textbooks are always wrong. History is never simple.

As a professor of Japanese history at a major state university, I have the luxury of teaching a full-semester survey course on Japan (History of Japanese Civilization). It is in this course that for many years now I have used Richard Kim’s *Lost Names*. (Just before the first edition went out of print, I was able to buy forty copies, so that *Lost Names* lived on in my course even though it was out of print.) So let me describe the course. There are forty-five students of various rank, freshman through senior; and the class meets three times per week. Two meetings per week are lectures, films, or other activities; one meeting per week is a discussion. I lead all the discussions. One of the concerns throughout the course is the relation between author and material (study the historian), and the syllabus carries biographical data on all authors we encounter, including both me and Richard Kim. I have as well the advantage of having been present twice in the last five years when Kim discussed *Lost Names* with groups of teachers.

The latter half of my course, roughly, is Japan since 1800. Because I dislike textbooks, I assign a non-textbook, Ienaga Saburo’s *The Pacific War*, and then spend much of my time disagreeing with it. My lecture presentations take issue with Ienaga, and for the final paper the students have to compare and contrast Ienaga and Minear. The next-to-last paper concerns *Lost Names*.

The *Lost Names* paper focuses on ethnocentrism in the Japanese treatment of their Korean subjects (*Lost Names* is the



students’ only source) and on how to evaluate the evidence Kim presents. *Lost Names* is not a history book; but how do we process the information Kim offers? Students find the first part of the paper—how ethnocentrism affects the narrator and his family and the Japanese officials—very easy and the second part very difficult. The sheer power of Kim’s prose makes it difficult for them to step back and criticize—even though this is late in the course and we have been criticizing sources all semester.

But close reading and criticism are what the course is about, and despite the fact that many students complain that *Lost Names* is all they know about the subject, I insist that they can and must *criticize*. It is not a matter of liking the book or not liking the book; with rare exceptions, students are bowled over by it. It is a matter of processing the material.

So where to begin? As always, with the author’s biography. Clearly, the narrator’s life and Kim’s overlap. But how do we deal with autobiography? What are the advantages and disadvantages of hearing things “straight from the horse’s mouth”? Some students find it impossible to believe that the narrator was so utterly invincible, so right in all the major choices he makes. The “Author’s Note” at the end of the new edition states artfully (too artfully?), “Perhaps I should have included a disclaimer [in the first edition]: all the characters and events described in this book are real, but everything else is fiction. . . . It is for me a happy predicament. On the one hand, a book I created as fiction is not accepted as such. . . .” In sessions with teachers, Kim has come close to stating that things happened essentially as he recounts them in the book, except that he combined events from separate days into one day or changed a daytime event to nighttime.

At war’s end, Kim the author is thirteen years old, the age of the narrator. But Kim wrote *Lost Names* twenty-five years later, in 1970, when Kim the author was thirty-eight. Between 1945 and

1970 Kim had continued his education in Korea, fought in the Korean War (on the side of South Korea), attended Middlebury College, and written several novels about the Korean War; in 1970 he was teaching in the English Department at the University of Massachusetts (he wrote *Lost Names* in English). What is the relation between Kim in 1970 and the narrator in 1933 or 1940 or 1945? That is a real question.

Most if not all students note that Kim the author cannot have remembered the scenes from 1933, at the beginning of *Lost Names*. After all, he is a baby in his mother's arms. Fewer raise questions about the scenes of 1940 (the loss of names, when author Kim was eight years old) or 1945 (the liberation, when author Kim was thirteen). *Lost Names* is seductive in part because it purports to be a child's recollection, but are we reading the thoughts of an eight-year-old Korean schoolkid (1940) or the thoughts of a war-hardened and cross-culturally sophisticated 38-year-old (1970)? At the end of the "Lost Names" chapter, the narrator speaks: "Their pitifulness, their weakness, their self-lacerating lamentation for their ruin and their misfortune repulse me and infuriate me. What are we doing anyway—kneeling down and bowing our heads in front of all those graves? I am gripped by the same outrage and revolt I felt at the Japanese shrine, where, whipped by the biting snow and mocked by the howling wind, I stood, like an idiot, bowing my head to the gods and the spirit of the Japanese Emperor." Are these the words of an eight-year-old? Fortunately, some students have a family member or know a neighbor of that age.

If the thoughts are, in part at least, the thoughts of a 38-year-old, what were the influences on him? When teachers asked author Kim about favorite reading when he was young, he mentioned the great Russian novelists (in Japanese translation). Is Kim's narrator perhaps part Tolstoyan hero?

Is the narrator's experience representative of the Korean experience? *Lost Names* is useful in my course in part because much of what the students hear from me (especially in contrast with Ienaga's book) is sympathetic to the Japanese—not in their treatment of Koreans but in relation to their struggle with American power. To hear a Korean viewpoint is enormously useful. But is Kim's viewpoint *the* Korean viewpoint or *a* Korean viewpoint? This is a tougher issue for students, but some acknowledge that the narrator and his family are exceptional in terms of wealth, prestige, nationalistic activity and religion, that one of the narrator's classmates—Pumpkin, for example—might have written a very different book. On occasion I have given them a quotation from an essay by Bruce Cumings to underline the point that not all Koreans think alike. Speaking in 1950, a Korean industrialist commented that the return to Korea after the war of "numerous revolutionists and nationalists" had stirred up anti-Japanese feeling, but today "there is hardly any trace of it." Korea and Japan "are destined to go hand-in-hand, to live and let live," so bad feelings should be "cast overboard." Today "an economic unity is lacking whereas in prewar days Japan, Manchuria, Korea and Taiwan economically combined to make an organic whole."

Almost to a person, the students are appalled at the Japanese treatment of the Koreans that *Lost Names* describes. It reinforces what they read in Ienaga, and I offer them no contrary evidence.

(A former colleague of mine, growing up on Taiwan at the same time, was sure at the end of the war that he was Japanese, not Chinese. Was Japanese colonialism the same everywhere and for every person subject to it? That is material for an entire course.) Could *Lost Names* happen only in Korea, or are there echoes in the histories of other countries, perhaps even our own? This is a tough one. A number of students come up with Ellis Island and the changing of names; but that was by and large voluntary—a simplification, not the forced purging of a past. A very few mention the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the schools it ran, which outlawed the use of native languages and insisted on "Christian" names. These events do not excuse the Japanese acts we read about in *Lost Names*, but they provide a context that the book does not.

We do not discuss *Lost Names* in class; the students read it on their own. Here are excerpts from two papers from Fall 1998 (I have made no changes):

Lost Names is a work of fiction, and it can not be construed otherwise. . . . [t]he narrator's family counters each insult from the Japanese in a glorious manner, which gives the story an element of unrealistic magnificence often found in fiction. . . . Events described in the book may have happened to Koreans, but it is implausible to have one family continually shake the foundations of Japanese occupation in one town without being ousted or "disappeared"—especially when the Thought Police knew the narrator's father organized a resistance in the past. The story is perfect. It was obvious that the narrator would save the Japanese Shinto priest—everything falls into place, and the family reclaims their dignity at every step. But these elements exist only in fiction.

—a junior majoring in History

Kim did not write Lost Names as a journal, as events happened. Instead he wrote the story when he was in his late 30's as a subjective reflection on what happened. The story was subjected to his experience and his views of the occupation and later events that shaped his life.

—a sophomore majoring in Political Science

It was clear from both their papers that *Lost Names* had moved these students, but they had been able to keep their critical faculties intact. And that, I suggest, should be one major goal of our teaching.

Lost Names is a work of high art. It deserves the most serious consideration. In my course, we use it in significant measure to problematize the Japanese master narrative. But just as there are American and Japanese master narratives, so there is a Korean master narrative. We need to be as leery of the Korean master narrative as of the other two. We may not know much about Korea, but there, too, we need to problematize the master narrative. ■

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