



Comfort Woman

Nora Okja Keller

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"On the fifth anniversary of my father's death, my mother confessed to his murder." Thus begins Nora Okja Keller's breathtaking first novel, which follows Beccah, a young Korean-American girl growing up in Hawaii, as she uncovers the secret of her mother's past. Completely ignorant of her mother Akiko's history - she was sold into prostitution in the Japanese "recreation camps" of World War II for her oldest sister's dowry - Beccah understands that her mother lives in a spirit world she cannot share, and that clearly marks her as "other." Narrated in two voices, Beccah's and Akiko's, Keller reveals the story of Akiko's extraordinary dislocation - the slavery of the camps, the death of her first child, her unhappy marriage to an American missionary - which Beccah understands only after her mother's death. In language that is both harsh and lyrical, Keller explores the universally complicated relationship between mother and daughter. She shows us both Akiko's way of survival, sustained by her remarkable strength and her love for her daughter, and Beccah's acceptance of her mother and her own place in a world her mother no longer physically inhabits.

Comfort Woman Details

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From Reader Review Comfort Woman for online ebook

Jesse Campagna says

Fought reading this because of the painful and ugly nature of the story. I cannot be more glad that I did. Inspiring and I think this book made me a better person. High praise.

spoon says

THIS BOOK FUCKED ME UPPPPP

fucked me upppp real good ugh.

Siao says

Breathtaking: I had to reread certain passages, just to fully process how AMAZING this book truly was. Would recommend this to anyone.

Linda says

A selection in my postal book group. I've never heard of this book prior to its showing up in my mailbox. It involves a Korean mother and her daughter who escape from occupied Korea to Hawaii. The mother speaks to spirits to the chagrin of her daughter but the financial benefit of another woman who gives the two a place to stay.

It was difficult for me to get into this book, but once I did I couldn't read it fast enough. There was a lot of magic realism and foreign words that caught me (I have to see every tree in the forest.) A challenging read, but worth the endeavor.

Daniel Clausen says

A Book that is about Far More than just History

The comfort women issue—perhaps one of the most contentious and controversial subjects in Japanese-Korean relations—is the backdrop of this amazing novel. The issue of the enslavement of Korean women to service Japanese soldiers during the war is at once a catalyst, a terrible haunting force, and the barrier to a better understanding of family lineage.

The issue of history is certainly important in this book, and provides it with a very unique backdrop. The author uses it skillfully to examine issue of trauma, the meanings of names and the systematic violence that occurs when a culture is dominated by an outside force. The author is also skilled at examining what happens

to bodies and their spirits when faced with these terrible incidences. But for me, the strongest narrative element is the relationship between Beccah and her mother. This aspect of the book shines as the most essential part of the story, and it is made that much more stronger by our ability to empathize with Beccah's struggles through childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

It's the relationship between Akiko/ Soon Hyo and her daughter Beccah that make something that is "just" history into something vital, human, and immediate.

From the viewpoint of someone who writes, the decision to have Akiko/ Soon Hyo tell her story from her own perspective is very impressive, and was probably the hardest to write. Keller does an excellent job weaving the different pieces of the story together.

The book is a breezy read, but never simple. It is highly evocative, challenging, but most of all gives you every reason to care about a mother and her daughter.

Aubrey says

To learn to be an American was to learn to waste.

I picked this book up due to the phrase 'comfort woman' having been circulating around my head for some time. My lackluster rating compared to the top reviews, and even the average, attests to a combination of incompatible reading tastes and misdirected reading efforts, as what I was probably looking for was not fiction, highly relevant title aside, but nonfiction. Chances are good, back when I was first searching, the political nonsense was more successfully suppressing such research endeavors, and after much perusal of resources that were rather lacking, I decided a fictional approach was better than none. Unfortunately, while I am not adverse to reading about trauma, fictional renditions make personal preferences harder to ignore, and Keller's work is neither *The Guest* nor *The Bullet Collection*, which are, to put it plainly, more 'subtle' in their portrayals of devastation and human processing of devastation. As such, my rating stays, and I'll definitely be on the lookout for less creative treatments of the subject. Much like *The Rape of Nanking*, *Medical Apartheid*, and others, ignorance about these events ultimately leads to further dehumanization, as can be attested to by how eagerly governments forcibly pass such education by.

As I said, this narrative wasn't structured in a way that was to my taste. I appreciated the scenes that occurred in Korea from the perspective of the mother and sometimes her mother, as it further grounded events that I had picked up from a variety of sources, literary and otherwise (*Mr. Sunshine* is a great show on Netflix, by the way, for anyone interested in historical fiction looking at the build up of Japanese imperialism in late 19th/early 20th Korea). However, the story majorly occurred in Hawaii from the perspective of the daughter, and that rather stereotypical underdog coming of age story, coupled with what can only be called borderline magical realism, grew tiresome after a while. It didn't help when the ending came together a tad too pat and myriad characters came out of the work just long enough to be referenced by name and humanize the previously dehumanized mother figure before sinking down into the daughter's hyperrealistic visualizations, which really didn't do much at all with regards to credible narrative conclusion. As can be seen from other reviews, people found this narrative both engaging and, perhaps, realistic, so I'm glad that it's doing more for those who need it. I'm not exactly lacking when it comes to necessary reading on trauma.

This is my last book by a woman of color read during 2018. I started something very long after my last finished read, but that's only because I literally don't have enough pages left in my current reads to last out

till January 1st. Goodreads tells me that nearly a third of my 2018 reads will be by women of color, which, considering my challenge efforts, shows I've come a long way when it comes to my reading demographics. Not everything I've conscientiously sought out for balancing purposes has qualified as underread classics, but the more I work my way out of the white male mainstream while keeping up my customary levels of critical thinking, the less susceptible I am to either outright praise or downright dismissal, a result which, in a roundabout way, one can see here. In any case, I'm eager to start afresh, especially since my current situation is so dramatically different from where I was at the beginning of 2018. Whether there will be such dramatic, preferably good, shifts for during the course of 2019 remains to be seen.

Melissa says

Fantastically written, though incredibly sad. She does a stellar job at making the reader feel the difference in culture between a Korean mother and an American daughter, and really articulates the poignancy of a mother's love for and relationship with her daughter.

It was a hard book to read, because the realities of the comfort camps were heartbreaking, but I agree with someone else on Goodreads who said that reading this book made them feel like a better person.

Paul Ataua says

It was a pretty powerful novel about the ties between a mother and a daughter, but it was a difficult read with the narrative switching not only between mother and daughter but also between present and past and between real and imaginary. I kept wondering about the title "Comfort Woman" when the present world of spirits seemed to be so central and seemed to almost strangle the horrific past events. I was also a little disappointed that the disclosure came so late. I would have liked to have had more time to see the effects of that disclosure. It was a reasonably worthwhile read, but I guess I wanted more.

Janet says

A beautifully wrought, nuanced novel about a mother and a daughter, and the way they are both held prisoner by the past--slowly revealed to be the harrowing experience of the mother, who, like many Korean women, had been arrested during WWII to service Japanese soldiers as a 'comfort woman' in a military brothel. I was incredibly moved by this debut book, reviewed it years ago in a now defunct magazine, *Speak*. In my mind I still have it next to Yannick Murphy's *the Sea of Trees*.

Diversireads says

content warning: rape, sexual violence, sexual slavery, child neglect

This was a surprisingly easy novel to read despite its incredibly weighty topic. I'm taking an Asian American lit class this semester, and I was assigned this to read immediately following a really frustrating documentary about comfort woman, and to be quite frank, I expected to have to force myself through this, crying and

moaning the whole time. And I did cry—of course I cried, I'm the girl who cried during *Madagascar*—but there was a sense of effervescence throughout the narrative that made it bearable. The writing was, of course, beautiful, but it wasn't just that. There was a life to the story, a spirit.

Comfort Woman tells the parallel stories of Akiko, a Korean comfort woman, and Beccah, the daughter she eventually comes to have with the American missionary she chooses to marry in order to leave Korea. After Akiko's death, Beccah is forced to confront the mother she thought she knew—and the woman who, she comes to realise, she didn't know at all.

I'm not going to talk too long about what an important novel this is—though indubitably it is that—but I do want to talk about how *good* this novel is. World War II narratives tend to end in victory or in death, and they also tend to end when the war does. In some ways, this makes narrative sense. In other ways, it obscures the generational trauma that still lingers to this day, especially in a political climate where Shinzo Abe visits the Yasukuni Shrine, the former mayor of Tokyo is an apologist for Japanese war crimes, and the very few comfort women who are still alive have yet to be offered state reparations or an official apology by either Emperor Akihito or the Japanese government.

Comfort Woman spends very little time in the camps themselves, and it's a stronger novel for having done so. It certainly doesn't shy away from the horrors of those euphemistically named "comfort stations," but it doesn't gorge itself on the comfort women's pain. It doesn't feel at all exploitative—rather, it focuses itself on the aftermath of trauma, and the way trauma never truly leaves us. So instead of visiting brutalisation upon women's bodies with the reader as a willing or unwilling voyeur, we experience the camp through Akiko's perspective, and we see the way it follows her, the way it bleeds into the life of her daughter Beccah.

The novel is split into two by time, by space, and by narrator. Akiko begins her story in colonised Korea, going forward through the war, while Beccah begins in Hawai'i in the modern day with her mother's death, and reaches backwards to her dysfunctional childhood. This split POV was at times frustrating, Beccah's voice cutting in just as I was getting caught up in Akiko's narrative—but I think it was effective not only in conveying this intergenerational trauma, but also, I think, in shaping our perspectives towards both Beccah and Akiko.

It's in the relationship between these two that the heart of the novel truly lies. It's a tense one, to be sure—Beccah describes growing up with a mother who was unable to take care of her, unable to blend in with the other mothers, who embarrasses her and sometimes neglects her. For Akiko, Beccah is in some ways both fruit and defiance of her trauma—her conception and birth both manifest in a reliving of her time at the camp. Yet it's clear that they love each other, that they are the world to each other—Beccah is Akiko's caretaker and advocate, while for Akiko, Beccah becomes the reason she plans and lives, the one light in her life.

There's a lot between them that's left unsaid, and it's up to the readers to fill in the gaps. This is a really effective technique, because I think it really hammers in the fact that trauma takes away our speech, takes away the reliability of language—that language, at times, is a kind of trauma.

I really enjoyed this novel—if enjoyment is the right word. Despite the deep undercurrent of anger, of pain, of bitterness, and resentment, the novel is ultimately one about love, and about the legacies that our parents leave us.

Alex says

Oh gooooodddd. There's a passage from this book that just about killed me. Killed me. I mean, if the whole book does nothing for you, then you are pretty much made of stone.

Betty says

A unique novel, moving between the narratives of a Korean mother - laced with threads of magic and mythology - and her stolid American daughter. Beccah's mother is opaque to her, but the reader learns of her tragedies. Sold by a sister to the Japanese, Akiko (as she is called by the Japanese) is enslaved as a comfort woman. Deeply mysterious, this is no Amy Tan novel with its easy access to Western readers. An amazing debut novel.

Cormack says

Comfort Woman tells the story of a Korean woman who suffered through being a prisoner in a Japanese prostitution camp during World War II. If I remember correctly It's told from the perspective of her Americanized daughter who's a bit embarrassed by her mother's strange behavior. After her mother dies she finds audio tapes her mother made and learns the truth about what her mother endured. I've been meaning to re-read this book to research historic and cultural details I didn't understand on first read, but it's not a book you read for fun.

Mpoushoura says

This is a "one-sitter" book. I wish my schedule allowed me to read it in one go. The story-telling is mesmerizing, taking you into a world that is there but we tend to ignore.

This book was unexpected. I was expecting more of a "historical" type of book, telling a story about a mother and daughter relationship. To my surprise, it was even more than that. In my opinion, this is NOT a book just about one daughter and one mother relationship. It has the ability to uplift your soul and become a part of the narration. I found a gem amongst so many books. I cannot wait to read Fox Girl, that I've ordered halfway reading Comfort Woman. To me, is that good!

It still has left a flavour in my mind. I would love to re-read it at some point to extract more juice from it as there is plenty.

I just would like to add that I loved the layout of the book in its whole. The way it is written and being on paper. For a person that has difficulties to focus it made it much easier to read.

A.J. Llewellyn says

A devastating book - beautiful and painful. Hard to read...hard to put down.
