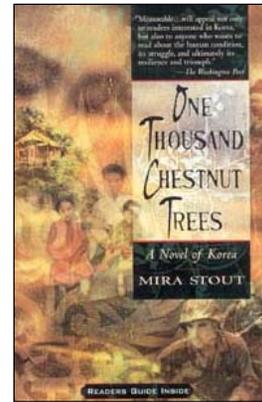


## The Trees of Hope

### *One Thousand Chestnut Trees*

by Mira Stout  
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*Review by Martha Vickery (Summer 1998 issue)*



A journey of a young woman artist to learn about herself becomes a journey into the turbulent past of her mother and of her mother's country in the recently released *One Thousand Chestnut Trees*, A Novel of Korea. This epic tale of the occupation-era and war-era past of Korea, told by a first generation immigrant to her second generation daughter, becomes a mission of self-discovery for the insecure daughter Anna.

This mission is a successful one, although along the way we are constantly reminded that efforts to discover the past are loaded with ambiguity, the potential for disappointment, and in some ways are ultimately not knowable at all. These qualities of uncertainty are exacerbated by Anna's striving to understand the Korean culture and concepts that have shaped the past of their family and driven them to act in ways that seem illogical or extreme to her. The language, lifestyle and other differences Anna encounters on her historical quest seem minor in comparison to Korean values that she tries hard to understand, and in the end, tries simply to accept.

Anna has a couple of advantages in her efforts to find her past that many other second generation daughters (and sons) do not have. She has a mother who is willing to tell her whole story, unembellished and complete, and who lets her daughter draw her own conclusions. Anna also has an uncle who has lived in both cultures enough that he can break the ice for her, in speaking the language, helping her to find places, and telling her bits of the family story from another perspective. It is clear that this sojourn into the past takes a family effort, and that part of Anna's lesson is relearning how to connect with her family and realizing the strength it gives her.

When she makes her decision to seek her family's story in Korea, Anna is working as an artist in New York. She has an impermanent kind of economic status in a city characterized by impermanence. Her uncle Hong-do pays her a visit, the second in her life since he stayed with their family when she was a shy teenager, and she likes him in a way she cannot precisely identify. She is somehow grounded by his presence, a man who is unapologetically Korean, yet a comfortable New Yorker as well. She envies him his absence of cultural issues. Upon his departure, she reflects more frequently on the transience that characterizes her life and that of other New Yorkers.

Her descriptions of bad living conditions and her reasons for constantly fleeing them are hilarious – Ted, the nude sleepwalker who urinated into the refrigerator on one of his nightly strolls; from that to an apartment on a street full of fast food joints during a

summer when the sanitation workers were on strike “a veritable United Nations of fast food, whose dependence on the city’s sanitation workers was total,” and a third “narrow, sooty tenement” which is “positioned sensitively between a transvestite brothel and a funeral parlor.”

After her decision to visit Korea is blindly made, partly as an escape, and partly as her only hope to find her roots and to know her mother and other family members in any meaningful way, Anna examines her thoughts on the way to the airport:

With family names as foundation stones, I might begin to build a sort of makeshift bridge from West to East, between my mother and myself. ...Despite the unlikelihood of achieving this ambition, a constructive impulse in this direction was a welcome surprise. I felt a tentative hope. Then a heavier thought nearly eclipsed it. This journey would take me far away from where I had been before, and deliver me somewhere I might not want to go. It was likely to take a long time. Worst of all, I might have to change.

Anna’s mother, Myung-ja, becomes a co-protagonist in the novel. Her life story takes up at this point and covers perhaps three fourths of the book. Her personal story and insights are vivid, from the description of the gently-worn generations-old family farm and large landholdings which are stolen from the family by the Japanese, to her occupation-era Japanese schooling, to the nightmarish war years, it is a story many older Korean Americans could tell.

She describes with sharp recall the social schizophrenia that existed among her schoolmates and herself about their education in the culture and language of the oppressor. She accepts this reality to some extent, but balks at the completeness with which children, caught in the middle of the covert war on Korean culture by the Japanese school system, were expected to convert. For example, she never accepted the Japanese name assigned to her. “To my prejudiced ear, Japanese names lacked gravitas and languor, their mincing, staccato rhythms were derisory: Yicky, yacky, yama. Anyway, you couldn’t change people’s names. It simply wasn’t possible.”

Even at their expensive private school, there were notices up on the bulletin board for the “Volunteer Labor Corps,” later discovered to be one of the fronts for the military sexual slavery program by the Japanese, also known as “comfort women.” “We were not the simpletons the notices took us for,” Myung-ja comments. “Maybe we even had a sixth sense about it. Not one girl in our school signed up.” Occasional, matter-of-fact references to this and other inhumane practices by the Japanese are chilling.

Similarly, Myung-ja’s observations on American life in the military are refreshing. After years in hiding with her parents and sister, living in great fear and physical and mental deprivation, the war is finally over, and Myung-ja’s brother finds her a job at the American air base. Her culture shock was complete. Brother Jin-ho’s description of food at the air base is laughable. “Everything is big and bland and meaty ...Nothing cut into pieces; just huge hunks of plain-cooked meat and whole potatoes as big as grenades. The only spice they use is a giant bottle of sweet red sauce made from tomatoes.”

One Thousand Chestnut Trees, a valuable work for its beautifully evocative writing alone, is one in a small number of very good mother-daughter recollections being written now by second generation Asian novelists. Still Life with Rice by Helie Lee, an account of a Korean mother and daughter, and Amy Tan's The Kitchen God's Wife, about a Chinese mother and second generation daughter, come to mind. Other stories, written by the first generation immigrants themselves, are also appearing, such as Clay Walls, by Ronyong Kim. These recollections, appearing in the last five to eight years, are an encouraging sign that the first generation recognizes the importance of telling its story, and the second generation is realizing the necessity of moving ahead by first going back and finding their family's own story and own truth.

The title of the book One Thousand Chestnut Trees refers to a place and a time in the Min family past that perhaps can never be known, a harsh realization Anna must accept. However, in a very Zen way, Anna finds that her search, not her goal, embodies the truth she seeks. The secret of the thousand chestnut trees, we learn, is also a treasured family hope, perhaps symbolizing that although the truth of an experience can be known only by those who lived it, telling a story as one remembers it also has the power to strengthen others; that the knowledge of the past, even a traumatic one, is useful on many levels, not only for ourselves, but for our generations to come.