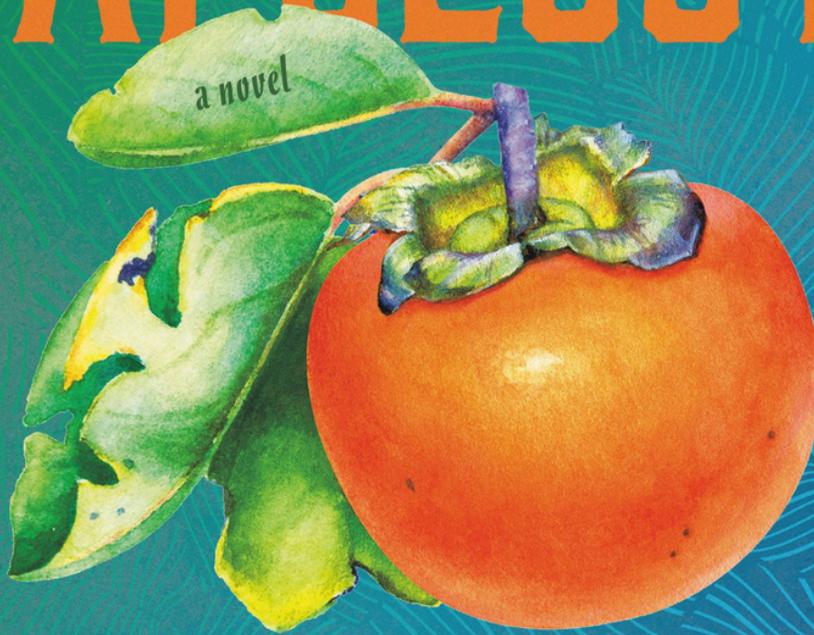


"An uncanny high wire act—arch, tender, mercurial."
—Alexander Chee, author of *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*

THE APOLOGY

a novel



JIMIN HAN

BOOK CLUB KIT

HELLO, FROM JIMIN

Dear Readers,

Thank you for making me part of your book club. I'm excited that you've chosen *The Apology*. It's special to me because it was a way for me to remember three extraordinary people in my life. One of the book club discussion questions is about the many kinds of love in the novel and that's exactly what I was thinking about when I was writing this book.

Three incidents were on my mind: my mother's death in 2016, a childhood memory of seeing my great aunt weep at her son's gravesite, and hearing about my friend Brian's diagnosis of a malignant brain tumor in 2020.

So much death, but I wanted to write about love.

What was very apparent to me in all three cases was that death didn't win out. The pain it inflicted was bottomless, but it didn't erase who these people were. They continued to be essential to my life. My mother died, but I think of her every day and memories of her help me with struggles and celebrations. I carry her with me. My great aunt clearly loved her son and he would live on in her as she moved forward without him. And my friend Brian wrote an entire memoir and revised it while he was receiving treatment for the disease that would ultimately end his life. That memoir lives on. We talked about death every week as we wrote. Its looming, imminent presence didn't stop us. We shared a love of writing and we knew that the writing will outlive us.

In honor of all three who are no longer with me now, I've written out a recipe for you that was a staple when I was growing up: mandu (Korean dumpling). Whether my brothers and I were having mandu eating contests at dinner on a school night or my mother was presenting an elaborate New Year's Day soup with mandu, the Korean dumpling is a flexible, essential dish. Every family has its own special recipe. Mine comes from my mother who created it based on her memories from when she was a child. I've included a spicy vegetarian version and a plain meat one too. Our family enjoyed both at any given time.

I love that dishes live on like this, essentially the same but can be changed with the times too. I make it with my daughters on New Year's Day each year, a tradition. Feel free to try my family recipe and then modify it to your taste. My older daughter has already begun to add Sriracha to her recipe.

Finally, a dear friend of mine reminded me to add something with a persimmon in it for you, and I was stumped for a moment. In my experience, fruit is often eaten fresh in a Korean home. Then, I realized there was a drink so familiar I'd forgotten about it. Sujeonggwa (or cinnamon ginger persimmon tea) is commonly served at the end of a typical Korean meal. The ginger helps digestion and the cinnamon and persimmon work as a refreshing palate cleanser. You can also drink this on your own, as I do. Hot or cold, at any time—it's soothing and calming.

Happy eating and drinking, reading, and talking about *The Apology*! I hope you enjoy the book and these recipes that are close to my heart. Thank you for welcoming a bit of my family into your group.

—Jimin

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does being Korean mean to Jeonga? How does her view compare to that of Chohui and Gwangmu?
- What is the relationship between family and culture to the characters in *The Apology*? Between family and duty?
- How do the younger characters in the book, like Chohui, differ from members of the older generation? Do you see similar differences in your own life?
- Why did Jeonga hide the secret of Hayun's pregnancy? If she had never received Joyce's letter, do you think she would have come to regret her decision? Why or why not?
- What are some of the secrets kept by the characters in *The Apology*, and what is at stake for each? Do you see any underlying similarities?
- Describe the role of motherhood in this book. What does it mean to Jeonga, and how does it influence the choices she makes in life and in death?
- Do you see any parallels between Hayun's pregnancy and Seona's elopement? How do their families respond to these events, and why?
- Describe the relationship between Jeonga and Chohui. How do they feel about one another, and why? Does this change over the course of the book?
- Throughout the novel, characters grapple with diaspora, or what happens when people reside outside of their ancestral homeland. What is the significance of South Korea to Jeonga and her family, and what does it mean for characters like Seona and Hayun to leave the country?

- In Chapter 5, Jeonga says, “How small that word: love. How small for how much it demanded for the illusion of what it gave.” The characters in *The Apology* grapple with many different kinds of love. What are they, and what do they demand of Jeonga and her sisters? Do these demands conflict with one another?
- Jeonga and Seona both fall in love during their lives, but they respond in very different ways. What drove each of their decisions? What are the consequences they experience as a result?
- Even in death, Jeonga and Seona are haunted by their sense of duty. What do they feel they owe to their families, and why?
- What does Jeonga encounter in the afterlife and how does it change the way she views her choices? The choices of Siwon, Seona, and Namgil?
- At the start of the book, Seona is presented as the outsider of the sisters. How is sisterhood portrayed in *The Apology*? What values does Seona hold, and how do they compare to those of her family? How does her relationship with Jeonga change over the course of the story?
- Why does Jeonga struggle to understand the apology she needs to give? Why is her ultimate apology so powerful?

Jimin Han's Family Recipes

TURKEY/PORK DUMPLINGS (GOGI MANDU)

Serves 8

Ingredients:

- 1 package of dumpling wrappers (14 ounces), any shape
- 8 ounces of ground turkey or ground pork
- 2 teaspoons of minced garlic
- ½ teaspoon of minced ginger
- 1 cup of finely chopped Vidalia or sweet onion
- ½ cup of finely chopped scallion, green and white parts
- 1 cup of green cabbage
- ½ block of firm tofu (7 ounces of a 14-ounce block)
- 1 ½ teaspoons of salt*
- 1 teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil
- 2 whole eggs

1. Bring 6 cups of water in a pot to a boil.
2. While waiting for the water to boil, cut the cabbage into quarters. Then place one quarter of the cabbage into boiling water and let the cabbage wilt, approx. 5 minutes.
3. Drain and set aside to cool. Then squeeze all the liquid from the cabbage. Finely chop and add to a large bowl.
4. Finely chop onions and scallions and add to the bowl.
5. Squeeze tofu to drain any liquid from it. Add to the bowl.
6. Add ground turkey or pork to the bowl.
7. Add salt, sesame oil, black pepper, garlic, ginger, and one egg to the bowl.
8. Mix all together until combined.
9. Take the second egg and separate the egg white from the yolk. Then place the egg white into a small bowl.
10. Line a large plate or tray with parchment paper or paper towel.
11. Spoon a small portion of the mixed ingredients in the bowl into the middle of a dumpling wrapper. Then use your finger to wet the edge of half the dumpling wrapper with egg white. Bring the edges together, pinching them firmly. Feel free to pleat or keep it simple.
12. Place on plate or tray, keeping each dumpling separate from others.
13. Repeat #11 until all the filling is used.
14. Steam, pan fry, or boil the dumplings (see instructions below).
15. Serve with dipping sauce (recipe below).

*Varieties can differ in saltiness so adjust accordingly.

KIMCHI VEGETABLE DUMPLINGS (KIMCHI MANDU)

Follow the recipe above, except for the following:

1. Replace ground turkey or ground pork with: 1 cup of finely chopped zucchini, ½ cup of finely chopped carrots, 1 cup of finely chopped cabbage kimchi (homemade or store-bought).
2. Omit garlic and ginger but double the amount of green cabbage.

HOW TO COOK DUMPLINGS

To steam, add a small amount of water at the base of your steamer and bring to a boil. While you wait for the water to heat, line your steamer basket with cabbage leaves or parchment paper to prevent dumplings from sticking to the basket. Add dumplings, spaced apart, cover, and let cook through, approx. 6-7 minutes.

To pan fry, heat a pan to medium heat with 2 tablespoons of a neutral oil. Add dumplings in a single layer until brown, 2-3 minutes, and then turn to cook the other side for 2-3 minutes. Add 2 tablespoons of water and cover for 2-3 minutes until cooked through.

To boil, bring 6 cups of water or more to a boil, depending on the size of your pot. If you want to boil more dumplings in a single batch, use a larger pot. Once the water is boiling, place dumplings in the water. Don't cover the pot. When the dumplings float to the surface, check to see if they're cooked through, approx. 5-6 minutes.

DIPPING SAUCE

Combine ½ cup of soy sauce, ½ cup of rice vinegar, and 1 tablespoon of sesame oil. Enjoy!



SUJEONGGWA

(CINNAMON GINGER PERSIMMON DRINK)

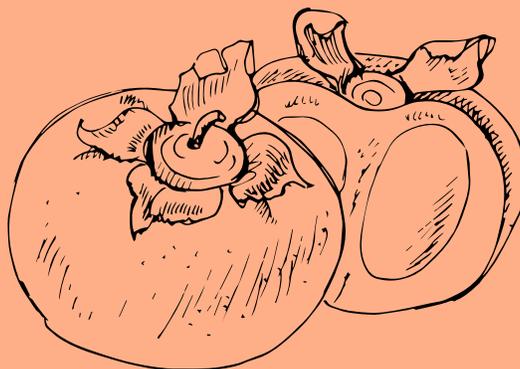
The idea for this hot or cold drink is to prepare the ginger and cinnamon liquids separately to get the freshest taste. Sugar and persimmon are added after you combine them.

Serves 8

Ingredients:

- 6 cups of water
- 20 grams of fresh ginger, peeled and chopped into thin slices
- 10 grams of cinnamon sticks
- ¼ cup brown sugar (decrease if you prefer it to be less sweet)
- 1 whole dried persimmon or 5-6 already-sliced pieces of dried persimmon
- ½ tablespoon of pine nuts

1. Pour 3 cups of water into a pot, add ginger, bring to a boil, and let simmer, covered, for 10 minutes.
2. While the water is boiling, rinse cinnamon sticks under running water and in another pot, add 3 cups of water and cinnamon sticks, bring to a boil, and let simmer covered for 10 minutes.
3. Strain both liquids into another pot and toss out solid pieces of ginger and cinnamon.
4. Add sugar and mix thoroughly.
5. Bring the pot to a boil and simmer, covered, for 10 minutes.
6. Add the dried persimmon and let it soak in the liquid for an hour. Remove afterwards.
7. Add a few pine nuts to each glass or mug. Serve as a hot tea or chill for several hours and serve cold.





KOREAN TV SHOWS THAT JEONGA WOULD RECOMMEND

It's true that Jeonga is a big fan of books and Chohui would be telling her which book to read next. For an English-speaking audience, I thought I'd share TV shows that Jeonga might find herself watching despite herself—and have an opinion about—for their fascinating storylines, charming characters, and subjects that interest her: social taboos and daring, also people who navigate love, life and death. They all have outspoken women characters who persevere and value relationships with friends and family above all else.

Here is a list of ten tv shows (in no particular order) that I hope you'll enjoy!

Crash Landing on You

A career-obsessed heiress in South Korea finds herself accidentally in North Korea and has to find her way back home with the help of an officer in the North Korean army. The villagers pitch in to assist her which adds to the highs and lows of this romantic comedy with politics mixed in. A lot of pride and prejudice run through this series.

Extraordinary Attorney Woo

The first job that this talented attorney with a photographic memory acquires is at a prestigious law firm where prominent social issues are prosecuted and defended in the South Korean legal system. The editors of the show bring us into Attorney Woo's inner world in creative ways that reminded me of how awkward social situations can be.

Our Blues

This large cast of residents of beautiful remote Jeju Island off the coast of South Korea have known each other all their lives and have to hash out misunderstandings and complex networks of relationships. Many apologies are given and accepted in this intergenerational series.

Hi Bye, Mama!

How can a story about a woman who dies in a car accident while her infant survives be uplifting in any way? This show pulls it off. The woman returns as a ghost in this comedy about a second chance at life that only lasts forty-nine days. We cry and laugh with her as she learns about herself, the husband she left behind and the future of her child.

Thirty-Nine

I was skeptical about this one. But the extraordinary friendship among these three thirty-nine year old Korean women convinced me to keep watching and after it was over I kept thinking about how much of life's ups and downs this show covered in deep ways. It also had me thinking about what's expected of women in South Korea and here in the United States.



One Spring Night

This show made me think South Korean culture was far more conservative than I realized. Why would a divorced man with a child be considered an unsuitable candidate for marriage? The hurdle has to do with how responsible these two main characters are. This series is an intriguing exploration of contemporary South Korea that opened my eyes to social rules that do ring true in all cultures to a degree.

Little Women

As a fan of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women*, of course I was going to watch this Korean version. Also because of the relationship among the sisters. In this case, three sisters are left to fend for themselves as young women when their parents abandon them. Two are old enough to have careers but the third is still in high school. The sisters' relationships remains central even as murder and intrigue drive the plot forward.

SKY Castle

My cousin told me to watch this show to understand the intense pressure on teenagers in South Korea to get into competitive colleges. Again, I'm recommending it because of the way the women, the mothers in this case, band together to save their children. Class and privilege, the inequities in Korean society are thrown in harsh relief but I thought how interesting too that shows like this can help people have conversations about their values and the institutions they support.

Queenmaker

Korean Succession? Yes but with women in key roles! The film critic and Chicago Tribune columnist Jae-Ha Kim told me this one was worth watching for the women who stand out in this dramatic series. Also she told me to look out for the way former foes team up, finding surprising common ground. She was right. Rarely do we see women take center stage as they do in this show.

See You in My 19th Life

This is new so I have to admit, I'm adding this with the caveat that I haven't finished watching it yet. But the first two episodes have caught my attention. Like *The Apology*, the story is pushed to the extreme. The woman at the center of this story has been reincarnated eighteen times previously. And she remembers each life. But this 19th life is different because she fell in love in her 18th life and returns with a mission to meet her loved one again. Let's see what happens!

AUTHOR Q+A



What inspired you to write *The Apology*?

There were three things that came together. In 2016, my mother died, my friend Brian had a diagnosis of brain cancer, and I had this conversation with the writer Alexander Chee where we thought we were cousins for a minute and in comparing notes it turned out that we were not.

What color would your afterlife be?

Jeonga's favorite fruit is persimmon so that's why I made her afterlife that color. It also symbolized that special relationship she had with her sister. My favorite fruit is the lemon, so I think in my ideal afterlife everything would be yellow. Not overwhelmingly yellow but, you know, a light yellow.

What do you think is Jeonga's biggest strength?

Often your strength can be your biggest downfall. I thought about that a lot. Jeonga is incredibly stubborn. That caused her a lot of pain in her life, but ultimately it helps her persevere.

If you could be visited by the ghost of anyone, who would it be and why?

Oh, it would absolutely be my mom. I would love to spend any more time with her than I possibly could.

Do you have a favorite epilogue?

There are several but the one I read most recently that really made an impression on me is from *A History of Burning* by Janika Oza. It's gorgeous and it's so different from the way it begins—the beginning of the book is gorgeous also, but in tone and everything it's so beautiful.

What would your ideal afterlife be?

I got to write it in the book. That's the afterlife that I talked about with my friend Brian when he was diagnosed with brain cancer. We talked a lot about what would happen after and so I got to write it in the book. It's an afterlife where you would be able to visit parts of your past life and also see what's happening with the people you love. I would love to be able to still watch over those I love and see if I can have some kind of influence on them, as Jeonga does.

Do you have any siblings? If so, how did that influence the sibling dynamics in *The Apology*?

I have two brothers and I have a whole bunch of cousins. My mother is one of four sisters and I got to watch her and her sisters talk, laugh, and share so many memories. It was really fun for me to imagine that for Jeonga. I also have two daughters and I see the way they are as sisters with each other. I just think it's a really special relationship.