



STONE

ANGELS

A NOVEL

HELENA RHO



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) The author includes two epigraphs at the start of the novel, one from Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and one from William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 116*. After reading the novel, why do you think she chose these excerpts, in particular? How do they reflect the novel's major themes? How many variations of love do you see in the novel?
- 2) In the prologue, Gongju has a dream about her sister, Sunyuh, while she's pregnant with Angelina. After reading the novel, what do you think the dream signified?
- 3) Discuss the ways in which motherhood is depicted in the novel. How did each mother (particularly Grandmama, Gongju, and Angelina) influence the way her daughter behaved and later raise her own children, for better or worse?
- 4) When Angelina first arrives in Seoul, she feels distant from her culture. She insists she is Angelina Lee, not Yi Sunyuh. Discuss the events that contributed to Angelina's feelings of cultural confusion, and her motivations for taking language classes at Konkuk University. Compare and contrast these experiences and motivations with those of her fellow classmate, Keisuke.
- 5) The novel sheds light on the little-known history of girls and young women who were victims of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery during WWII. Before reading the Author's Note, were you aware of this aspect of history?
- 6) In chapter six, Angelina says: "History will repeat itself if we don't change the pattern of hiding secrets . . . The truth is sometimes unbearable, but eventually, it releases you." Una disagrees: "I think the truth is sometimes so painful one cannot live with it." Where do you fall in this debate?
- 7) Discuss the motif of water in the novel, and the symbolic role it played in Gongju, Sunyuh, and Angelina's lives.
- 8) What was the moment you realized Angelina's connection to Lars wouldn't last? Why was the affair a necessary stepping stone for her relationship with Keisuke?
- 9) Angelina was raised to believe it was the epitome of good manners to hide her feelings, to be stoic. Do you believe it's better to spare others the weight of one's feelings, or speak them honestly?
- 10) Of the three women who narrated the novel, who was your favorite? How did Angelina, Gongju, and Sunyuh mirror one another in the novel, personality and experience-wise? Did you chalk these similarities up to genetics? The way the women were raised? Discuss.



DEAR READER,

To be perfectly honest, I never intended to write a novel. And I was completely unaware in the summer of 2006 that the origins of *Stone Angels* were taking root when I returned to Seoul, for the first time, since I'd left as a six-year-old child. Now, an MFA candidate in Nonfiction at the University of Pittsburgh, I'd abandoned the practice of pediatrics and was relearning my mother tongue, reconnecting with my Korean family, and writing about my journey back to the culture of my ancestors.

American Seoul, my memoir, was published two years ago.

In 2006, the confluence of my first hearing about the victims of sexual slavery by Japan during the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945) along with my deep sorrow over my mother's first suicide attempt and my acute alienation from feeling neither Korean nor American in Seoul drove me to seek refuge in books. On my desk, in my tiny dorm room at Konkuk University, were two of my favorite novels:

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison and *Persuasion* by Jane Austen. Morrison's novel of a girl brutalized by her father and shunned by her community may seem diametrically opposed to Austen's Regency era novel about second chances at love. But these two female authors gave me the courage to write

Stone Angels.

My novel illuminates a little-known corner of World War II history, but it also contains the stories of women and the intricate relationships between mothers and daughters, sisters and wives. For a long time, I believed I was a doctor too mired in facts to ever write fiction. But I needed fiction to tell the truth about "comfort women" (a misnomer that stuck and used as shorthand for the hundreds of thousands of victims of sexual slavery by Japan. Most were teenagers at the time they were trafficked, and some of them were as young as nine years old.) Only through fiction could I imagine the life of a single victim, her family, her friends, and her community. And at the heart of my novel is a love story—a nod to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*.

I'd never written a love story. In desperation, I turned to Austen. But Angelina Lee, my central character (loosely based on Anne Elliot from *Persuasion*), was acting in unexpected ways—even to me and I'm the author, for god's sake! Angelina wouldn't choose the man I envisioned she'd end up with, the Captain Wentworth from *Persuasion*. Hence, my "Aha!" moment—my novel would feature multiple characters from all six Austen novels. I like to describe my novel as a version of "*Pachinko* meets *Persuasion*" in its themes of migration and identity; a slice of painful history; a precious second chance at love; women trying to navigate the beauty and brutality of their lives. Please join me on an epic journey across oceans and continents as Angelina searches for love and family.

In gratitude,

Helena Rho





MY MOTHER'S WATCH

One of my favorite chapters in *Stone Angels* is the one I like to call “Gongju at Angelina’s Wedding.” This chapter, told from the character Gongju’s point of view, was almost fun to write because Gongju has a darkly comic way of looking at life. And when her gallows humor is juxtaposed with two terrible conversations with two of her daughters, both comedy and tragedy are heightened. But another reason I love this chapter is because, on Angelina’s wedding day, Gongju gives her an antique watch, the “something old” of the cliché in American culture that every bride should receive. Before my own wedding, my mother gave me an invaluable gift. Angelina’s watch is modeled after it in the novel. My mother bought the watch in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1975. We were on a grand European tour enroute to America, having escaped Uganda, East Africa, and Idi Amin’s military dictatorship. My parents, born in Korea during the Japanese Occupation, admired Swiss engineering and wanted to buy for themselves items that would become family heirlooms. Years later, when my father needed money, he sold his custom Rolex for more than he paid for it. But my mother’s plain, gold-plated cocktail watch that the Rolex company mass produced by the thousands in the 1970s, had depreciated over time and only appraised for about \$200 in 2012 when I was going through an ugly divorce with an uglier ex-husband who insisted the watch was joint property, assuming that a Rolex must be worth thousands. Still, it is a treasure to me because my mother, like Angelina’s grandmother in the novel, wanted her cherished possession to be inherited in a matrilineal line. My mother passed away in 2018. In our last conversation together, she said she hoped that, someday, a great-granddaughter of hers would proudly wear the watch and remember the legacy of the gift. In the meantime, I’m keeping it safe until that day, hoping this priceless reminder of my mother will continue to survive through many more generations of women, each aware of the stories of the mothers and daughters who lived before them.





LIAM'S BIRTHDAY TOFU WITH SPINACH

(ADAPTED FROM DOK SUNI: RECIPES FROM MY MOTHER'S KOREAN KITCHEN BY JENNY KWAK WITH LIZ FRIED)

I, like my character Gongju, love to cook tofu and this less-than-30-minute recipe is one of my favorite ways to make it. Starting from when he was five or six years old, my son, Liam, consistently asked for this dish on his birthday. Now, at age twenty-four, he still requests this. While I prefer it less fiery, Liam's tolerance for spice has increased, so he wants two teaspoons of gochugaru or Korean red pepper flakes instead of a half teaspoon when he was a child.

INGREDIENTS:

Yield: 3-4 servings

- 1 tablespoon olive oil or neutral oil
- 1 (14-ounce) block of firm or extra-firm tofu
- ½ clamshell package of baby spinach, about 3 ounces
- 5 tablespoons of soy sauce
- 3 tablespoons of water
- ½ teaspoon of honey or 1 teaspoon of brown sugar
- 2 large garlic cloves crushed, about 2-3 teaspoons
- 3 scallions—minced white parts but thinly sliced green ends—
about 2 tablespoons
- 1 tablespoon of roasted sesame seeds, crushed in a mortar and pestle
- 1 tablespoon of sesame oil
- 1-2 teaspoons of gochugaru (Korean red pepper flakes), depending on spice tolerance



STEP 1

Tofu brands vary in their labeling so use whichever tofu is structured but soft and has a little jiggle. If using Pulmuone firm tofu from H-Mart, place tofu block between two plates and then place a weight on top for about 8-10 minutes to gently press out water. If using Nasoya firm tofu or Target's Good & Gather extra-firm tofu, no squeezing needed. Cut tofu into approximately 1 inch by ½ inch by ½ inch pieces—bite size.

STEP 2

In a small bowl, whisk together soy sauce, water, honey, garlic, red pepper flakes, crushed sesame seeds, and sesame oil into a marinade. Stir in scallions to the mixture at the end.

TIP

This recipe is forgiving, so tailor it to your taste and play with it. Add more water or use less soy sauce, up the garlic or decrease the scallions. Even add a splash of rice vinegar like I sometimes do.

STEP 3

Heat the olive oil over medium-high heat in a 12-inch nonstick frying pan and place tofu in a single layer—overlapping pieces will not get any color—cook to a golden brown, about 4-5 minutes. Do not over-sauté. Flip tofu pieces over and cook for another 2-3 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and pour marinade over the tofu and stir for about 1-2 minutes, coating each piece. Add spinach and fold in. Remove from heat when the spinach is wilted. Add more water if the sauce has become thick or sludgy. Serve tofu and spinach over a bowl of warm white rice, allowing the sauce to seep into the rice.



THE K-DRAMAS THAT INFLUENCED *STONE ANGELS*

OUR BLUES

FATED TO LOVE YOU

GUARDIAN: THE LONELY AND GREAT GOD

DESCENDANTS OF THE SUN

WHAT'S WRONG WITH SECRETARY KIM

ENCOUNTER

FORECASTING LOVE AND WEATHER

MY LIBERATION NOTES