

First Thursday Book Group Discussion Questions

Pachinko

by Min Jin Lee

September 5, 2019, 2pm. Location to be determined. Lorraine Wheeler leads the discussion

1. The book's first line reads: "History has failed us, but no matter." Why do you think Min Jin Lee chose to begin the book this way?
2. The inciting incident in the book comes when Sunja, the daughter of a boardinghouse owner, is seduced by Hansu, the mysterious and wealthy stranger. How does that moment reverberate through the generations?
3. What role does shame play in the novel?
4. How does being in exile and being perceived as foreign affect how Sunja's family members see themselves?
5. Sunja is told early on that "a woman's life is endless work and suffering ... For a woman, the man you marry will determine the quality of your life completely." How do the women in this book have or not have agency? And how do they struggle to reclaim it?
6. How did the book make you think differently about migration, if at all?
7. Did you know much about the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 through the end of World War II before reading this book? Or about Korean culture in Japan?
8. "There was more to being something than just blood," Min Jin Lee writes. How do the characters grapple with this idea throughout the book?
9. The epigraph for the third section of "Pachinko," from Benedict Anderson, describes a nation as "an imagined political community." Do you agree?
10. Which character throughout the four generations do you identify with most, and why?
11. How did the book make you think differently about what makes a family?
12. At one point in the novel, Min Jin Lee writes: "You want to see a very bad man? Make an ordinary man successful beyond his imagination. Let's see how good he is when he can do whatever he wants." How does that apply to characters in the book and the larger historical events happening around them?
13. Did you identify at all with Noa's efforts to "pass" as an identity different than his own — as Japanese instead of Korean — and if not, did it feel relevant to today?

14. "We cannot help but be interested in the stories of people that history pushes aside so thoughtlessly," Min Jin Lee writes. Do you think "Pachinko" is an effort to reclaim those stories?
15. After finishing the book, why do you think Min Jin Lee chose the title "Pachinko," from the game common in Japan? How does she compare the game of Pachinko to the game of life?