

Jody Baik

Critique of *Where Do I Belong*

Most people have wondered at least once in their lives if they truly belonged in a place or with someone. New graphic novelist Jody Baik explores this sense of belonging/ exclusion in her autobiographical graphic short stories in *Where Do I Belong*. The author is a Korean-born 20-year-old college student who has lived half her life in South Korea and the other half in the United States. She has also lived away from her parents and sister from the age of 12 to attend school in America. At a time when Baik is starting to consider where to start her post-graduation life, she attempts to understand certain aspects of both Korea and America in her three short narratives that she has felt excluded from throughout her life. Jody Baik's autobiographical stories provide a one-of-a-kind look into her interesting perspective and experiences that have resulted from her unique life.

The first story titled "Plastic Surgery and the Importance of Appearance in South Korea" is a piece that explores just what the title suggests: why appearance is so important in South Korea to the point in which 40 percent of South Koreans in their 20s have had at least one kind of plastic surgery (Oh Seung-mock). Because Baik has spent most of her teen years in America, a country where plastic surgery is often times looked down on and kept a secret, she has a difficult time relating to many of her family and friends who are so open about plastic surgery and wanting to change their appearance. After some research, Baik starts to understand that in South Korea, beauty is indeed important in not only marriage but also in seeking employment. She also learns that many Korean idols give young children and teenagers the message that a beautiful outer appearance is important for finding love. Baik ends her story with a hopeful

yearning for Koreans to start recognizing others' inner beauty as well as others' outer beauty so that people do not feel the need to change their appearances so drastically.

The second story has an even more personal touch as Baik is writing about her younger sister. Titled "My Little Sister," the second story is the longest of the three stories. After 8 years of mostly living away from her family, Baik feels isolated from her little sister, Jeemin, and yearns to be closer to her. In the story, Baik attempts to understand her sister's lack of dedication to her studies and her growing apathy towards the author. After a better understanding about what kind of pressure and environment her sister has to study in, Baik vows to be of any little support to Jeemin. The story ends on a positive note as the author exchange text messages with Jeemin for the first time in a long while.

Unlike the first two stories which focused on the author's sense of exclusion in Korea, the third story titled "Representation in Theatre A.K.A. Why I Cried Hysterically that One Time I Saw A Play in the US about a Korean Woman" focuses on her experiences in the United States. In this narrative, Baik investigates why seeing a play a year ago about a Korean woman caused her to become so emotional as to cry hysterically after the play was over. She explores how she fell in love with theatre, and how theatre helped recover her confidence. Then Baik addresses how the lack of Korean characters and actors in productions she was in caused her to doubt if she actually belonged in the world of theatre in the United States. The story concludes with Baik stressing in big letters that representation in theatre is important because of the sense of belonging it brings (which is very fitting with the title of the collection of stories).

Baik's illustrations are simple and frankly, cute. Although one can immediately tell that Baik is not the most talented illustrator, she is able to convey a range of different emotions through the various facial expressions of her drawn characters. The medium she has chosen for

her autobiographical stories seem to be a good one. Jody Baik is able to display the visual aspects of her stories such as how different her sister looks from her and how specific the beauty standard in Korea is effectively through her illustrations.

Baik addresses several serious topics such as plastic surgery, conformity, pressure, harsh studying environments, familial relationships, and representation in her autobiographical stories. Although Baik fails to provide solid resolutions or solutions to the issues she addresses in her graphic stories, she still gives an interesting perspective to these familiar topics. Some can say that Baik has a very naïve outlook on these issues, as all her stories end on a hopeful note despite the lack of solutions for these problems. However, I believe that her hopeful attitude is refreshing. It reflects the 20-year-old author's bright personality and hopeful outlook on life. Moreover, this attitude compliments the childlike handwriting and cute, simple illustrations in the collection.

New graphic novelist Jody Baik's *Where Do I Belong* is a fascinating and refreshing perspective on various serious issues. I expect several readers to enjoy Baik's unique outlook and adorable illustration.

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