



## A Gesture Life

*Chang-rae Lee*

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A Gesture Life by Chang-rae Lee is a taut, suspenseful story about love, family, and community, and the secrets we all harbor. It is the story of a proper man, an upstanding citizen who comes to epitomize the decorous values of his New York suburban town. Yet as his story unfolds, precipitated by events that take place around him, we see his life begin to unravel.

Courteous, honest, hardworking, and impenetrable, Franklin Hata, a Japanese man of Korean birth, is careful never to overstep his bounds. He makes his neighbors feel comfortable in his presence, keeps his garden well tended, bids his customers good-bye at the doorway to his medical supply shop, and ignores the taunts of local boys. Now facing his retirement years alone, Hata begins to reflect on the price he's had to pay for living this quiet "gesture life."

After suffering minor injuries in an accidental fire, he remembers the painful, failed relationships of his past; with Mary Burns, a widow with whom he had an affair, and with Sunny, a Korean girl he adopted when she was seven, who is now a grown woman he hasn't spoken to or seen in years. As Hata recalls the strained, troubled relationship with Sunny, he begins to understand why his daughter, unlike himself, "felt no more at home in this town, or in this house of mine, or perhaps even with me, than when she first arrived at Kennedy Airport."

Unknown to Sunny, there is a secret that has shaped the core of Hata's being; his terrible, forbidden love for a young Korean woman from his past. Serving as a medic in the Japanese army during World War II, Hata was assigned the task of overseeing the female "volunteers; women taken against their will to provide sexual favors for the men in the battalion. One of these "comfort women" he came to love. These remembrances, tinged with grief and regret, ultimately draw Hata once again to his daughter; and help him begin to attain a more truthful understanding of himself.

## A Gesture Life Details

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## From Reader Review A Gesture Life for online ebook

### **Morgan says**

Somehow the author makes this book largely about women, even though the first-person narrator is a man. It touches on ways that we try to belong and the ways we avoid doing so. Also the ways we fail just by not doing. The end is somewhat simplistic, and sort of solidifies the main character's tendency to abandon his loved ones, at least physically. He instead opts for lending financial support, which it seems he has always done without second thought. It is well written and the language is rich.

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### **Jenny McKeel says**

I think Gesture Life goes in my top five favorite books. I recommend it to everyone.

It's about a Korea-born Japanese-American man who is forced to face, and in certain ways is attempting to face, the legacy of a lifetime of refusing to feel. It takes place in the present and goes back and forth to various times in the past. It touches on horrible things that happened during World War II. It's also a thrilling, horrifying page turner, in the WWII sections. It deals with heavy issues, but deals with them in a sad, honest, and poignant way. Lee's writing is gorgeous and he does an amazing job of describing perceptions and mental processes in a particularly elegant way. It evokes complicated emotions, I think, both empathy and intolerance.

I love this book!!!!!! Everyone read it!!!!

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### **Dayna says**

This was a heartbreak book. A reserved Japanese store owner has settled in a small American town, raising an adopted Korean daughter. He appears to lead a regular working-class life. Later in the novel it is revealed that he was a doctor in the Japanese military during the war and had fallen in love with a Korean comfort woman. What is most painful is the conflict between the man's quiet exterior and the emotional/political life he has led. I admire this novel for addressing the continuing issue of Korean comfort women (especially when Prime Minister Abe so recently failed to recognize their existence during the war) and the author's success in creating a plot which subsists along that blurry line of the political and the personal.

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### **Marie says**

<http://mariesbookgarden.blogspot.com/...>

A Gesture Life is another book that was really hard to get into, but the patience paid off. If it hadn't been a

book group selection, I might not have stuck with it.

Franklin Hata was a man who was difficult to admire or respect, because he seemed cold and heartless. His stilted relationship with his adopted daughter Sunny just made me sad. He had a chronic difficulty in relating to anyone on a deep, true level.

Presumably, this was because of his difficult experiences in the war and his obsession with K, a Korean "comfort woman." The storyline about the comfort women made me truly sick to my stomach. Apparently when Chang-Rae Lee began writing this novel, it was going to be all about comfort women, but he found that to be too heavy of a subject. His obsession with K reminded me of the foreign men I knew in Japan who were obsessed with Japanese women...many of them ended up marrying them and staying in Japan. They were drawn to them because they were less likely to challenge them than western women. They liked the way the Japanese women looked up to them. Often, these men would not have been classified as "catches" in the US or UK. These relationships were not very equal.

That is the relationship between Franklin and K. He thinks he loves her, but she only views him as one more man who is taking advantage of her. In his case, perhaps he can help her a little. But he means nothing to her.

I appreciated this book more after discussing it with my book group. Some of them liked it better than I did, and one of my friends observed that perhaps it was the way she had been raised, with more distant parenting. That could be.

It was beautifully written, but a little bit disappointing for me. I expected more, and I found it to be really sad.

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## **Charity says**

I almost love this book, but a few things keep me from it.

First, though, I'll tell you why I love it. I love the way the story unfolds. Chang-rae Lee takes his time revealing the story. It comes out in bits and pieces from the first-person perspective of Doc Hata, just as a person would generally reflect on his own life. A scene comes to mind, then something else jumps in and we follow that thread for a bit, then back to the original scene, which is now colored by the tangent. I luxuriated in the language and found myself hypnotized by the writing. I closed the last page and looked at the clock and did a double-take: it was 2am. I love when a book transports me like that.

One of the little pebbles in my shoe along the journey of this book is a time issue. I had (and still have) a lot of trouble figuring out how old Sunny is at the end of the book. Doc Hata says at one point that he hadn't seen her in nearly 13 years and that now she would be twenty-two. Except that we know he saw her when she was 18. Maybe he meant that he hadn't really *seen* her since she was 9, before the rift between them began to widen? Maybe he meant she was thirty-two? This would make more sense given that he mentions a few wrinkles and grey hairs, which are more common in the over-thirty set than the twenty-two-year-olds I've known. Maybe this is just an editing snafu, but man does it rattle me.

The other part that keeps me from loving this book is the despair of it. Doc Hata is a man who has lived a number of identities, all shaped by and for the culture around him. He's Korean and works to become Japanese. He's Japanese and works to become an American. He's a medic and becomes a doctor (at least in

the eyes of the people in his town). He's a chameleon, which is, I think, why it's so hard for anyone to get close to him. How can they know who it is they're dealing with? How can they put their trust in someone whose identity is so slippery?

Then there's Hata's sense that, because he's around when tragedy strikes those around him, he somehow attracts tragedy (*cum hoc, ergo propter hoc*). He sees himself as the opposite of a lucky rabbit's foot, and he convinces himself that those around him would be better off without him. He seems to feel as though he's unintentionally deceived them into believing that he's helping them through their misfortunes when they wouldn't have had any misfortunes at all if he'd kept his distance.

While it's illogical, it's not unrealistic that Hata believes this. On the contrary, his world-view and his view of himself are all the more tragic because they're totally realistic, and all the more unsettling because of the personal connection I feel to these beliefs. I can relate to Hata's search for a place and an identity, and I can relate to his attempts to make some order out of the causes and effects in his life. I've not experienced anything to the degree that Hata has, but as a life-long nomad, I've done my share of trying to fit in and trying to discover who I am in relation to the wheres and whos of my current stop, wherever and whenever that might be.

This was a beautifully written gut-punch of a story, but I couldn't love it because it carried the much-too-real aroma of the despair and futility that lurks just beneath the surface. Acknowledging that despair by loving this story seems too dangerous; I prefer to keep my distance from it.

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### **Daniel says**

This was a tough read. The story unfolds at a slow pace and the narrator's accommodating personality is, at times, repulsive. Two-hundred pages in, I wondered why I was still reading, when there are so many other books out there. Any yet, I had a sense that Lee was going somewhere with this growing ennui and that I just needed to follow him there,

In the last forty pages or so, Lee brings the story to its culmination, and all of the time that he (and thus, readers) has devoted to Franklin Hata's excessive pliability bears down upon this conclusion with terrible consequence. Without this build-up, the story's final revelations would not have the same impact. In fact, I am not sure that I could relate to this story without spending this much time with Hata, whose considerations and perspective are very different from my own.

Already, this book's standing grows more distinct and carries more weight in memory. It needs time to be digested, and I may have read it too quickly. I am glad that I saw it through to its sad end.

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### **Stacy says**

chang-rae lee is a quiet author whose narratives unfold delicately and fully; like a tightly-wound tea leaf when confronted with boiling water. *A Gesture Life* was deceptive in its simplicity, in its lulling me into this nuanced narrative of an old korean man living in a small middle-class american town.

i don't always know what to say about a book that i've liked, or what it was about it that "did" it for me. the first novel of lee's that i'd read was *native speaker*, and it was strong enough to lead me to another of his. i don't go looking for an epic story, journey, or family history per se, and there aren't specific tropes i seek either. lee has a compelling voice as a narrator, and his characters are complex while being simultaneously spare--something of a feat, i think. i enjoy reading international fiction because it shows me how completely uneducated i am about the rest of the world, about history told from anyone's viewpoint other than The West's, and because i want to be immersed in a world i wonder about, but know very little of (i was ashamed i knew little to nothing about the comfort women used during japanese/korean conflicts before this, and just how hideous their existence was).

chang-rae lee's novels never leave me wanting for more, or do i feel like a cross-cultural voyeur reading them. i tend to be a completist reader, meaning that when i find an author i like i will read their oeuvre straight through unless repeatedly insulted by their output (as in the case of coetzee). this is not lee's strongest work, but if you like his voice, as i do, you will eventually seek it out.

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### **Mirjam says**

I thought that this book started out strong, with beautifully lyrical prose...and then, although the main story was compelling, it kept getting tripped up by flashbacks that told a back story that initially had great potential but then turned into an annoying tale about a man who thinks he has honor but does not. I think the thing that was so annoying to me was that the author could really have done something with that back story. Soldier fancies himself in love with Korean "comfort woman," when really he is just using her with no attention paid to what her needs or wants might be - the only difference between him and his comrades is that he is wrapping his consumption of her in a noble-looking mantle of chivalrous love (there are interesting similarities to the way in which Hata fancies himself to love his adopted daughter, Sunny, when really he is just emotionally invested in her, or more accurately, his image of how she should be. And finally, he sacrifices her physical integrity, as well as her needs and wants, to this noble-looking image of the perfect father and daughter). What was lacking for me in this book is that neither of these issues seemed to be resolved, and the first seemed not to be even addressed. And that total lack of accountability soured the entire book for me.

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### **Sang Ik says**

I find it interesting that so many people review books based on their judgement on much of what 'should' have happened or how the book 'should' have been written or even more interestingly, how a character should have been (e.g Dr. Hata was too unemotional, etc). I feel Chang Rae Lee gets the short end of the stick concerning much of this and I find it rather ironic that the character was so ingrained that one would be dissatisfied that intensely. Still - for the reader unacquainted with Lee just yet, I ask you to consider him a bit more than perhaps he has been given credit for in some other reviews.

Besides his literary success with *Native Speaker*, I must admit that I find this book to be his best work to date. Perhaps Native Speaker is easier to relate with and fits more comfortably within the genre of hyphenated Asians in their convoluted duality - thus also easier to digest (and even culturally more understandable in Asian-American literary discourse). A *Gesture Life* is a tad bit more ambitious - requiring a more empathetic 'cultural' lens (ie. He's NOT simply a Japanese man. It's like saying Poles were Russians

when they were the USSR. Or in terms of trauma, calling a person German during the Second World War without mentioning he's also Jewish). Besides, Lee's deft strokes does wonders in unraveling subtleties. His beautiful prose may be a bit overboard to some, but he is intricate in his weaving (New York Times reviewed his work as reflective of the word "accrue") and his pace is one that perhaps plods. It works in seemingly agonizing speed, but part of this process is what makes this book so satisfying in its later violent and disturbing consequences. It takes patience, it underlines things unsaid, and is reflective of the title - merely one that can be left in gestures. Would that be satisfying for the reader (this slow drowning)? Would that be as 'active' as something like The Life of Pi or as interpretive and performative as Foster Wallace's raging ingenuity?

Lee is a different mold and his books are of a different 'fragrance' than others. It is much like an old worn paper, you have to concentrate and focus to feel each groove that lines its pages. It's a work of labour and asks you the demanding task of carefully layered suffocation and suppression (and trauma if you will). It also engages in a perspective of a much older, disengaged individual that still surprises me since Lee was so young when he wrote this. If I had to compare, he smells somewhat similar to Ted Hughes at certain points. If you have the patience, I highly suggest you let it give you a try. I was intoxicated when I jumped head first (it does require some courage) and was sapped at the end by its unveiling. Lee is an excellent if quiet guide and A Gesture Life does have much to offer. You may not love/appreciate the book as much as I may have, but I think it will still linger with you for a while.

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### **Gail Goetschius says**

A Gesture Life is a beautiful and subtle novel, one of the best I read this year. It is the story of "Doc" Hata , a Korean raised as Japanese who moves to New England after serving as a medic for Japan in WWII. Since childhood Hata has made fitting in and being accepted and respected the single goal of his "gesture" life. In doing so he betrays the three women who are most important to him.

Told in Hata's voice the "Doc" is a classic unreliable narrator . His inaccurate perception of events is a brilliant way of showing that it is the appearance of things and not the truth that is important. It takes active reading to really know what is going on.

The story of K, the comfort woman, was very hard to read. It is a part of history that I needed to learn. Hata tells us and believes himself that he loves K yet he uses her and is unable to come to her defense. Similarly he betrays Sunny, his adopted daughter, when he forces her to have a late term abortion in her late teen years. When he has the opportunity for happiness later in his life with Mary he remains emotionally distant and loses her.

The turn around in his life comes when Sunny and her young son return to the area. He also has a chance for redemption when he stands behind the family who buys his store.

Lee uses some beautiful water symbolism in the novel. At one point Hata takes a scalding bath and both Hata and Mary have near drownings in the pool. When Hata gains insight into what is truly important he facilitates two rebirths; he saves his grandson and his friend from drowning.

This is a book that will stay with me for a long time. I am definitely a Chang Rae Lee fan.

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## **Yulia says**

i'd been told this was chang-rae lee's strongest novel, but after having read it, i was very disappointed and don't think it can compare to his previous work, "native speaker." i know the detached, impersonal tone is intentional in this novel, but after a while it gave me the chill of a morgue, the sense i was being told the story not of breathing individuals but of ghosts. that said, perhaps this was intentional as doc hata's past is haunted by people he can no longer reach. still, lee is much more penetrating in writing about family than he is about love interests, and the passion he relates in his characters is entirely unconvincing. though i found the character kkutaeh intriguing in her own history and secrets, i was disturbed by the sterility and lack of empathy in hata's regard for the comfort women and couldn't believe he ever felt love for kkutaeh, only obsession and jealousy. but perhaps this, too, was intended. it could be argued i have more complaints about not liking the protagonist rather than the book itself, but i used to regard lee as a flawless writer and no longer regard him as such after numerous passages that were simply embarrassing in their over-writing, especially those about suburban life. why three stars? because i did read on and was stirred by my frustration with hata; i even rooted for the other characters to shake him out of his walking/swimming coma. but no, i have to accept doc hata was born cold and will die cold.

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## **Steph says**

How does one fill a void for which there is no hole? This seems to be the question that Franklin Hata is asking as he reflects on his life and the lives that have intertwined with his. How surface acquaintances and weekday friendships can come so easily to a renowned and beloved member of a small, up-scale community, and how, for that same man, all attempts at intimate relationships meet with unparalleled disaster. For all of the various reasons that these relationships fail, one cannot help but see Hata as the common denominator. Although endued with eloquent introspection and self-awareness, Hata is sadly unable to articulate the source of his doomed attempts at love, even if consciously (and regrettably) he recognizes them as being mere echoes of a deeper, paradoxical complexity; of how someone so desperate to have meaningful relationships seems hopelessly blocked by an internal, emotional or spiritual deficiency.

For all his desire to be a man of substance, of integrity and character, Hata's emotional barrier-which prevents him from ever fully investing in a deep romantic or familial bond-is a question without an answer. It is evident in the expendability of his entanglements, beginning with his adoptive parents (who he claims never to have felt truly belonging to) to his own adoptive daughter and grandson, both of whom he seems doomed to maintain a distanced and compartmentalized intimacy with. Perhaps the most telling moments of his life involved his hesitancy with both K and Sunny. With K, the relationship is as confused and unnatural as the surroundings in which they find themselves, and it may be unfair to hold Hata accountable for the choices made while caught in the midst of a nightmarish state where the normal confines of human decency and morality cease to exist. Nevertheless, he is rendered incapable of action or real sacrifice, and is left to face the horrors that await as a result of his refusal to accept reality, but rather to act on a wishful fantasy that has no hope of coming to fruition.

This passive-resistance is most present though in his relationship with Sunny. Be it the emotional block, cultural implications, or the prevailing numbness preceding from the ghosts of his former life, something there is that prevents Hata from fully assuming his role as a parent. He fails to see that it is his lack of

shaping his child's character- of demanding a development of empathy and conscience- that is the source of his failure, and that by allowing a 15 year-old child to walk a destructive path while deeming oneself incapable of halting it is clearly unacceptable. To be numb to the emotional hardness in a child is to send the silent message of apathy or indifference.

Hata continues to keep others (his grandson, his lover) at an arm's distance from his heart, yet cannot seem to right himself, and is resolved to remain solitary and disconnected, in a martyred way of saving others from himself. The void remains unknown and unfulfilled. But at the very least, Hata and his estranged family retain a measure of peace about it.

For all of its painful subject matter, Lee has created a beautiful story. What makes the horrific images that the reader is presented with digestible is the lyrical prose and profound observances that weave themselves into the external and emotional carnage. The story of K and her fallen sisters renders an equally moving and resonating note in the mind of the reader. This was a masterful work and I look forward to reading Lee's other works as well.

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### **chucklesthescot says**

This book was so boring that it nearly cured my insomnia. We got the extremely boring life of a Japanese man living in a boring town and doing virtually nothing on every page. Very exciting. We have a supporting cast of annoying and obnoxious characters who bugged the hell out of me, a plot that was going nowhere fast and the book was badly written and uninteresting. This is the second book by this author that I have endured and I hated both of them.

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### **Julie says**

My dislike and distrust of the subject matter trumps the well-written prose, unfortunately.

I have always had a problem with Chang Rae Lee's portrayal of Asian/Asian American woman. And, really, the tale of a Japanese man (whose character is marked by silent inaction) falling in love with a Korean comfort woman makes me want to throw something against the wall. Especially this book.

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### **Mircalla64 says**

#### **ma che sapore ha, una vita non spesa? (cit)**

Franklin Hata, giapponese di origine coreana che vive in una piccola città negli Stati Uniti, è alla fine della sua vita quando tenta di mettere insieme i pezzi di tutto quello che ha lasciato indietro e finisce inevitabilmente per fare i conti con quello che ha perduto per strada...

storia di un uomo normale che si è trovato in situazioni straordinarie e che non è certo un eroe, pertanto quello che ha vissuto diventa il suo cancro personale, che finirà per crescere in silenzio e altrettanto silenziosamente divorare tutta la sua vita successiva...

certo i medici da campo giapponesi durante la guerra ne hanno viste molte e altrettante, alcuni di loro almeno, ne hanno pure fatte, ma Franklyn Hata è solo un giovane idealista che crede davvero che l'Imperatore gli chieda di sacrificare la sua vita per la grandezza della patria e che le "volontarie" che allietano il soggiorno delle truppe di stanza siano davvero tali...ovvio che la sveglia arriverà anche per lui, ma la sua scelta di ripiegare e raccogliere i cocci gli costerà l'intera sua esistenza successiva...

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