



Familiar Things

Hwang Sok-yong , Sora Kim-Russell (Translation)

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Seoul. On the outskirts of South Korea's glittering metropolis is a place few people know about: a vast landfill site called Flower Island. Home to those driven from the city by poverty, is it here that 13-year-old Bugeye and his mother arrive, following his father's internment in a government 're-education camp'.

Living in a shack and supporting himself by weeding recyclables out of the refuse, at first Bugeye's life on Flower Island is hard. But then one night he notices mysterious lights around the landfill. And when the ancient spirits that still inhabit the island's landscape reveal themselves to him, Bugeye's luck begins to change – but can it last?

Vibrant and enchanting, *Familiar Things* depicts a society on the edge of dizzying economic and social change, and is a haunting reminder to us all to be careful of what we throw away.

Familiar Things Details

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From Reader Review Familiar Things for online ebook

Paul says

Another book that caught my attention from the pedestal in Foyles, it was an impulse buy, to try a new author and expand my bookish horizon a little further.

Bugeye and his mother move to the improbably named Flower Island, a massive landfill site at the edge of Seoul where outsiders make a meagre living collecting recyclables from the rubbish.

As his mum moves in with the group leader, Bugeye ends up with a younger step brother, Baldspot, who takes him to a secret hide out some of the kids have made. While hanging out with Baldspot, he notices lights moving around the landfill site, and Bugeye learns they are dokkaebi, spirits of people gone before.

Weird. Unfamiliar. They are two words that I think of when I think of Familiar Things. The story is very sad, focusing mostly on the kids as much as the life of the outsiders working on the landfill site, a harsh juxtaposition to the often futuristic portrayal of South Korea, and Seoul in particular. There is some comment on our throwaway society, but given the setting of the story, it did not come across as particularly heavy. What I found weird were words and phrases that cropped up throughout the book, whether intentional or a quirk of translating I couldn't tell, but describing one of the neighbourhoods that the trash trucks come in from as 'the cream of the crop' was unexpected and while it works, it didn't feel quite right in a novel. That's probably just me though.

As pointed out by the Economist on the cover, the story floats between harsh reality and whimsical folk tale without jarring the reader, but at the same time the message behind the novel, the vast gulf between the have's and the have not's, is one that has been heard and told before, and while the reality is harsh, there are other realities that are harsher still and so Familiar Things becomes exactly that, a Familiar tale. While the ending is sad, there is a glimmer of hope, but sadly, probably not enough for me to read further.
(blog review here)

AJ says

My library rejected my requisition request so I bought this outright. I've never read anything by Hwang Sok-yong before but from a quick author search, the realistic socio-economic topics mixed with fantasy element-type stories he writes seemed right up my literary alley. This didn't disappoint in that regard.

Told in six easy to read chapters, we enter thirteen-year-old Bugeye's world of poverty on the outskirts of Seoul. He and his mother have just relocated to Flower Island, effectively a trash site where the city's garbage gets sent. They live in a slum and sort through garbage for items that can be recycled for money or resold. They live without electricity, running water, or any mandatory education to speak of. Every time they go into town, their social status is apparent because they can't easily get rid of Flower Island's smell.

This bleak but realistic setting is interspersed with elements of fantasy, of spirits who visit Bugeye and his younger, de facto adopted brother, Baldspot. I got the sense that these were island ancestors, real people who once lived on Flower Island. They lead Bugeye and Baldspot to a discovery that changes their fortune--whether for better or worse is up for debate.

I enjoyed this quick read, although I didn't get quite as invested as I do with books I deem five-star reads. I'm

unsure if that was the subject matter or the fact that I was reading a translation (which, apart from two small errors, was pretty spot-on). Either way, this novel's worth a read if you're interested in South Korea's slum-life of the past recent decades.

Teresa says

This book was great. The entire story was set in a landfill exploring the lives of the people who work every day looking for salvageable items in the trash. The two main characters were two Korean boys, ages 13 and 10. The 13 year old worked as an adult and the 10 year old worked on the sidelines supporting him.

On one level this book is giving voice to those living in poverty. And on another level it's just a good story. I read this book quickly and enjoyed every bit of it. There were never any sections that dragged or that felt dull.

The mysterious lights that are referred to in the book's blurb refer to a really interesting side plot. I won't spoil it here, but just know that when the lights enter the story it will become so much more interesting!

Also, from a social, political, and environmental perspective the book is spot on. Seoul is definitely a city in environmental crisis and the book accurately attests to that fact.

I think this book is surprising in the way it can deal with the really ugly and depressing subject of trash, but make it feel quite lighthearted. In the story we have little boys being boys -- playing Super Mario, getting into fist fights over bruised egos, refusing to throw away their beloved baseball cap, etc. In the same story a man loses his legs in a work-related accident. Another man goes to prison. The book is quite skillful in its juxtaposition of serious and light images. I think the author knew quite well that if he wanted to send a strong political message about poverty and about the environment he'd have to find a way to make it palatable to readers. I'd say he succeeded 110% percent in not only making a political novel palatable but also making it pleasurable.

Gwenn Desliens says

Ce livre est pour les parias, les oubliés, les abandonnés, les abimés, les petits fantômes, les délinquants, les gamins seuls, les adultes épuisés.

Cet auteur exceptionnel vous fera découvrir l'organisation et les vies de la décharge à ciel ouvert de Séoul dans les années 90.

Ce texte nous fait avancer dans un univers incroyable le plus naturellement du monde. Il nous montre ce que nous évitons de voir. Ce n'est pas un livre moralisateur, c'est un livre qui montre et expose, qui nous laisse agrandir notre univers.

Scribe Publications says

Five stars ... Readers expecting this novel to develop into a savage take on Seoul slum life will be

disappointed ... [Hwang Sok-Yong] wants to tell a different story altogether. Familiar Things turns out to be less about simple disposal than movement between different worlds ... resonant.

The Daily Telegraph

Hwang Sok-yong is one of South Korea's foremost writers, a powerful voice for society's marginalised, and Sora Kim-Russell's translations never falter.

Deborah Smith, Translator of *The Vegetarian*

A powerful examination of capitalism from one of South Korea's most acclaimed authors ... [Hwang] challenges us to look back and reevaluate the cost of modernisation, and see what and whom we have left behind.

The Guardian

Undoubtedly the most powerful voice in Asia today.

Kenzaburo Oe, Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

[A] vivid depiction of a city too quick to throw away both possessions and people.

Financial Times

Sora Kim-Russell's translation moves gracefully between gritty, whiffy realism and folk-tale spookiness.

The Economist

In Familiar Things, the great Korean writer embraces the social realities of his country. It is the opposite of the economic miracle that he paints for us here. Beyond simple naturalism, Hwang Sok-yong mixes into the actual, the magic of a popular culture steeped in the spiritual.

Livreshedbo

A great political book, a plea for a country under the boot of a general, a country embroiled in a fierce power struggle, where ideology has been devoured by productivity, where human beings are nothing more than bellies to be filled for the benefit of industrial producers ... Grandma Willow in her dementia rails, "You're despicable! Do you think you live alone here? You men may all disappear, nature will continue to exist!" Let's hope so!

Critiques Libres

Hwang Sok-yong is one of the most read Korean writers in his country, and best known abroad. An activist for democracy and reconciliation with the North, in his books he melds his political fights with the Korean cultural imagination.

Le Monde

Familiar Things is a poignant novel that depicts decay and regeneration ... A sense of menace pervades the novel. But the relationship that develops between Bugeye and Baldspot, who he comes to adopt as his younger brother, is heartwarming.

The Big Issue

Hwang Sok-yong is an endearing author. For his perspective on people and things, for the instinctive modesty of his characters as well as his ability to "capture" — to return through fiction — the contemporary history of his country. Even more, to embody it.

La Croix

Reality, fiction and fantasy mix closely, giving his writing unparalleled power. Hwang Sok-yong's empathy for his heroes is always accompanied by a fierce rage against the powerful.

Le Monde Diplomatique

While it invokes South Korean history, culture, mythology and folklore, this slim novel is unmistakably universal in its reach, contemporary in its appeal, and packs an emotional punch that reverberates long after reading.

South China Morning Post

Familiar Things is both tragic and heartrending.

The Skinny

Galvanized by Nobel Prize-winner Kenzaburo Oe's resounding endorsement—'undoubtedly the most powerful voice in Asia today'—and master translator Sora Kim Russell's exquisite rendition, Hwang's latest anglophonic import is surely poised for western success.

Terry Hong, Booklist

As one of the country's most prominent novelists, Hwang has never shied away from controversy ... With Familiar Things, Hwang turns his attention to the underside of South Korea's remarkable economic development, namely, the vast underclass it has created.

John Feffer, Boston Review

Hwang's writing is rich with symbolism, cautionary lessons, and the potential for redemption.

World Literature Day

[A] cautionary tale, both a mirror and a portent for our own world.

Fionn Mallon, Los Angeles Review of Books

Familiar Things walks a perfect path between realism and the supernatural.

Annie Smith, A Bookish Type

Familiar Things is a fine little novel, showing a crushing, grim reality in which the resilient human spirit and imagination makes do.

M.A.Orthofer, The Complete Review

Lolly K Dandeneau says

via my blog: <https://bookstalkerblog.wordpress.com/>

"People live here, just like anywhere else." She said.

"People? All I see are flies and garbage. It stinks."

It may be garbage now, but they say it turns to gold." His mother said playfully.

Flower Island may as well be another world existing outside the city in South Korea. A landfill where families and single people dig through the trash for recyclable goods for their survival, Flower Island certainly doesn't live up to its pretty name. Stinking of the rot around them, empty bellied and looked down

upon by the citizens, 14-year-old Bugeye and his mother find themselves living in a shack after his father's internment. There is little hope, and even less food. He is quick to learn that the 'rich', fortunate city people throw away food that is still good, even if he has to fight the flies for it. The things they throw away are so beautiful and new that people are quick to accuse the inhabitants of the trash heap of theft. Oh to be so rich, so wasteful, he can't even imagine it. It isn't long before he befriends an unusual boy with problems of his own. Baldspot is the son of the crew leader (Baron) and tells him his father thinks he is stupid, noting the boy seems a little slow, Bugeye is wise enough to understand it benefits him to get on the good side of this odd boy. When Baldspot shows him mysterious blue lights, there is something spooky about them, and maybe something magical too, but he isn't sure he is ready to find out.

The boys will become as close as brothers and find the lights are spirits that live in a sort of parallel world to their own only without the horrors they face, the trash or ugly shacks. But why are they here, what do they want? As good fortune lands on Bugeye, it's hard to trust whether it's a gift or his doom. Bugeye is well aware of how other people live, with their clean clothes, education, and plenty of food. There are many shaming encounters, especially when he goes into the city with Baldspot with money in his pocket, trying to give the younger boy a little joy. Even charity, and free food from the church has a way of making the poverty stricken children feel shame. The smell that follows them is one city people can't abide, and maybe the good women care more for being seen giving charity than being around the urchins. But food is food, pride won't keep your belly fully.

Can ancient spirits change Bugeye and Baldspot's dismal futures, or will life continue to strip the boys until they are nothing but bones? This novel hits you in the gut, it's hard to imagine this is actually the life other people live, particularly from our beautiful homes full of stuff we don't really need for survival. Bugeye and his mother are down to the basics, and barely that. To my mind, the scariest horror story is a life without basic necessities and that through the joy of Baldspot, there is still happiness to be had is humbling. This is the sort of story that makes you feel so far removed from true suffering that it induces shame for having so much. It's a quick read with a gut punch at the end. Folklore meets tragic existence.

Publication Date: June 8, 2018

Scribe Publications

Mary says

All the struggles of life; family, relationships, love and community set in the backdrop of a vast landfill site called Flower Island where the poorest of the poor dig through the trash to find recyclables to sell.

Hulyacın says

‘Dünyada sadece kendinizin mi ya?ad???n? san?yorsunuz?’

• Süper Mario’nun dile geldi?ini dü?ünün..Prensesi kurtarmak için ç?kt??? yolda, onca macera aras?nda neler dü?ünürdü sizce? En kötü bölümlerden geçip saraya varmak mümkün mü?

• Çiçek Adas?’nda geçen günleri okuyoruz..Yaln?z ad? biraz yan?lt?c? olabilir.. Çöp kamyonlar?n?n gelip

öpleri y??d???, onlar? ayr??t?ran insanlar?n barakalarda ya?ad??? bir yer buras?. Elit mahallerin öpleri için kavga edilen, ailelerin ?afaktan gün bat?m?na dek al??t???. ünkü o kadar çok öp var ki ayr??mas? gereken..

Att???m?z ?eyler asl?nda ‘tan?d?k ?eyler’, sevmekten vazgeçti?imiz, s?k?ld???m?z, yerine yenilerini koydu?umuz.. Belki k?zd???m?z, k?skand???m?z, özledi?imizin özlemini artt?ran ?eyler.. Hepsi bir yerde toplan?yor, bir kazanda kaynam?yor, yüzüne bakmad???m?z insanlar?n elleri de?iyor onlara. Ve bizim ellerimizde tutmad???m?z ?eyler ile ya?amalar? mümkün oluyor..

Hwang Sok Yong, büyük cümleler kurmadan iki çocu?un gözünden anlat?yor bu iek Adas?n?.. Sa?ran ve Pörtlek. ?simleri var elbet ama kim kullan?r ki~ Gere?i var m? isimlerin bu yerde?

Bir yandan misyonerlik ve Amerika etkisindeki Kore’yi görüyoruz, di?er yandan evrensel bir tabakala?may?: Tüketen ve tüketenlerin alt?nda ezilenleri~

Yazar?n okudu?um di?er eseri Prenses Bari de bir bu kadar etkileyiciydi. Orada yurtsuzluktan can?m? yakan bu eserde ise yurdunda ya?ay?p yurtsuz b?rak?lmak..al??abilmek için ya??n? büyötmek, çocu?unu doyurabilmek için bir erke?in sözlerini emir bellemek.. Ac? da olsa gülümsetti pek çok kez, çünkü hala umut var! Özellikle çocuklar?n gözlerinde!

Anna says

When recently asked to describe Familiar Things in a nutshell, two things came to mind: first, that it is an endearing book and second, that it is an excellent comment on modern day society.

Full review at <http://www.sfintranslation.com/?p=2751>

Sandra says

I found this book to be a complete gem; so heartwarming and poignant.

It is set in South Korea where we meet 'Bugseye' a 12 year old street smart boy who lives with his Mum and Dad in a slum area of South Korea. Dad is sent off for 're-education' so Mum and son have to fend for themselves.

Mum chooses to leave the slums and move to 'Flower Island'.

Sounds like a holiday destination but NO!, it is a shanty town built on the cities land fill.

Mum gets a job as a rubbish picker and because Bugseye looks big for his age he gets to be the second picker.

So they go through the cities rubbish picking out recyclables from metal to paper (and everything in between) to sell as scrap. They also find their clothes and food from the leftover, discarded refuse of daily lives.

'But what was the straight and narrow when you lived in a garbage dump? People brought things with

money, did whatever they wanted with those things, and threw them away when they were no longer of use. Maybe folks like him had also been thrown away when they were no longer of use.'

This book describes social classes very well and almost innocently as it is through the eyes of a 12 year old child.

Bugeye's Mum ends up in a 'common-law marriage' with the Baron the head guy of one of the district rubbish tips. Bugeye instantly dislikes him but builds a brotherly relationship with Baron's son 'Bald spot'. Bald spot is younger and has a palm size of hair missing from his head from a scolding burn he received when he was young. Baron doesn't have much time for his son but Bugeye learns that Baldspot is an exceptional soul and is impressed by the people he knows including the 'dokkaebi' that appear as blue lights.

So there is more to this tale but than that would be spoiling, so I won't do that. Some more quotes:

'People threw away so many things that by the time the objects lost their shape and decomposed into smaller and smaller and more complex parts, they became strange and curious objects that bore no resemblance whatsoever to whatever the machines in the factories had originally spat out. Bugeye gazed down at the moonlit grass and nearly murmured, I want to flyaway.'

'But, with time, the flower stalks would bore their way through the ash of the charred fields and stretch and sway in the wind, tender new leaves would unfurl on the scorched branches, the dark-green blades of young silver grass would slide up from the earth. They would come back. They always had.'

Some beautiful parallels here.

Phoebe says

“...she had tried to console Bugeye at first by saying people lived there just like anywhere else, but he knew it was a garbage dump filled with things used up and tossed aside, things people had grown tired of using, and things that were no longer of any use to anyone at all, and that the people who lived there were likewise discards and outcasts driven from the city.”

Once in a while, a book comes along and forces you to face head on with things that you subconsciously try to sidestep. The world runs on the fuel of bottomless unmerited misery and I know it, you know it. But, we pay no heed to what we don't see. Written in endearing narrative voice and unpretentious prose, Hwang Sok-Yong's 'Familiar Things' is a cri de cœur and a call to action. The gritty realism in this book leaves me haunted.

14-year-old Bugeye and his mother fall through the cracks in the society after his father has been detained at a re-education camp. No longer able to put food on the table with measly earnings from his mother's vegetable shop in the market, they move to Flower Island, a vast landfill site on the outskirts of Seoul. They soon become part of the community of impoverished trash pickers who make their living by weeding recyclable items from the rubbish. As they acclimatise to their new home, a younger boy named Baldspot befriends Bugeye and the two become friends, as close as brothers. The novel switches effortlessly between the biting realism and the mysterious magical realism. Hwang Sok-Yong builds a world that is at once dystopian and realistic. The sense of uncanny permeates through the landscape. The dehumanisation of the characters leaves me shell-shocked. The vivid and detailed depiction of the world they live in, is truly

horrifying and I constantly catch myself grimacing in phantom pain.

A heartfelt and harrowing story which I would recommend to any member of modern day society. It is an endearing plea to stop mindless consumption of any kind and a haunting reminder to be careful of what we throw away. Last but not least, 'Familiar Things' teaches us to be aware of less fortunate members of the humanity and render help in any way possible to make this world a better place.

I received a review copy of 'Familiar Things' from Pansing in exchange for an honest and unbiased review. A shoutout to wonderful people at Pansing for sending me this incredible read.

Cass Winters says

It is few and far between when a book leaves me shellshocked, but this one has done that. I finished it ten minutes ago and I still feel myself ready to cry over this ending and this book overall. It is a truly powerful read. Right now I honestly cannot put into words how I feel about this particular book except I think this one will haunt me for awhile.

Hannah Swanwick says

I liked it, that's what my review is.

Jo says

From the way Hwang Sok-yong imbues Bugeye's arrival at a landfill site with wonderment and promise, I knew early on that *Familiar Things* would be thought provoking. But it is his juxtaposition of opportunity with the harsh reality of his character's circumstances that leaves a lasting impression. **Read full review >>**

Kimbofo says

Set on a massive landfill site on the outskirts of Seoul in South Korea, *Familiar Things* by Hwang Sok-yong gives voice to the city's marginalised population.

To read my review in full, please visit my blog.
