



SVENSKA AKADEMIEN

Biobibliography

한 강 Han Kang was born in 1970 in the South Korean city of Gwangju before, at the age of nine, moving with her family to Seoul. She comes from a literary background, her father being a reputed novelist. Alongside her writing, she has also devoted herself to art and music, which is reflected throughout her entire literary production.

Han Kang began her career in 1993 with the publication of a number of poems in the magazine 문학과사회 (“Literature and Society”). Her prose debut came in 1995 with the short story collection 여수의 사랑 (“Love of Yeosu”), followed soon afterwards by several other prose works, both novels and short stories. Notable among these is the novel 그대의 차가운 손 (2002; “Your Cold Hands”), which bears obvious traces of Han Kang’s interest in art. The book reproduces a manuscript left behind by a missing sculptor who is obsessed with making plaster casts of female bodies. There is a preoccupation with the human anatomy and the play between persona and experience, where a conflict arises in the work of the sculptor between what the body reveals and what it conceals. ‘Life is a sheet arching over an abyss, and we live above it like masked acrobats’ as a sentence towards the end of the book tellingly asserts.

Han Kang’s major international breakthrough came with the novel 채식주의자 (2007; *The Vegetarian*, 2015). Written in three parts, the book portrays the violent consequences that ensue when its protagonist Yeong-hye refuses to submit to the norms of food intake. Her decision not to eat meat is met with various, entirely different reactions. Her behaviour is forcibly rejected by both her husband and her authoritarian father, and she is exploited erotically and aesthetically by her brother-in-law, a video artist who becomes obsessed with her passive body. Ultimately, she is committed to a psychiatric clinic, where her sister attempts to rescue her and bring her back to a ‘normal’ life. However, Yeong-hye sinks ever deeper into a psychosis-like condition expressed through the ‘flaming trees’, a symbol for a plant kingdom that is as enticing as it is dangerous.

A more plot-based book is 바람이 분다, 가라 (“The Wind Blows, Go”) from 2010, a large and complex novel about friendship and artistry, in which grief and a longing for transformation are strongly present.

Han Kang's physical empathy for extreme life stories is reinforced by her increasingly charged metaphorical style. *희랍어 시간* (*Greek Lessons*, 2023) from 2011 is a captivating portrayal of an extraordinary relationship between two vulnerable individuals. A young woman who, following a string of traumatic experiences, has lost the power of speech connects with her teacher in Ancient Greek, who is himself losing his sight. From their respective flaws, a brittle love affair develops. The book is a beautiful meditation around loss, intimacy and the ultimate conditions of language.

In the novel *소년이 온다* (2014; *Human Acts*, 2016), Han Kang this time employs as her political foundation a historical event that took place in the city of Gwangju, where she herself grew up and where hundreds of students and unarmed civilians were murdered during a massacre carried out by the South Korean military in 1980. In seeking to give voice to the victims of history, the book confronts this episode with brutal actualization and, in so doing, approaches the genre of witness literature. Han Kang's style, as visionary as it is succinct, nevertheless deviates from our expectations of that genre, and it is a particular expedient of hers to permit the souls of the dead to be separated from their bodies, thus allowing them to witness their own annihilation. In certain moments, at the sight of the unidentifiable corpses that cannot be buried, the text harks back to the basic motif of Sophocles's *Antigone*.

In *흰* (2016; *The White Book*, 2017), Han Kang's poetic style once again dominates. The book is an elegy dedicated to the person who could have been the narrative self's elder sister, but who passed away only a couple of hours after birth. In a sequence of short notes, all concerning white objects, it is through this colour of grief that the work as a whole is associatively constructed. This renders it less a novel and more a kind of 'secular prayer book', as it has also been described. If, the narrator reasons, the imaginary sister had been allowed to live, she herself would not have been permitted to come into being. It is also in addressing the dead that the book reaches its final words: 'Within that white, all of those white things, I will breathe in the final breath you released.'

Another highlight is the late work, *작별하지 않는다* ("We Do Not Part") from 2021, which in terms of its imagery of pain is closely connected to *The White Book*. The story unfolds in the shadow of a massacre that took place in the late 1940s on South Korea's Jeju Island, where tens of thousands of people, among them children and the elderly, were shot on suspicion of being collaborators. The book portrays the shared mourning process undertaken by the narrator and her friend Inseon, who both, long after the event, bear with them the trauma associated with the disaster that has befallen their relatives. With imagery that is as precise as it is condensed, Han Kang not only conveys the power of the past over the present, but also, equally powerfully, traces the friends' unyielding attempts to bring to light what has fallen into collective oblivion

and transform their trauma into a joint art project, which lends the book its title. As much about the deepest form of friendship as it is about inherited pain, the book moves with great originality between the nightmarish images of the dream and the inclination of witness literature to speak the truth.

Han Kang's work is characterized by this double exposure of pain, a correspondence between mental and physical torment with close connections to Eastern thinking. In *회복 하는 인간* = *Convalescence* from 2013, this involves a leg ulcer that refuses to heal and a painful relationship between the main character and her dead sister. No true convalescence ever actually takes place, and the pain emerges as a fundamental existential experience that cannot be reduced to any passing torment. In a novel such as *The Vegetarian*, no simple explanations are provided. Here, the deviant act occurs suddenly and explosively in the form of a blank refusal, with the protagonist remaining silent. The same can be said of the short story *에우로파* (2012; *Europa*, 2019), in which the male narrator, himself masked as a woman, is drawn to an enigmatic woman who has broken away from an impossible marriage. The narrative self remains silent when asked by his beloved: 'If you were able to live as you desire, what would you do with your life?' There is no room here for either fulfillment or atonement.

In her oeuvre, Han Kang confronts historical traumas and invisible sets of rules and, in each of her works, exposes the fragility of human life. She has a unique awareness of the connections between body and soul, the living and the dead, and in her poetic and experimental style has become an innovator in contemporary prose.

Anders Olsson

Chair of the Nobel Committee

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