



Spreading the word about Korean books

Barbara Zitwer

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Barbara Zitwer discusses her role in bringing books from Korea - the Market Focus country at London Book Fair in 2014 - to a wider audience.

I sold my first Korean novel, called *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*, in the US in 2006, and that year I brought another, *Tongue*, to the London Book Fair. I had discovered contemporary Korean literature that past winter, when my co-agent Joseph Lee (of KL Management) and I were having dinner after BEA and I was complaining about not having enough American books to sell. I asked him: "Don't you have any brilliant Korean books that I can sell around the world?" He smiled and said: "As a matter of fact... what about *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*?" I loved the title and storyline, and we called the author, Young ha Kim, immediately. That's how it all began.

I soon discovered other Korean authors who had never been published outside their country before, and was full of excitement. I believed that I had found literary gold, but not many people agreed with me. No one had ever heard of Korean books, and my table at the agent's centre was pretty empty, my appointment schedule spare. Many editors and publishers were baffled by "this New York-based agent who is selling books from Korea around the world"; the books seemed completely alien and "unpublishable" to them.

Undaunted

However, I had fallen in love and knew that the books I had discovered were among the best in the world. And, outside Korea, they were all new. I was determined to get these brilliant books published around the world, and hundreds of rejections didn't stop me. My dedicated co-agents agreed with me and joined my cause, and we would sell one book at a time; a tiny advance from France and that first deal in Germany were as if we had won Academy Awards. The Korean authors were astounded and overjoyed that we were giving them our attention; international publishing was a whole new experience for them. But eventually, word started spreading and publishers in Spain, Italy, Brazil, Holland and Poland started acquiring Korean books. Some of the commissions still didn't even pay for the cost of my table at the book fair, but we were selling and getting Korean novels published.

I first heard about Kyung-sook Shin's *Please Look After Mom* from Joseph a few years before it was even published in Korea, and I wanted that book. I bugged him constantly after he mentioned the title and storyline to me, and waited more than two years to finally be introduced to Shin and then to be chosen as her world agent. When I read the first 20 pages of the English translation, I trembled; the novel was magical and moving. It had high literary writing, profound themes and it was, in my mind, a high-concept, completely universal story about a mother. After years of cajoling, waiting, rejections and tiny advances, I had the breakout bestseller in my hands.

Mom went on to sell in 40 countries, become the first Korean book to become a *New York Times* bestseller, and in 2011 Shin became the first Korean, and first woman, to win the Man Asian Prize. She paved the way for Korean writers in the world. Now, my book fair schedule is filled up six months before the fair and I have to book double or triple appointments. Last year, three editors from different countries sat huddled at my table as I told them about Shin's new novel, *I'll Be Right There*.

The London Book Fair (LBF) Market Focus on Korea next April will be a joyous celebration of Korean literature and culture. More and more British and international publishers see acquiring a Korean book as a must. Those attending LBF will be struck by the energy, grace, humility, talent and warmth of the Korean authors visiting the Fair. We will be able, for a few days, to breathe in a bit of the "Korean air".

Korean writers are a surprise. We can expect penetrating and substantial political discussions and philosophical conversations during panels and readings. Korea is still bitterly ripped in half, and those writers living in the South cannot help but feel part of their souls and families are lost - they are. North Korea sits side by side with a free, modern South Korea, but life in the North is tenuous and sometimes excruciating - a conundrum of massive proportions. You can literally thrust your hand into the airspace of North Korea, but you can't grab someone and help them to cross over to freedom. Because the world has "shrunk", thanks to the web and nuclear arms, what happens in North Korea matters to all of us all over the world, and we will be hearing from the source about the situation.

Economic powerhouse

South Korea and its authors are more relevant and important to us in the West than ever before. And the Korean economy has become one of the richest in the world and a serious rival to the bigger powers of the world. The Market Focus is an opportunity to do more import/export business with our Korean partners. It's a chance to open discussions and to begin to nurture mutually beneficial relationships.

Sun-mi Hwang's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, dubbed the Korean *Charlotte's Web*, is a book for all ages and an international bestseller. A new edition will be published this Christmas and it will feature as part of the Market Focus. Shin, Joseph and I will come full circle and will be celebrating the launch, at LBF, of Shin's new novel *I'll Be Right There*. Ji Young Gong's *Our Happy Time*, Jung Myung Lee's *The Investigation*, and Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* will be published around that time too, and we hope they will join us.

I am sure that everyone will be eating kimchi and barbecue, and Soju (Korean beer) will replace wine. And, maybe we - who are usually on the go 24/7 for those few days - will become a bit calmer, more peaceful and gracious, a little more thoughtful and humble as we interact and become affected by our new Korean friends. Buddhism is the dominant practice in Korea and that too affects many books and the way of life of the writers we will meet. I am looking forward to introducing many authors and taking part in unforgettable events that will surely enrich all of us. I feel a deep satisfaction in having played a crucial role in bringing Korean books to the world.

Photo: Barbara Zitwer and a Korean monk.

Barbara Zitwer is the founder of the Barbara J Zitwer Agency in New York.

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