



***Pachinko*, by Min Jin Lee**  
**Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, March 2019**

*Pachinko*, Korean-born author Min Jin Lee's four-generation epic, was published in the United States to universal acclaim. A National Book Award finalist and the winner of many international honors, *Pachinko* is a sweeping *tour de force*.

The sprawling saga, which depicts one Korean family's travails throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, begins in a fishing village near the port of Busan. In 1910, Japan had annexed Korea, and many Korean families struggled on the colonized peninsula. Hoonie, the crippled son of proud peasants who ran a boardinghouse, had trouble finding a wife. His mother then turns to a matchmaker to barter for a bride for him. She settles on Yangjin, a poor girl with few prospects.

Together, Hoonie and Yangjin set out to build a new life, and they work hard to maintain the boardinghouse. Their only surviving child, a daughter whom they name Sunja, is the principle character of *Pachinko*. Her challenges and hopes for a better life are the novel's central core.

As a young teenage girl, Sunja was put in charge of shopping for the rooming house and its lodgers. At the market one day, she notices a well dressed fish broker, Koh Hansu, staring at her from a distance. A seaweed seller explains that Hansu "was supposed to be unimaginably rich. He came into Busan three nights a week and lived in Osaka and Seoul. Everyone called him Boss."

At first, Sunja avoids conversing with the handsome stranger, but Hansu quickly wins her over with his polished manners. He protects Sunja when Japanese students harass her, insisting that the boys apologize. Soon Hansu gains Sunja's trust, and they often meet. Meanwhile, an ailing lodger, Isak Baek, a pastor from Osaka, also shows interest in the young girl. Sunja, however, cannot forget Hansu, and she imagines that one day he would marry her.

As the novel progresses, Sunja has two sons, the sensitive Noa and more gregarious Mozasu. She raises the boys in Osaka during the second World War. To make ends meet, Sunja and her sister-in-law Kyunghee (this reviewer's favorite character) prepare and sell kimchi to restaurants across Osaka.

Each of Sunja's sons struggles with his own identity issues, as boys growing up Korean in a Japanese culture. Noa, who attends prestigious Waseda University in Tokyo, secretly yearns to be Japanese. His brother Mozasu apprentices in a pachinko parlor. Pachinko, the fast-paced Japanese casino game, is a cross between a slot machine and a pinball machine. Small metal balls wiz around randomly as players try drop them into moving catchers.

Min Jin Lee initially intended to name her memorable novel "Motherland." Instead, she entitled it *Pachinko*, an apt metaphor for life's unpredictable twists of fate.