



A Gesture Life: A Novel

By Chang-rae Lee

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The second novel from the critically acclaimed *New York Times*–bestselling author Chang-rae Lee.

His remarkable debut novel was called "rapturous" (*The New York Times Book Review*), "revelatory" (*Vogue*), and "wholly innovative" (*Kirkus Reviews*). It was the recipient of six major awards, including the prestigious Hemingway Foundation/PEN award. Now Chang-rae Lee has written a powerful and beautifully crafted second novel that leaves no doubt about the extraordinary depth and range of his talent.

A Gesture Life is the story of a proper man, an upstanding citizen who has come to epitomize the decorous values of his New York suburban town. Courteous, honest, hardworking, and impenetrable, Franklin Hata, a Japanese man of Korean birth, is careful never to overstep his boundaries and to make his neighbors comfortable in his presence. Yet as his story unfolds, precipitated by the small events surrounding him, we see his life begin to unravel. Gradually we learn the mystery that has shaped the core of his being: his terrible, forbidden love for a young Korean Comfort Woman when he served as a medic in the Japanese army during World War II.

In *A Gesture Life*, Chang-rae Lee leads us with dazzling control through a taut, suspenseful story about love, family, and community—and the secrets we harbor. As in *Native Speaker*, he writes of the ways outsiders conform in order to survive and the price they pay for doing so. It is a haunting, breathtaking display of talent by an acclaimed young author.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Never judge a book by its cover--or, for that matter, by its name. Otherwise you might overlook *A Gesture Life*, Chang-rae Lee's fine if awkwardly entitled follow-up to *Native Speaker*. As he did in his debut, the author explores the dilemma of being an outsider--and the corrupt, heartbreaking bargains an outsider will make to adapt to his surroundings. The protagonist, Franklin Hata, has actually spent his whole life donning one variety or another of existential camouflage. First, as a native-born Korean, he bends over backwards to fit into Japanese culture, circa 1944. Then he attempts a similar bit of environmental adaptation in postwar America--more specifically, in the slumbering New York suburb of Bedley Run. But in neither case does he quite succeed, which gives the novel its peculiar, faltering sense of tragedy.

"There is something exemplary to the sensation of near perfect lightness," confesses this resident alien, "of being in a place and not being there, which seems of course a chronic condition of my life but then, too, its everyday unction, the trouble finding a remedy but not quite a cure, so that the problem naturally proliferates until it has become you through and through. Such is the cast of my belonging, molding to whatever is at hand."

A Gesture Life presents this chronic condition in two different time frames. In one, delivered via flashback, Hata is a medical officer in Japan's Imperial Army. Posted to a tiny installation in rural Burma, he's ordered to oversee a fresh detachment of Korean "comfort women"--i.e., victims of institutionalized gang rape. At first he maintains his professional distance, not to mention his erotic appetite: "It was the notion of what lay beneath the crumpled cotton of their poor clothes that shook me like an air-raid siren." But soon enough he's drawn into a relationship with one of the women, whose bloody and horrific denouement leaves a permanent mark on the "unblissed detachment" of his existence.

The present-tense, American half of the story revolves around Hata's life in Bedley Run, where he adopts, alienates, and finally forms a shaky rapport with his daughter, Sunny. We might expect this sort of material to pale in comparison with his wartime trauma. But oddly enough, Hata's suburban melancholia is much more compelling--and the gradual disclosure of his past, which is supposed to ratchet up the tension, seems too crude a mechanism for a writer of Lee's superlative talents. (His truest tutelary spirit, in fact, might be John Cheever, who gets an explicit nod at one point.) None of this is to dismiss *A Gesture Life*, whose dual narratives are written with a rare, unhurried elegance. And if Lee's splice job lacks the absolute adhesion we expect from a great work of art, he nonetheless pulls off a remarkable, moving feat: he puts us inside the skin of a man who, "if he could choose, might always go silent and unseen." --*James Marcus*

From Publishers Weekly

Franklin Hata, born to Korean parents, raised by an adoptive family in Japan and settled in America, is the narrator of Lee's quietly stunning second novel. Like his first, the Hemingway/PEN award-winning *Native Speaker*, it is a resonant story of an outsider striving to become part of an alien culture. Beloved in the small, wealthy suburban New York community where for more than 30 years he ran a surgical supply store, "Doc" Hata lives a stringently circumspect life designed to afford him privacy and respect. Never married, he adopts a young girl of mixed parentage from a Japanese orphanage. He raises Sunny with strict adherence to impeccable standards, and is bewildered when she spurns his gifts and rejects his code of values. He is tormented, moreover, by memories of a gradually revealed event in his past, when he was a paramedical officer serving in the Japanese army in Burma. Then known as Ziro Kurohata, he tries to mask his Korean origins by behaving with inculcated respect for authority. But when five young Korean women arrive to

service the soldiers as "comfort girls," his emotions betray him. He falls in love with one of them, and in a tentative attempt to behave heroically, he precipitates tragedy. Lee reveals these crucial events gradually in flashback, meanwhile also slowly completing his portrait of Hata as a decorous model citizen. After the war Hata determines never again to give way to emotion, so he loses an opportunity to enjoy love with a local widow, to give succor to another woman he admires, whose son is dying, and to establish real relationships with others in the town of Bedley Run. Moreover, Sunny rebels against his stern standards, dropping out of high school and leaving town with a drug dealer. "You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness," she tells him. "You burden with your generosity." Finally, Hata is able to admit that both his exemplary behavior and his emotional reserve have been an attempt to distance himself from the dishonor of his wartime experiences. Meanwhile, he has quietly betrayed others in spite of his vow never to do so again. This ironic realization finally takes a physical toll, but opens his heart to an act of redemption. In an elegantly controlled narrative, Lee makes Hata's tortuous dilemma agonizingly real. While the prose is measured and moves to the pace of Hata's introspection, there is a rising tide of suspense that builds to two breathtaking climaxes: one at the army camp and the other in the present. Lee subtly contrasts the nuances of cultural conditioning in Japanese society and in Hata's virtual reincarnation as an American citizen, all the while delivering a haunting message about the penalties one pays for such a metamorphosis. His psychologically astute depiction of Hata's inner life is reinforced by the presence in the plot of other characters who live valiantly despite troubled lives. This is a wise, humane, fully rounded story, deeply but unsentimentally moving, and permeated with insights about the nature of human relationships. If Lee's first novel was an impressive debut, this one marks the solid establishment of a stellar literary career. Author tour. (Sept.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Lee's second novel, after the award-winning *Native Speaker*, leaves little doubt about the depth of his talent. It is the story of Franklin Hata, a Japanese man of Korean birth and a 30-year resident of the respectable and traditional New York hamlet of Bedley Run. Doc Hata is recently retired and plagued by real estate agents asking if he would consider putting his house on the market. He has enjoyed success as a businessman and a neighbor in his community, but his carefully constructed facade of politeness and prosperity masks a dark and secretive past. A random series of events, including the return of his estranged adopted daughter and her young son, cause Hata to reexamine his past while trying to keep his current life from unraveling. *A Gesture Life* is a suspenseful and emotional narrative, complemented by Lee's striking and luminous use of language. Highly recommended.

-Adianna Moeller, OCLC/WLN Pacific Northwest Svc. Ctr., Lacey, WA

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