Concept Analysis

*Year of Impossible Goodbyes* by Sook Nyul Choi
Dell Publishing (1991)

**Grade level (as calculated by readability-score.com):**
- Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 5.3
- Coleman-Liau Index: 9.3
- Automated Readability Index: 5.5
- Gunning-Fog Score: 7.5
- SMOG Index: 5.8

**Average grade level calculated by readability-score.com:** 6.7

**Our opinion:** The language of this novel is simplistic enough that it should be taught no higher than grades 7 or 8. (In terms of readability, it could even be taught at lower levels.) The main concern is the appropriateness of the novel for certain age groups, since there are indirect references to forced prostitution and other war crimes. However, these references are so vague (they’re given from the perspective of a young girl who doesn’t really understand everything that’s happening) that the novel won’t be too shocking.

1. **Title Material**
*Year of Impossible Goodbyes*. Published by Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Young Readers, 1991.

2. **Brief Plot Summary and Organizational Patterns**
The novel *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* can be divided into five basic sections: Exposition (1–47), Things Get Even Worse (48–63), Sookan in School (64–83), Enter the Soviets (84–115), and The Escape South (116–169). Note: These are not the actual names of the sections, but rather brief descriptions of what takes places in them.

*Year of Impossible Goodbyes* tells the story of a young Korean girl named Sookan and her family as they struggle to survive under the Japanese and Soviet occupations of North Korea in World War II. The entire novel is told from Sookan’s perspective and covers a period of five years total. Some websites and libraries classify the book as autobiography, and some classify it as historical fiction. Its category doesn’t seem to be explicitly stated, but it seems to be a mixture of the two genres.

In the novel’s exposition, Sookan’s family is introduced, as well as the “sock girls” who come to help them work in a sweatshop and make socks all day for the Japanese. The oppressive Japanese policeman Captain Narita is also introduced; he lords cruelly over the Koreans and monitors their work in the sweatshop sadistically. The exposition ends with the tragic death of Sookan’s grandfather, brought on in part by Captain Narita’s cruelty. In the next section of the novel, things get even worse as Captain Narita tightens his fist over the family—this section ends with the tragedy of the sock girls’ abduction by the Japanese. (This is not stated overtly, but the girls have been taken to the war front to be sex slaves for Japanese soldiers.) The next section of the novel Sookan as she begins her compulsory enrollment in a Japanese school, and readers see the indignities she’s forced to suffer there. The following section
chronicles the Koreans’ joyful liberation from the Japanese and the renewal of their freedom and cultural expression—until Soviet troops move in to occupy Korea and other changes begin to take place. After Sookan and her family tolerate the new injustices they’re forced to endure, the final section of the novel chronicles the family’s flight across the border to South Korea. They must leave an aunt and cousin behind, and Sookan and her brother are later separated from their mother during the trip, but most of the family eventually makes it to Seoul, South Korea, and freedom—until Soviet troops begin pouring in there, as well. (This is where the book ends, with a cliffhanger.)

3. The Big Questions or Enduring Issues
What is the price of freedom? - Sook Nyul Choi depicts what happens when families live under a dictatorship that brands them as second-class citizens because of their heritage/ethnicity and essentially puts them in slavery. During the Japanese occupation, the Koreans’ language is taken from them as children are forbidden to speak Korean in schools and books in Chinese or the old language is forbidden to be read (4). Their right to property is stripped: soldiers confiscate any metal objects (even family heirlooms) and melt them down to use in the war. In the end, under these and other forms of oppression, the family must decide whether to continue to live under the Japanese and Russian ruling, or leave. The cost of leaving could be death.

Is there such thing as an inferior culture? How do you know when you are giving too much? What is the value of cultural identity (and what is the cost of cultural oppression)? Who are you? What is the soul? - While the oppression of the Japanese and Russian invaders is very clear, and the stakes are high, the main characters never struggle with the decision to leave. Like a branch under too much pressure, they eventually just snap, as if to say, when a certain amount of freedoms are taken away there is a breaking point that is merely inevitable. Nor does the book explore any benefits of having an invading regime (perhaps because there are none). Characters that benefit and are empowered by invading forces are vilified, and homeland fighters become martyrs. The main characters never really struggle with the question of whether or not they should leave, or join forces with the invading peoples. The enduring or big questions we could ask of this text include:

- What is the price of cultural identity? (Examine the potential benefits/consequences of dominating cultures inhabiting foreign soil.)
- What is freedom? What is servitude? (Examine physical and metaphysical/“spiritual” definitions.)

4. Background Knowledge
In order to understand this work, students need to have an understanding of the basic events of World War II, and of the overall historical issues involving Japanese and Soviet expansion into South Korea and other areas of Asia. It is not particularly necessary to rehearse large amounts of Korean culture, since the author does a good job of explaining those elements as they come, but it would be useful to discuss elements of Asian cultures in general. Many students have some familiarity with Japanese or Chinese culture and may not be aware of ways that Korean culture is similar or different. It would also be helpful to briefly discuss the ideologies of Japan and the Soviet Union (i.e. their expansionist philosophies, Communism, etc.). For examples of Japanese ethnocentricism/expansionism (especially their idea of being the “Heavenly Race”), see pages 8 and 27. See pages 108-110 and 119-120 for examples of Soviet ethnocentricism/expansionism, especially the propaganda devoted to “Mother Russia.”
5. Issues Related to This Study of Literature

Theme(s): As we see Sookan and her family struggling to survive and be happy in demeaning and sometimes dangerous conditions—and, later, to escape to the safety and freedom of South Korea—we see these themes play out in the novel:

- **Hope carries you through.** Many unjust and terrible things happen to Sookan’s family, but they are able to hold on because of the hope of a better life—of life free from oppression, of live in a better place. Those hopes (like Sookan’s dream of planting flowers outside again) are eventually realized.

- **Family is the most important thing.** The most terrible toll of the Japanese and Soviet occupations is the disruption of families, and the reason why the characters have hope and have a reason to look to hold on and look to the future is because they have (and need) the support of their families.

- **Freedom must be sought at all costs.** Despite the incredible difficulties in their path to freedom, Sookan and her family can’t bear to stay in North Korea for the rest of their lives. They risk their lives to flee South.

- **You can do near-impossible things for love/family and freedom.** Sookan’s family makes great sacrifices for her and Inchon, and the whole family plays a difficult deceptive game with the Soviets until they can escape South. When Sookan and Inchun are separated during the escape, this could have spelled their end, but they hold on with the hope of seeing their family again in the South.

- **The oppression of your culture and identity can kill your spirit.** Grandfather dies only three days after Captain Narita disrupts the special birthday party for Haiwon and then cuts down Grandfather’s special tree. The day-to-day drudgery of not being able to speak their own language, wear their own clothes and eat their own food is deadening to the souls of Sookan’s family, and their liberation from the Japanese brings a new life to them all (especially Sookan’s mother).

- **War has great costs.** Sookan’s family is fractured by the war as her father and brothers are sent off to work camps. Other families (including Sookan’s later on) experience the deaths of loved ones because of the war. The sock girls are shipped off to the war front, never to be seen again.

Setting: Most of the novel is set in the Kirimni area of Pyongyang (now the capital city of North Korea). The last part of the novel focuses on Sookan’s family’s flight across the 38th Parallel into South Korea and the family’s new home in Seoul. A map of Korea can be found in the novel, facing page 1.

Point of View/Narrative Voice: All of *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* is told from the first-person perspective of Sookan, a young Korean girl. Here’s an example of this perspective, from a scene where Sookan anticipates a special birthday party they’ve planned for the sock girl Haiwon:

- “It was late at night and our rice-paper paneled doors were draped with thick blankets. We were all busy planning for Haiwon’s birthday celebration. We heard Grandfather moving about in his room, and Mother and Aunt Tiger busy in the kitchen. Soon Kisa came by to check on us, and told us to turn off the lights. I felt too excited to go to sleep. Haiwon would be so surprised. I lay in the dark wishing it were morning” (23).

Busath and Steinacker, BYU, 2012
Characterization/Major Characters:

- **Sookan** - The protagonist of the novel. As the whole novel is told from her perspective, we’re exposed to the characterization of her throughout; however, a few good selections that describe or express her character are pages 14-15 (her nail-painting with her mother and her interactions with Kisa and the sock girls) and pages 29-31 (her reaction to Captain Narita’s cruelty).

- **Inchun** - Sookan’s younger brother. He is sometimes very serious and sober for his age, but he’s still a little boy. Pages 9-10 briefly describe his personal and normal activities, and page 65 describes his concern for Sookan and how he is sometimes like a “wise old man living inside [a] little boy.”

- **Sookan’s mother** - Sookan’s mother is a loving and patient woman. She’s been worn down somewhat through working in a sweatshop every day for the Japanese, but she’s still beautiful. Page 13 describes Mother’s “worn” beauty, and pages 36-40 talk about her past life in Manchuria.

- **Sookan’s grandfather** - A wise man who secretly opposes the Japanese occupation and cultural oppression. Pages 1-3 provide an excellent description of Grandfather’s character and appearance, and we receive some characterization there as we see the way the he interacts with Sookan and other family members.

- **Kisa** - Sookan’s cousin, a friendly and hardworking young man with some slightly-handicapping injuries. Pages 12-13 provide a description of Kisa’s personality and appearance. Pages 121-122 describe his courage in staying behind when the family flees to South Korea.

- **Aunt Tiger** - Sookan’s aunt, a tough woman who is tender at heart and fiercely devoted to her family. Page 16 provides an excellent physical description of Aunt Tiger, and also an explanation of why she received her name. Pages 14-16 provide an interesting comparison/contrast between Sookan’s mother and Aunt Tiger; both women have “different kind[s] of strength” (16). Pages 123-125 talk of her bravery and love in staying behind when her family flees to South Korea.

- **Captain Narita** - A cruel officer in the Japanese army who oversees the sweatshop labor of Sookan’s family and the sock girls. Pages 26-27 describe his sadistic pleasure in disrupting Haiwon’s birthday party, and pages 58-60 describe the frightening joviality he displays as he abducts the sock girls to send them to the war front. His wife, “Narita Sensei,” is basically his feminine doppelganger.

Other Literary Terms taught in 6th-12th grades:

- **Theme** - As discussed elsewhere in this concept analysis, there are a variety of important themes for discussion in this novel, including the price of freedom and the importance of cultural identity (and the effects of trying to force that identity upon others).

- **Figurative Language** - Though told in fairly simple prose, Sook Nyul Choi’s story also uses a variety of moving figurative language—consider the first page of the novel as an example.

- **Simile** - One of the forms of figurative language that Choi employs regularly is simile, so there are many opportunities to analyze her writer’s craft throughout a classroom reading of *Year of Impossible Goodbyes*. Following are some examples of effective similes in the novel:
  
  o “The gentle rays of the April sun flitting through the pine branches played upon his face like dancing fairies” (3).
  o “We are like mice trapped in a dungeon of wildcats” (55).
  o “Listening to this boy was as refreshing as diving into a cool stream” (81).
  o “I moaned like a dying animal” (160).

- **Point of View** - The entire novel is told in a first-person point of view, but it would be interesting to have students consider certain scenes in the novel from other characters’ perspectives. For instance, after discussing the pros and cons of the Japanese occupation of Korea and the Japanese ethnocentric mindset, students could rewrite Haiwon’s birthday party scene from the perspective of Captain Narita, thus enriching their understanding of complexity of these issues.

- **Narration** - The entire novel is told from Sookan’s perspective and covers a period of five years total. The class will have many opportunities to analyze the narrative genre as seen in this novel.
• **Conflict** - Every novel is built on conflict, of course, but *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* affords many different types of conflict for class analysis. The Japanese (and later the Soviets) overtly oppress the Korean people in general, but there’s also a great deal of conflict between characters (e.g. Captain Narita and Sookan’s mother, Aunt Tiger and basically everyone). Sookan’s family also struggles with internal conflict in regards to what to do living under an oppressive hand, as well as how long they should wait out before making a break for the South and freedom.

6. **Affective Issues Related to the Work**
Most students will be outraged as they read about the injustices that Sookan and her family were forced to endure. They will also feel a sense of horror at some of the events (e.g., the sock girls’ abduction). Students will likely connect to Sookan’s desire to celebrate her cultural heritage and history, and her frustration at having that identity repressed. Some other affective issues that could be addressed are anger and fear.

7. **Vocabulary Issues**
Overall, Choi (the author) does a good job of explaining any new vocabulary words in the text as they come up. The following selections from the novel can be used as opportunities for studying usage of vocabulary, or models of good writing:

- “Small clusters of pale green needles emerged from the old weathered pine tree in our front yard” (1).
- “Grandfather’s tree stood alone in the far corner of the yard, its dark green-needled branches emanating harmoniously from the trunk, reaching out like a large umbrella. It was a magic tree, holding in the shade of its branches the peace and harmony Grandfather so often talked about” (1).
- moat, menacing, oppressiveness, engulfed, glint (1)
- exhilaration, meditated, emerged (2)
- permeated (3)
- “I was disappointed to see him stir; time would no longer stand still” (4)
- delicacies (8)
- “Lined up on two long benches, the girls sat as though glued to their machines like puppets for the rest of the day” (9).
- Quota (11)

8. **Implications for Students of Diversity**
• **Kisa and disabilities** - Kisa is one of the few characters with a physical disability/handicap. How does the author portray him? What does she seem to be saying about people with disabilities? See pages 12-13, 60, 112-113, and 121-122.
• **Suppression of cultural identity** - Why don’t the Japanese let Sookan and her family be “Korean?” Why do they make them adopt Japanese customs and even Japanese names? What effect does this oppression have on Sookan, her family, and other Koreans? See pages 6-7, page 27, and basically all of chapter 5 (when Sookan goes to school).
• **Superiority/ethnocentricism** - What moves the Japanese (and later, the Soviets) to treat Sookan’s family and other Koreans the way they do? What examples from the text show how the Japanese think of the Koreans? What examples from the text show how the Japanese and the Soviets think of people from other countries, like the United States? See pages 6-7, page 27, and chapter 5 for the Japanese mindset. See pages 98-102, and 105-111 for some examples of the Soviets’ mindset.
• **Portrayal of Koreans (and Asians) in Popular Culture** - This would be a good opportunity for students to evaluate their own perspectives and nip racism in the bud. Depending on different schools’ student populations, students may know little to nothing about Korea past and present;
this novel provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn more about Korea. Students may also have incorrect and stereotyped views of Asians and Asian culture in general, and the instances of ethnocentricism and cultural oppression in the novel make it easy to have class discussions and form text-to-self and text-to-world connections. Students can ask themselves if they accidentally ever treat people in a way similar to how Captain Narita treats Sookan’s family. A good pairing text for this topic would be *American Born Chinese* (see Linked Texts below).

9. Gender Issues

- **“Spirit girls”/“Comfort Women”** - This is the most obvious part of the text that is charged with gender issues. When the sock girls do not meet their quota, Captain Narita and his soldiers abduct them and send them to the front to be “spirit girls” (i.e. sex slaves) for Japanese soldiers. Note: the most-common euphemism for this slavery seems to be “comfort women,” as seen in various modern news articles and texts.

- **Japanese and Soviet treatments of Korean men and women** - The Japanese tend to send men to work in labor camps (except for Kisa, who is injured), while women are either kept in servitude at home or shipped to the front as “spirit girls.” The Soviets tend to expect both men and women (and even children) to labor hard in the fields all day, and the Soviets also allow some women (e.g. Mrs. Kim and the Town Reds) positions in their Soviet organizations. It would be useful to compare the forms of treatment in the novel with modern-day practices (especially unfair ones) in our own country, to ask students how people react to those they conquer in war or in other forms (including economically, culturally, etc.).

- **Roles within Korean Culture** - While not developed thoroughly, the book does make reference to gender roles within Korean culture. Sookan would like to spend more time listening to and learning from her grandfather but she was not “supposed to disturb Grandfather after [her] morning lesson” because she was a girl and was “supposed to stay with the women” (10).

10. Research Issues/Project Ideas

- **The effects of imperialism/ethnocentrism on conquered peoples.** Possible areas of research:
  - The United States and Native Americans
  - Britain and the United States, or Britain and India
  - Rome and various countries (Rome and France, Rome and England, etc.)
  - French Kings in Spain

- **Objects that help define cultural identity in different countries.** Students could examine a specific aspect of cultural identity: gender roles/class/religion/daily routines, etc. Focus could be limited to cultures in the novel (Korea, Japan, USA, Russia), or it could be expanded to include various world cultures. It would be best to limit students’ focus to looking at objects that fall within a certain category. The best topics will help students to understand another cultures’ daily way of life, rather than some once-a-year event that culture celebrates. Here are some sample categories for research (these may overlap):
  - Religious objects (e.g. religious artifacts, religious rituals, etc.)
  - Folk art (e.g. weaving, furniture-making, etc.)
  - Native foods or celebrations (beware: this one has the danger of being simply a “food, fun and festivals” approach with little depth.)
  - Music (both instruments and musical traditions; e.g. Southern spirituals)

- **Miscellaneous Topics and Sample Research Questions**
  - What mythos contributes to Korean paradigms? (Draw heavily on Sookan’s discussion of what Grandfather has taught her about Korean culture)
Historical context of World War II – What factors led the Japanese and Soviets to Korea? How were the Koreans eventually liberated in the South? What’s happened to the North since WWII?

Underground escape groups (compare Sookan’s escape to the Underground railroad in America, groups that hid Jews from the Nazis, etc.)

Communism – What is it? How is it portrayed in the novel? Where does it exist today?

Fascism – What is it? How is it portrayed in the novel? Where does it exist today?

Sewing shops/sweat shops (6-7; 11) – What were these like in Korea? Where do they exist today?

Familial roles in Korean families (5) – What are these roles traditionally? How do they compare to American families? How are the roles shown (or not shown) in the novel?

Shinto temple/ Heavenly Emperor (Japanese) (5) – Compare Korean and Japanese religions. How are they portrayed in the novel?

11. Text Sets and Enrichment Resources

Maps of Korea:
- A small map is found in the novel, facing page 1.
- What’s the distance between Pyongyang and Seoul? See [http://www.distancefromto.net/between/Seoul/Pyongyang](http://www.distancefromto.net/between/Seoul/Pyongyang). Students can use GoogleMaps to calculate how long it would take to make Sookan’s trip on foot. Example: [http://tinyurl.com/walkkorea](http://tinyurl.com/walkkorea) (about 42 hours)

On Korean culture and history:

On the “spirit girls” or “comfort women”:
- Video report on “Forgotten faces”: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE0dydp9tbw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE0dydp9tbw)

On the legacy of the Japanese and Soviet occupations:
- A controversy exists regarding Japanese occupation; it supposedly helped to modernize Korea (before the occupation it was a little more “primitive” and rural”), but that modernization came at what cost? Wikipedia is a good reference source to begin with: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korea_under_Japanese_rule#Economy_and_modernization](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korea_under_Japanese_rule#Economy_and_modernization)
- This short article provides a good summary of the issues involved with Japan’s colonial rule of Korea: [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_koreaimeperialism.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_koreaimeperialism.htm). This article also provides a good (more detailed) summary: [http://countrystudies.us/south-korea/7.htm](http://countrystudies.us/south-korea/7.htm)
- Compare Japan’s reconstruction to the United States’ reconstruction in Japan after the atomic bombings—would they be so advanced now if we hadn’t bombed them and come to help rebuild?

Text Sets—Novels
- *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood* (University of California Press, 1998). This is a semi-autobiographical novel that describes the author’s life in Japanese-occupied Korea, including having to use a Japanese name instead of his real Korean name. It would be excellent to
use selections from the novel and compare them to Choi’s novel. (Note: Unsurprisingly, this novel also has a strong anti-Japanese slant that would need to be counterbalanced with other historical material.)

- Interviews about the novel and info about how to use it in junior high or high school: [http://www.asian-studies.org/eaa/lostname.htm](http://www.asian-studies.org/eaa/lostname.htm)

- **American Born Chinese** (Square Fish, 2008). This engaging and layered graphic novel follows Jin Wang, a Chinese-American student who struggles to fit in; and Danny, an “all-American” boy who is embarrassed by his cousin Chin-Kee (a caricature of racist stereotypes of Chinese people).

- **Under the Blood-Red Sun** (Yearling, 1995). A Japanese-American boy living in Hawaii must come to grips with his dual heritage in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attacks.

- **Dragonwings** (HarperCollins, 1977). A young Chinese boy joins his father in America to pursue his father’s dream of airplane flight, despite challenges from Americans and other immigrants.

- **Shizuko’s Daughter** (Fawcett, 1994). Yuki, a young and high-achieving Japanese girl, must learn to live in the aftermath of her mother’s suicide and other family problems.


- **Obasan** (Anchor, 1993). This novel is based on the life experience of its author and tells the story of the forced relocation of Japanese-Canadians during World War II.

**Text Sets—Easy Readers**

- **Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes** (Puffin, 2004). Young Sadako tries to fold 1,000 origami cranes in order to cure the leukemia she has contracted as a result of America’s atomic bombings of Japan. This novel is very short and accessible for students at very low reading levels.

- **Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear** (Yearling, 1994). This 144-page novel is fairly accessible and is a lot of fun for students to read. It also helps deal with unfair stereotypes of Asians in the United States.

**Text Sets—Picture Books**

- **Journey to Topaz: A Story of the Japanese-American Evacuation** (Heyday, 2004). This sophisticated picture book is based on the experiences of its author, who was interned in a camp at Topaz, Utah, during World War II.

- **Hiroshima No Pika** (HarperCollins, 1982). This picture book displays—sometimes pretty graphically—the horrors that ensued after the American atomic bombings of Hiroshima.

- **Zen Shorts** (Scholastic Press, 2005) and **Zen Ties** (Scholastic Press, 2008). These beautifully-illustrated picture books explain (with panda bears!) some of the principles of Zen Buddhism, a religion similar to that which Sookan’s Grandfather practiced.

- **Baseball Saved Us** (Lee & Low Books, 1995). This picture book describes the experience of a Japanese boy and his family who were sent to an internment camp during World War II, and how baseball gave some color back to their suddenly dreary lives.

- **Grandfather’s Journey** (Sandpiper, 2008). This “breathtaking” picture book (according to Publishers Weekly) chronicles the journey of its author’s grandfather from Japan to the United States and back again.