

Voices
from the
Gaps*To Swim Across the World*
by Frances and Ginger Park

Imagine a place half a world away where young children are forced into fields to work long days, earning only enough food to keep their families from starving to death. Or consider the pain of having bloody, cracked hands from darning socks for all seven hours of a school day. These tales of labor and suffering took place in North and South Korea during the Japanese occupation of World War II.

To Swim Across the World by Frances and Ginger Park is the fictionalized account of their parents' experiences as children growing up in the divided Korea during the 1940s and 50s. Their parents, Heisook and Sei-Young, overcame formidable obstacles and endured great suffering just to make it to their 18th birthdays. Their story is a compelling mixture of love, personal pain, familial loss, and a continued sense of faith. The authors take readers on an emotional and memorable journey into the past.

Growing up in North Korea with a wealthy father, Heisook Pang enjoys a relatively privileged existence. In school, she learns both Japanese history and language, and she regularly enjoys treats such as rice candy and cakes. During World War II, her life changes: due to the Japanese occupation, beginning in 1941, she is forced to darn socks every day for the Japanese war effort until her hands begin to bleed. This is only the beginning of her suffering. After World War II, the Russians take over North Korea and Heisook witnesses horrors beyond her imagination. She recalls one incident where Russian soldiers who opened fire on 400 boys from the local high school. In the aftermath, Heisook looks out the window exclaiming, I looked out. It was a gruesome sight, it was hell on earth, it was a massacre (153). Her life is never the same, this struggle to deal with death, longing, and escape carves out a tale of true courage.



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To Swim Across the World by Frances and Ginger Park

Meanwhile, in South Korea, there is a boy pulling trees from the ground with his bare hands until sunset, when he can no longer see two feet in front of him nor move another muscle. He works to make just enough food to keep his family alive, but barely has enough strength to take the long walk home through the valley to deliver their meal. Sei-Young Shin, whose name means To swim across the world is the son of a poor peddler. During the Japanese occupation, he watches as his father and grandfather are beaten, his mother nearly raped, and his brother, Kwan-Young, suffers from malnutrition and dehydration. After World War II, the Americans establish a democracy in South Korea, giving Sei-Young hope for a better future.

Heisook and Sei-Youngs amazing struggles during World War II and the Korean War are events that only a rare few readers will have experienced. However, *To Swim Across The World* brings the reader along on their journey through pain, suffering, and great loss. The authors writing style sweeps the reader up with vivid descriptions and memorable metaphors. The novel alternates between the stories of the two main characters, but ends by weaving their tales together with their eventual meeting. This incredibly well written piece of fiction paints horrific visions of war and struggle along with heart-warming moments of love and affection. This book is a definite must-read.

Besides collaborating on *To Swim Across the World*, Frances and Ginger Park have co-authored four childrens books entitled, *Goodbye, 382 Shin Dang Dong*, *Where on Earth is my Bagel?*, *The Royal Bee*, and *My Freedom Trip*. *My Freedom Trip* and *The Royal Bee* have each won multiple awards, including the Capital Choices Book Award and the Parents Choice Award for *The Royal Bee*, and the Childrens Literature Book Award for *My Freedom Trip*. Frances Park has also published a novel for adults entitled, *When My Sister Was Cleopatra Moon*. Today, both sisters live in Washington, D.C. and own a boutique named Chocolate Chocolate.

Reviewed by Abbey Peterson