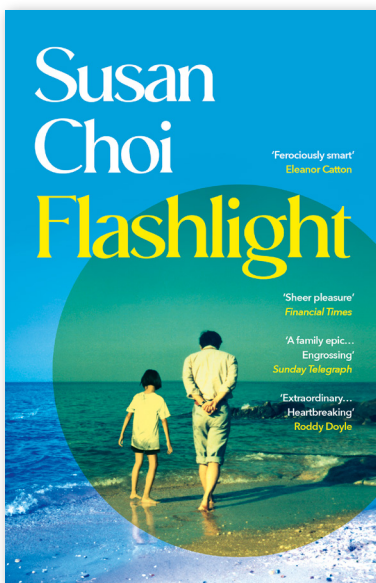


# Flashlight

by Susan Choi



## PLOT SUMMARY

A moment is all it takes to shatter a family. The echoes last a lifetime...

One evening, ten-year-old Louisa and her father, Serk, take a walk out on the breakwater. They are spending the summer in a coastal Japanese town. Hours later, Louisa wakes on the beach, soaked to the skin. Her father is missing: presumably drowned.

This sudden event shatters their small family. As Louisa and her American mother return to the US, Serk's disappearance reverberates across time and space, and the mystery of what really happened that night slowly unravels.

## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

*Flashlight* is both a family story, rich with interpersonal dramas and secrets, and a novel that takes the reader deep into the history and politics of Korea and Japan in the twentieth century; because of its complexity, it benefits from four narrative points of view.

In using multiple narrators, Choi is able to tell the same event from more than one viewpoint, as well as show a wider range of events than they would with a single point of view character. Through this structure, Choi balances and explores complex geopolitical settings and history.

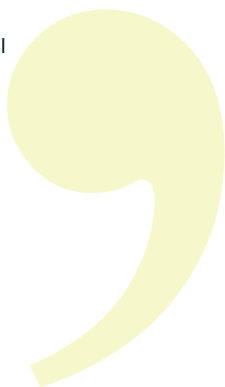
We see Serk's childhood and his parents' membership of the DPRK as well as seeing his daughter's life in America much later. The narrative moves from Japan to Korea to the USA in different timelines, meaning that we also experience the four point of view characters at different times in their lives – including childhood and adulthood. This freedom also gives Choi the ability to express her characters' observations with varying levels of naivete, knowledge and cynicism.



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“A masterfully plotted multi-generational saga ... constantly disrupts expectations.”

MONA ARSHI  
2026 JUDGE



Additionally, the four perspectives are able to express a wide spectrum of emotion, familial ties, motivations, and thoughts as we follow their different character arcs, all of which adds depth and humanity to a story which is based on historical research. Choi's merging of the historical, political and personal by telling the story of four generations of a family here is masterly.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

Choi's characters all experience alienation from their culture and identity in different ways. Serk/Seok/Hiroshi – his name in itself an expression of the different cultures he has lived in – is a Korean who grows up believing himself to be Japanese, and then moves to America before accepting a job in Japan; from there, he is kidnapped and taken to Korea to be “re-educated”. Anne is a white American woman who feels out of place when the family moves to Japan. Serk believes her illness to be related to feeling out of place. Of Anne, Choi says:

‘She... persistently attached herself to men who spoke many languages and hauled her into unknown territories and seemed to be comfortable nowhere, so that they inflicted on her discomfort she could have avoided.’

Louisa is a ‘gaijin’ in Japan, although she learns to assimilate and speak the language, but has previously felt the odd one out in America because of her dark hair and eyes. Tobias is literally alienated from Anne, his birth mother, and searches for his identity, both by becoming a ‘Japanophile’ but also in building relationships with Anne and Louisa.

What do you think Choi is saying about belonging and alienation from family, culture and country? Is it possible to belong somewhere and not belong at the same time? How do the macrocosmic political themes of belonging and allegiance to a country echo in the more personal and microcosmic experiences of belonging to a family?

### QUESTIONS

*Flashlight* is told from differing viewpoints: Serk, Anne, Louisa and sometimes Tobias. Did you have a character whose chapters you enjoyed the most? Why?

What is the role of health, illness and disability in *Flashlight*? How does Anne's experience with MS compare to Tobias's brain tumour? What did you think about Tobias telling her it was ‘mind over matter’?

How did you feel about Anne being denied anaesthesia in childbirth, and the perception that this might be ‘punishment’ for having a baby out of wedlock?

What does the flashlight that Louisa steals from Dr Brickner's office symbolise in the novel?



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If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

## NEXT STEPS

When Anne finds the photo of Serk and Louisa in her purse, taken at the beach by Soonja, neither Anne or Louisa can remember where or why it was taken. If you have photo albums of family from the past, choose a picture that is special to you and write about it. Where was it taken? Who is in it? What had just happened? What was about to happen? What would later happen to the people in the picture?

Alternatively, make a reading journal for novels in translation from either Japanese or Korean. Can you find some new authors that you enjoy? You might like to try non-fiction books about Korean and Japanese history and culture, or manga. Make notes about what you enjoy and what you don't – perhaps leave yourself questions or notes for further reading. Your reading journal can look however you like, but if you're a fan of stationery, you could take inspiration from some of the Japanese manufacturers of different coloured pens, stickers, notes and pencils. You could add in sketches or collaged images too. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Susan Choi** is the author of the novels *Flashlight*, *Trust Exercise*, *My Education*, *A Person of Interest*, *American Woman* and *The Foreign Student*. She has won the National Book Award for Fiction, the Asian American Literary Award for Fiction, the PEN/W. G. Sebald Award and a Lambda Literary Award, and has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Susan Choi lives in Brooklyn, New York, and teaches in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.



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# If you enjoyed this book...

## RECOMMENDED READS

In *American Woman*, Susan Choi tells the story of Jenny Shimada, a young fugitive who is drawn into a group of revolutionaries.

In *Black Butterflies* by Priscilla Morris, an artist remains in Sarajevo during the siege of 1992, trying to survive and remain an artist.

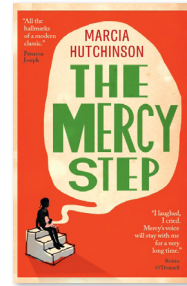
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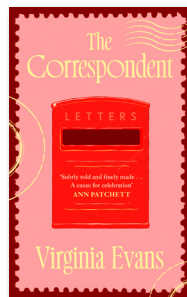
**The Mercy Step**  
by Marcia Hutchinson



**Dominion**  
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**The Correspondent**  
by Virginia Evans



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by Lily King

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discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

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