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Review of *Made in Korea* Written by Sarah Suk

Adult/Educator Reviewer: Ji Hyun Hong
University of Georgia, Athens, GA

Child/Student Reviewer: Yena Lee, Grade 12



Suk, S. (2021). *Made in Korea*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

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Adult Review: Ji Hyun Hong

For the last three years, Korean American Valerie Kwon and her cousin Charlie Sung have dominated in selling Korean beauty products at their high school. Their business comes under threat when Wes Jung, a new Korean student, also starts selling K-pop (Korean popular music) merchandise at school. With the growing rivalry between Valerie and Wes, they bet that whoever makes the most money in the school year gets to keep all the earnings. The stakes are high. Besides proving to her mother that she is capable of establishing a successful business, Valerie hopes to earn enough money to take her grandmother to Paris before her health deteriorates. Wes needs the money for music school applications and potential college fees, which he must earn on his own since his family disapproves of his passion for music. Throughout the competition, the business rivals hire a spy to outdo each other, become lovers, and emotionally and mentally mature to confront their families about their deep-seated tensions.

Made in Korea is a fast-paced book with refreshing elements. Even though the story takes place in a schoolyard, it is not a restrictive place but an exploratory one, in which students are encouraged to become entrepreneurs in their own way. The book also reflects the realities of teenagers who strive to achieve their dreams independently while trying to gain support from their families. In addition, diversity within the Korean community is portrayed well with references to Korean culture, language, transnationalism, and varying characters, including Korean Americans, a half-Korean and half-Irish American, a transnational Korean, and Korean immigrants. Students may find the complex culture, identity, and self-growth of the characters relatable and inspiring to reflect on what is truly important in their lives.

Educators should advise students of references to teenage drinking in the book. Educators should also

be careful not to stereotype the Korean parent-child relationship. While Valerie and Wes confront their parents, both parents abruptly end the conversation without providing a clear solution. While this may seem normal to some, it is not true for all Korean American families.

Student Review: Yena Lee (Grade 12)

Made in Korea starts with the character Valerie and her K-beauty business that she runs with her cousin. She is very narrowed into the business perspective as she gets competitive with a new student, Wes Jung, who is a threat to her business. The book presents the perspectives of the two characters that intertwine throughout the book. Valerie has always felt pressured by being compared to her sister Samantha and her new business rival Wes. She has a strong mentality, but in the end, she reaches her limit. Similarly, Wes is also pressured, especially by his father, to get into a good school even though he loves music. Wes was not interested in doing a K-beauty at school, but as he thought about music school and fixing his saxophone, he got curious. Throughout the book, he and Valerie fight to win over each other's business. As Wes brainstorms on how to win over Valerie's school business, he also falls in love with her. Even through the ups and downs, their relationship continues beautifully with a happy ending.

The aspect I loved about this book was how the book switched between perspectives, connecting the characters together, like a diary entry back and forth. The book touched me emotionally, like the scene where the family finds out grandma has Parkinson's disease. My favorite part of the book was Valerie's relationship with her grandmother, which reminded me of my close relationship with my grandma. I really admired her will to do anything for her grandmother. Overall, this book is perfect for Asian teen readers for how you can see a similar perspective of pressures from Asian parents. For non-Asian readers, you can still relate to some aspects as a Senior or just high

school in general. After reading the book, I didn't just relate or remember an experience from my own past, but also felt the pressure, for example making college decisions, in the present. I was able to relate more since I am a Senior and Korean like the characters. One aspect I disliked about this book was the inclusion of the relationship between Pamela and Charlie, which

I viewed as awkward. I was confused about their role in the plot. Still, the storyline of Wes and Valerie is a cute high school romance and shows how the characters change in their own ways, whether it's making the right choice or convincing your parents that you have a goal that's not their own.