

## fiction

## this week's essential reading

{ 'The pleasures of imagination' by Paul Bloom, *The Chronicle Review*

A psychologist's musings on the fact that we spend so much of our time engaged with fiction, and on the question: Just how suspended is our disbelief? }

# Conflicted feelings

*The Surrendered* opens with an image reminiscent of a war photograph. An 11-year old girl is riding on top of a train, cradling her two younger siblings against the cold with a stolen blanket as they flee south with other refugees at the start of the Korean War. The image is iconic, beautiful in its way and shot through with foreboding. Nested together, the orphans are "these last of their kind." And soon, the girl, June, is the only one left.

The novel opens up like an album of atrocities, though the stills that are hard to look at alternate with more alluring ones, in a book that has perhaps as much sex as it does death. Its characters are so convincingly etched, its story carried forward with such a momentum of empathy that, like the refugee train, it is more felt than intellectually encountered. The novel's author, the Korean-American writer Chang-Rae Lee, recently told an interviewer that he wanted "to give a certain bodily experience to the reader. Because I don't think I can explain war."

In this he succeeds: his words provoke what Susan Sontag, in her dissection of war photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, called "the pleasure of flinching". There is unease but also an affirming sense of basic human connection – the solidarity of being moved to pity and horror. Yet this is not a book about the Korean War. It resists being tagged that way, transcending the documentary role reserved for photographs from the front. The politics and imprint of that particular conflict are just the backdrop.

*The Surrendered*, it could be argued, isn't even about war or its aftermath. The name and the hometown of its hero suggest that it might be: Hector Brennan, an American soldier from a town in upstate New York called Iliion, seems as miraculously shielded from physical harm as his namesake from *The Iliad*. But he is just one of a trio of characters whose lives intersect after the



A military policeman of the US 24th division searches a child for weapons along the banks of South Korea's Nakdong River bank in September 26, 1950. The child was brought from the western shore with hundreds of North Korean refugees and prisoners, following a successful allied crossing. AP Photo

war at an orphanage run by missionaries, and whose entangled fates are Lee's true subject. The novel is about June Han, the edgiest of the orphans, "each a hardened kernel of memory, this mystery of survival". It's about

Hector Brennan, who drifts to the orphanage at the war's end to work as a handyman. On the road there, he finds June delirious with hunger and – though she imagines him a rapist and attacks him, leading this pair of pugilists

to trade blows first – he leads her to the orphanage. It's also about Sylvie Tanner, the wife of the pastor in charge there, to whom both become fiercely and erotically attached.

Three decades later, the two

kindred rivals meet again in metropolitan New York, when June, dying of cancer, hires a private detective to find her estranged son. He is, it turns out, also Hector's son.

Lee uses the search for the son – and the attempt to involve Hector in that search – to propel the story. The real engine of suspense, however, isn't a desire to know that journey's outcome. It's to know

In lucid, measured prose, Chang-Rae Lee's *The Surrendered* offers a visceral and intensely visual portrait of the Korean War's psychological and emotional aftermath, writes Gaiutra Bahadur



**The Surrendered**  
Chang-Rae Lee  
Little, Brown  
Dh69

what happened at the orphanage all those years ago and what became of Sylvie.

To unravel that core mystery, Lee confidently shifts time and place, stretching back to wartime Manchuria in 1934 – when Sylvie herself was orphaned – and ending in Italy in 1986. And he burrows in the atmospheric underbelly of small town America, in the working-class town in New Jersey where Hector has settled, "between the massive, inglorious feet" of the George Washington Bridge, to live out his days as a barfly at Smitty's Below the Bridge and janitor for a dodgy Korean-American businessman. In one of the less subtle passages in the book, Lee spells out the irony, telling us that Hector "took a small pleasure in the idea that more than 30 years of tumultuous world history should presently lead to a moment like this, for him to be dressed in cheap overalls, mop in hand, preparing to clean the toilets of a grubby Korean mall in New Jersey."

Inasmuch as Lee has given a bodily experience to his reader, he has also consciously crafted a book very much about bodies: their needs, their wants and their ends. June's body is ravaged by hunger, then by the cancer that lodges itself in her stom-

ach, where the pangs of wartime starvation used to sit. Sylvie succumbs to adulterous desire and an opium addiction. And Hector has to contend with more bodies than he can bear, not least of which is his own. He blames it for bringing ruin to both lovers and enemies with its raw, animal force, and he resents it because of its tendency to emerge unscathed when those of others do not.

There is the body of his anti-war father, who dies before Hector enlists, and then there are the bodies of the fallen soldiers he recovers in the army's graves unit. Lee writes about corpses with a kind of forensic poetry, not withholding the autopsy-room details. Hector's father, dredged from the Erie River, is "bloated and as shiny black as an inner tube". On the battlefield in Korea, the only way to tell a white GI from a black one is by his hair, because "all of them had turned the color and sheen of licorice by then, the skin finely lacquered by the elements". Nor does Lee spare us Hector's memory of kneeling over "some headless, legless, armless torso, probing with chopsticks or needle-nosed pliers or with his fingers to see if the dog tags had somehow descended into the flesh". The novel chronicles the varieties of the body's surrender, but it also pays equivocal homage to its capacity not to yield.

In Hector's eyes, that capacity amounts to a "sentence of persistence". It may be like that for June too, turning her into a girl so flinty that Sylvie's husband refuses to adopt her. ("Because she's not a nice girl. She's not a kind girl. Maybe she once was, but she isn't any more.") Still, "her talent, her gift" appears to be to survive. How could so corporeal a book not – by some inevitable principle of opposition – also be about the soul?

Churches populate its pages. Hector, as handyman, constructs a chapel at the orphanage. A "slapped together catacomb," painted a "ghostly and serene" grey, it reminds Sylvie of the church in Lombardy that her missionary parents, devotees of the Red Cross, took her to on pilgrimage as a child. Built with the skulls and bones of soldiers who fell there in

1859, it forms part of the legend of the Red Cross. Henri Dunant, a Swiss tourist who witnessed the battle, wrote an account of it that ultimately led to the founding of the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross. That book, *A Memory of Solferino*, serves as a totem of persistence in Lee's novel. Sylvie's parents gift it to her, with the inscription "To our own steadfast girl," and she in turn gifts it to June. It also passes through Hector's hands, its descriptions of the maimed too like what he already knows for him to keep it long. The book plays a role in how both characters lose Sylvie, and when June's son leaves her, he steals it. *The Surrendered*, not surprisingly, breathes its last surrounded by the calcified remains of bodies in the church at Solferino.

This novel, Lee's fourth, differs from its predecessors – ironic, first-person narratives about immigrant identity and assimilation, with a fretted style. Here, the writing is mostly clean and simple. When occasionally the metaphors become complex or abstruse, they do important work, as when Lee employs the vocabulary of astronomy and physics to describe the loneliness of his two female protagonists, even before they are orphaned. June has two sets of twin siblings, with the self-contained connection of each pair excluding her; Lee describes it as "a system of orbit that seemed unlucky to her at first but in fact suited her burgeoning character". Many chapters later, he tells us that Sylvie is similarly shut out of her parents' shared missionary zeal; she was "set just outside the tight centripetal force of their labours, the impassioned orbit of their work". Lee's language suggests that both women are the way they are because of the laws of nature and fate, no matter the horrors they have seen and survived – and that this is ultimately not a novel about war or its aftermath, but about character. It is June's Law, or Sylvie's Theorem, to persist or surrender.

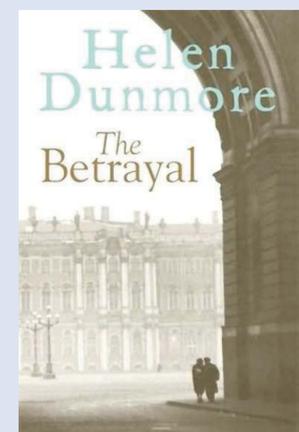
Gaiutra Bahadur is a contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Nation* and *Ms Magazine*.

## new fiction

## From Russia with fear

Nine years after publishing *The Siege*, a novel of one family's experience during the Leningrad blockade, Dunmore returns to the story of Anna, her husband, Andrei, and brother Kolya. It's 1952 and the three are making a life together as anonymous, obedient Soviet citizens, their domestic contentment a refuge from past horrors and the ever-present fear that "anybody can go out of favour in the blink of an eye".

Andrei, a paediatrician, is asked to examine the son of Volkov, a secret police chief so feared his name is "only spoken in whispers". The boy's condition is beyond Andrei's expertise, but Volkov demands he take charge of his care, a task which brings dreadful consequences. The plot recalls an episode during Stalin's final days, and Dunmore's knowledge of her subject matter is impressive and illuminating; her psychological portrait of siege survivors is particularly affecting. As with *The Siege*, she excels at using a minor, domestic tragedy to



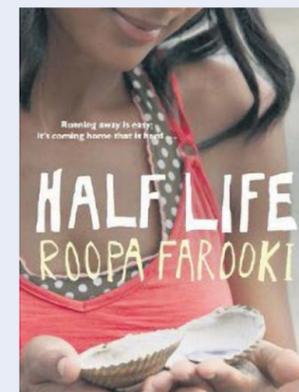
**The Betrayal**  
Helen Dunmore  
Penguin  
Dh100

tell a bigger story – and with every stench and shiver, her sensuous, simple prose accentuates the everyday, human experience of an unimaginable terror.

## Moving narratives

During the months that she spent absorbed in the research and writing of *Half Life*, Roopa Farooki's two young sons apparently accused her of simply "making things up and writing them down". But Farooki's novel is the most honest of fictions. From her explorations of the historical pressures that forced lives of mobility on South Asian families a generation ago to her detailing of the almost nomadic existence of today's subcontinental youth, everything rings true.

As the novel's key figure, Aruna, walks away from one cosmopolitan life and into another, Farooki paints an accurate likeness of the wandering contemporary South Asian elite. The author manages to weave a compelling tale of Aruna's forays in Singapore, Malaysia and England, and of the connection she feels to her parents' homeland in Bangladesh. When Farooki's narrative takes up an older generation, the novel delves into a historical tale of friendship, war and romance during



**Half Life**  
Roopa Farooki  
Macmillan  
Dh63

Bangladesh's fight for independence. In its portrayal of those tumultuous times and its illustration of the present day, the book paints a beautifully tragic picture of people both in search of, and running away from, home.

From page 14 Her mind still raced at night like a fueled engine, simply running and running, until it ran so hard and long that it forgot all else but this sole reason for being