

Unveiling the familiar in a strange place



Kim Young-ha: 'I became a writer because that is the only thing that makes me feel that I am a human being of free will'

GOOD political fiction lends an intimate human dimension to the major conflicts that dominate the headlines. Kim Young-ha's best-known novel *Your Republic Is Calling You* does just that for the North and South Korean conflict.

Originally published in Korean in 2006 as *Empire of Light*, it tells the story of a seemingly average man living in South Korea named Gi-yeong, who works as a foreign film importer and has a wife and daughter.

As the story unfolds, Gi-yeong reveals himself to be a North Korean spy who is pretending to lead a normal life in the South. The plot really takes off when he receives a coded e-mail ordering him to return home immediately.

As part of the Singapore Writers Festival, Kim will take part in a panel discussion titled *On The Dirt Road to Dystopia* this Sunday and talk about how he handles North and South Korean politics in this book.

In an e-mail interview, the author says that the conflict serves as a backdrop for examining one man's struggle to understand who he really is.

"North Korea is the last Stalinist nation in the world; but South Korea is one of the most developed Asian countries. Sixty years ago, the two nations were one, but now they are on extreme ends.

"Everything but language is different, and this is very interesting to me," explains Kim, who was born in South Korea in 1968 but now resides in New York.

"My protagonist is a North Korean spy, but he is a metaphor for all middle-aged men who have to survive a sudden change. I want people to find something very familiar about the very strange place and people in the novel. That's how novels work and why people read them," he adds.

Ultimately, Kim believes that his novel is "about human destiny" and

less so about the political situation in North and South Korea.

Kim recalls that the reason he even started writing was because of his own love for reading. He wrote his first complete short story when he was 14.

After graduating from university, he worked as a professor and regularly hosted a radio programme, but decided to quit those jobs at the age of 40 and dedicated himself solely to his writing career.

"I became a writer because that is the only thing that makes me feel that I am a human being of free will. When I write, I can make characters and plots, whatever I want," he says.

Apart from *Your Republic Is Calling You*, Kim has had other novels translated into English, like *I Have The Right To Destroy Myself* (2007), which delves into the topic of suicide.

One of his most recently translated works, *Black Flower* (2012), also

touches on politics as it is set in 1904 during the Russo-Japanese War, when Koreans were forced to flee their country and rebuild their lives across the world in Mexico.

Kim will take part in a panel discussion titled *The Writer in a Country's Intellectual Life* tomorrow from 5.30pm to 6.30pm at the Singapore Management University Binary Pavilion on the Campus Green. This event is included in the festival pass.

He will also take part in a panel discussion titled *All Art is Quite Useless* on Sunday from 4pm to 5pm at The Salon at the National Museum of Singapore. This event is included in the festival pass.

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