

Strangers in our Own Lives: An evening of cultural exchange



STRANGERS IN OUR OWN LIVES: AN EVENING of CULTURAL EXCHANGE

The British Council, LTI Korea and LBF Korea are currently sponsoring an 18 month exchange programme between the UK and South Korea. At the Central Library on Thursday evening, writers Kim Insuk and Han Kang took the stage with Glasgow's own [Karen Campbell](#) to discuss themes of the individual, social alienation and migration. The discussion was chaired by BBC Arts Producer, Serena Field.

Kim Insuk has won all three major Korean literary awards in the course of her career. She is part of Korea's '386 generation' – people born in the 1960s, who became students in the 1980s and who were in their thirties when the term was invented fifteen years ago. The 1980s were a very difficult time in Korea – a military dictatorship was in power, and Insuk recalled that students spent more time protesting than studying. Her most painful and powerful memory of those years was seeing a friend set fire to himself; as she watched him die slowly in hospital, she asked herself 'what more can I do to after this?' – yet she knew she had to do something, and that literature had to play its part in attacking the injustices in society. This gave her a very clear remit.

The democratic election of a president in 1987 led to a huge feeling of positive energy in Korean society; young people believed that they could do great things, but as they have aged, Insuk feels they have become complacent and part of the 'old guard' themselves. Korean society has changed beyond measure, and at a speed never seen in the West. Insuk has to work harder to find the themes for her writing, and has become

interested in how individuals become alienated from society. Her story 'Long Road' is about a member of the 386 generation who, disillusioned with Korean life, emigrates illegally to Australia. Emigration and alienation are traditional themes in Korean literature; Insuk is, however, more interested in how an individual may alienate himself from society than in how gaps in income levels and the modernisation of society may alienate him. Korean writing is now focusing on immigrants to the country and also considering the position of Koreans returning to Korea after growing up overseas, who may feel alienated in their own homeland.



Han Kang, a professor of creative writing in Seoul, is younger than the 386 generation, but still remembers the 1980s; she was aware of the Gwangju Massacre (in which up to 169 people may have died in protests against the military government), and from childhood she questioned how people could do such terrible things to their fellow men. She writes to ask questions not to offer solutions, and says that she could not have started writing if she had felt that other writers had all the answers. Her novel 'The Vegetarian' is about a girl who decides to live without harming others; she eventually believes she is a plant, and starts to starve herself to death. Meat-eating is used as a symbol for man's violence and cruelty – Kang poses the question, is it possible to live without causing any harm at all, or will this in itself cause harm? What is the individual's role in society?

Karen Campbell's new book 'This is where I am' looks at alienation through the life of Abdi, a Somali refugee in Glasgow and his mentor, Deborah. Although Karen has previously written crime novels, all of her work has been about identity; she writes about facades, what goes on behind closed doors and behind our personal barriers. Just as people have preconceptions about police officers, so they make assumptions about refugees – people don't have the time or interest to

challenge this social shorthand.

Karen seeks to show how a person away from their own home can become an infantilised, truncated version of themselves – they may be defined by the word ‘refugee’, and feel that they can only share a small part of their lives with strangers. We can all choose the identities that we present to the world, but refugees may have far more baggage and far less chance to unload it. They may also find it too painful to speak about their experiences, especially to someone like Deborah, a woman volunteering for a charity and who has been told to keep some emotional distance.

With this new novel, Karen has had her best ever reader response – she was heartened to hear that the members of a rather conservative book group reported that it had ‘made us look at refugees in a different light.’

This was a fascinating and thought provoking evening. [The British Council](#) is hoping to arrange further collaborations between the two countries before the programme ends in October 2014.

<https://www.londonbookfair.co.uk/whats-on/interest-area/korea-market-focus/>

http://www.klti.or.kr/e_main.do

Submitted by [Rosemary Kaye](#)