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Dictee



Synopsis

Dictée is the best-known work of the versatile and important Korean American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. A classic work of autobiography that transcends the self, *Dictée* is the story of several women: the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Joan of Arc, Demeter and Persephone, Cha's mother Hyung Soon Huo (a Korean born in Manchuria to first-generation Korean exiles), and Cha herself. The elements that unite these women are suffering and the transcendence of suffering. The book is divided into nine parts structured around the Greek Muses. Cha deploys a variety of texts, documents, images, and forms of address and inquiry to explore issues of dislocation and the fragmentation of memory. The result is a work of power, complexity, and enduring beauty.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book baffles me but I can't help coming back to it time and again. It makes my brain turn flip-flops and, in doing so, realize faculties of thought, imagination and empathy that I never knew existed. Cha's work is amazing, original, extremely insightful and interesting, bleak, defiant. As college reading lists "discover" the works of Asian American women writers (many of whom, like Amy Tan, are immensely popular but regularly problematized by scholars in Asian American studies), Theresa Cha must not be overlooked or forgotten.

The poet Charles Simic says, "Long drawn-out works conflict with the fragmentariness of our consciousness. What is recorded in a notebook is the sense of the unique and unrepeatable

experience of the rare moments of clarity."Dictee is this kind of book, a collection in nine parts of mixed writing styles including short passages in French and English, journal entries, stories and dreams, even a handwritten letter. And more. Theresa Hak Cha's book, which has been called both fiction and autobiography, also contains photographs, film stills, diagrams, and other black and white images. "Electric" only begins to describe the structure and style of Dictee. Cha's writing doesn't come without risk--Dictee seems thematically and structurally difficult. But it's with this style, actually a process-of-writing style, that Cha shows us how her mind works. It's in her "fragmentariness" that elements of profound meaning rise to the surface, what Simic meant by "rare moments of clarity." Cha's imagination on the page, her explorations into language and poetic lyricism--with connections to nationalist and feminist themes--help us feel her genuine struggle with Korea as a victim of the Cold War. This message is her legacy; it's a kind of Presence in her writing. And we sense her triumph.

The autobiographical work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Dictee," is both a challenging and unique experience to read. Her provocative blend of prose, poetry, narrative and historical pieces, among other genres, reveal a voice that purposely avoids a "typical" patriarchal discourse that is refreshing although disarming. Her words, contextually somewhat difficult for the (this) reader not previously aware of the complexities and truths of Korean history (both in Korea and America), are at once powerful and insightful...poetic, yet raw. Cha is able to use her gift to offer a glimpse into one woman's history and journey; one that ended much too soon on this planet for this talented artist.

Buy this book. Trust me. Flip through it a little, it's a fun book to look at. Don't start reading it yet. Let it sit on your shelf for a while. Remember it. A month or so later open it up and flip through it again. It's got such a nice book. Take some time out to read it: choose a weekend without plans. Read it slowly, it's short enough to. After you're finished, set it down. Put it back on the bookshelf. Maybe later flip through it again. Try to think about it. It's a hard book to understand. Maybe revisit the Erato section--that was absolutely wonderful. Open to a random page and read that page. Set it down again. There's something about this book. What is it? Think about it. The object in your hands is something special, you just don't know exactly what. I finished this a few weeks ago, and while I'm still not sure quite what I read, I'm glad I did. Looking back through sections, it really does add up somehow, in a way beyond words (which is quite fitting). I understand this review is not clear, not helpful, but it's all I've got. Trust me on this, even though we haven't met, this is a book to be read.

In total ignorance, just happened upon "Dictee" at a local garage sale. Incredible blessed find! Beyond others' benedictions, only to note that the prose-poem aspects of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's writing offer IMHO a useful and liberating meditation on language and thought and the ever-shimmering hallucinogenic bond and border between them. A marvelous work. If you're reading "Dictee" as an obligatory Asian lit assignment, you might pass through it in dismissive haste, like speeding through Mecca en route to a shopping spree in Abu Dhabi. Allow yourself time with Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

Cha takes the reader to a word with odd syntax and diction, with lovely imagery and sounds. This book is a great read. It provides historical context through narrative, and provides a great look on a minority culture(s). I would definitely recommend this book to anyone who wishes to read something not following a cliched formula.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictee is well crafted, yet difficult. It examines life experience from the perspective of Korean women. Poetry, narrative and other text structures are employed. Language is used forcefully and in thought provoking ways to build the unique form of this book. Dictee poses questions and provides a lens from which to view the Korean immigrant experience, as well as, the history of political struggle in Korea. Reading Dictee is a worthwhile experience that will expand a reader's vision.

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