

Behind the Book

Heinz Insu Fenkl on SKULL WATER

Skull water is the fluid that's said to accumulate in the human skull, and, according to a Taoist folk belief, it can cure any human ailment. In my novel, the main character, Insu (who's based on my younger self), sets out with his friends to dig up a grave to get skull water for his uncle, Big Uncle. Big Uncle has suffered for decades from a mysterious foot injury that never seems to heal, and he's dying as the infection spreads, so there's an urgency to the quest, which goes spectacularly wrong with lots of unexpected consequences.

SKULL WATER is largely autobiographical and has two parallel stories—Big Uncle's survival during the horrible early days of the Korean War and Insu's survival between cultures in 1970s Korea. (My wife calls it the great "After M*A*S*H" novel.) The threads of Insu's and Big Uncle's lives overlap in unpredictable and illuminating ways.

My real-life Big Uncle was a geomancer who could read the landscape's spiritual energy—the "dragons"—to find auspicious grave sites; he also performed exorcisms. He had an unusual method of consulting the I Ching, the ancient Chinese oracle, to look into the future. As I wrote SKULL WATER, I used the pictographic method I learned by watching him to shape the novel. The only other writer I know of who integrated the I Ching into writing a novel is Philip K. Dick with *Man in the High Castle*.

I'm the legacy of parents who survived terrible traumas: Japanese Colonization, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and all the displacements that came with those conflicts. At times, I thought we were forever caught in a liminal state, but ironically, it's by dwelling in that state between displacements and disjunctures that the central characters in SKULL WATER realize a unique and underlying wholeness.

As a mixed-race kid—my father was a blond and blue-eyed GI, and my mother was a Korean black marketeer—I had a rough childhood in Korea. I and other kids like me (like the other main characters in the novel) were outsiders from both cultures. We were marginalized, bullied, and discriminated against, living between U.S. Army bases and squalid Korean camp towns (because we weren't allowed housing on base) and surviving with almost no parental supervision because our fathers were away from home most of the time (sometimes serving in Vietnam) and our mothers were busy gambling or dealing illegal goods on the black market. My friends and I were exploited and abused by both the Americans and the Koreans. We were forced to create our own make-do families. And we grew up much too quickly. SKULL WATER shows the daily—sometimes mortal—dangers in our lives, which we were often oblivious to—quite shocking in retrospect—and it also memorializes some of us who didn't make it.

I wanted to capture a time and place that no longer exists—one that hasn't been adequately documented or reflected, or validated in literature: life in camp towns in the 1970s in South Korea under the dictator Park Chung-hee—a lost history that so many Koreans and Americans lived through; the two largest American military bases in Korea (ASCOM and Yongsan Garrison), which are now mostly decommissioned; aspects of Korean culture and the American military presence in Korea that have long been taboo; places like the Monkey House, where women were confined and forcibly treated for venereal disease; the dog market in Incheon and what happens there—something that has a new urgency in the era of COVID. I think aspects of my portrayal of gender during that time in Korea will also be surprising and thought-provoking.

My novel shows many of the dark aspects of those times—like racism, violence, sex trafficking, and corruption—but I also describe things that will evoke a lot of bittersweet nostalgia. I think SKULL WATER will resonate with those whose friendships have been tested, those who have been betrayed, those who served in the military (or know people who did), those whose lives have been disrupted by war, and those who had to endure in its aftermath. And those who spent a lifetime grieving lost love. That's a lot of us!