



No One Writes Back

Eun-Jin Jang , Jung Yewon (Translator)

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Communication—or the lack thereof—is the subject of this sly update of the picaresque novel. *No One Writes Back* is the story of a young man who leaves home with only his blind dog, an MP3 player, and a book, traveling aimlessly for three years, from motel to motel, meeting people on the road. Rather than learn the names of his fellow travelers—or even invent nicknames for them—he assigns them numbers. There's 239, who once dreamed of being a poet, but who now only reads her poems to a friend in a coma; there's 109, who rides trains endlessly because of a broken heart; and 32, who's already decided to commit suicide. The narrator writes letters to these men and women in the hope that he can console them in their various miseries, as well as keep a record of his own experiences: "A letter is like a journal entry for me, except that it gets sent to other people." No one writes back, of course, but that doesn't mean that there isn't some hope that one of them will, someday...

No One Writes Back Details

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From Reader Review No One Writes Back for online ebook

Charles Montgomery says

Unbelievably touching story of a boy and his dog, their last travels, and relationships, both raveled and unraveled. Far and away the best book in this series.

No One Writes Back is a book that can be recommended to anyone: It's a kind of backpacker's road trip and 'letters' about all the characters he meets on the way. Jihun is a man with a blind dog (ironically once a guide dog for the blind – Jang enjoys this kind of irony particularly as she slowly but surely reveals the histories of her characters). Jihun travels aimlessly through Korea for three years carrying only his clothing and an mp3 player; moves from hotel to hotel; assigns people he meets (that is, those who are willing to give him their home address) numbers, and never referring to their names (in the narrative) he writes each one of them a letter and hopes for one in return.

The story begins with Jihun meeting character #751 and they begin a strange and chaste intellectual seduction of each other as they travel from hotel to hotel, she attempting to see her novel, and he traveling and writing letters. The letters Jihun is writing as we read the story are all based on the idea of reconciliation with his family, and are, in fact, to family members. At the same time Jihun also freely remembers his previous numbers/letters when events remind him of them, and that gives the reader a clearer understanding of the road Jihun has traveled.

Jang's writing is consistently funny, both in concepts and lines and Jihun, anyone's model for an untrustworthy narrator (and perhaps not even the author of the tale being told), is full of amusing thoughts and judgments, as well as straight-out misinformation.

If there is a slightest issue with this book, it is that it is so squarely aimed at the "aw shucks" hearts of its readers that it occasional borders on the treacly. But this is vastly overwhelmed by the surprises and the often subtle (they would not be so subtle to a Korean reader) jabs at Korean work and beauty culture. Perhaps the biggest miracle of this book is its ending which manages to take a waterfall of what could have been treacle and turn it into something quite different and unexpected and deservedly tear-jerking. One of author Jang's most amazing skills is to carefully set up a carpet for you and then yank it out in one paragraph and if you aren't moved by the final pages of this novel you may need to check yourself for a heartbeat.

Sadly, in a way, No One Writes Back is the living, breathing, and likely commercially unsuccessful proof of the insufficiency of marketing of Korean literature overseas. This rights to this book should have been purchased by a major publishing house. It is a story of universal appeal, well written, and clearly translated. No One Writes Back contains plenty of "representative" Korea in it, but it is also just great literature that most readers would love.

A boy, his dog, a chance meeting, and an ambiguous but lovely conclusion.

Pick it up!

Zak says

The main character owns a home but has decided to embark on a long journey to nowhere. There is no time limit to this travel and he himself does not know when it will end. Along the way he moves from motel to

motel, trying to meet as many people as possible and taking down their address (physical, not email) after getting to know them. He assigns each new person a number, instead of a name and writes letters to them at each stop. He then waits for their written replies by calling home to his friend daily, who has been assigned the task of checking his mailbox. He has been doing this for the last three years but thus far, has not received a single letter in reply, hence the title of the book.

He also writes to his family members and through these letters and the narration of his travels we slowly learn about his history, the people he has met and what made him leave home in the first place. Along the way, he meets a struggling, peripatetic female novelist who decides to follow him, to his initial consternation.

I found this novel surprisingly enjoyable. Due to the exceedingly simple, straightforward prose, at first I found it a bit 'lacking' but it gradually grew on me. Perhaps it is the writing style that gave it a sense of immediacy and intimacy that eventually made me become completely immersed in the story. It felt like I was sitting cross-legged in a dark room with the protagonist, who was telling me his story in an impromptu manner, without any chance for embellishment or pretence. There is also a special relationship with his dog which was quite touching. This book might not be for readers who are looking for 'literary' fiction in the generally defined sense but it made an impact on me. I have not finished a book of similar length in such a short time for a while now.

Final rating: 4.5*

Tom says

The first book I've read in the new Library of Korean Literature series published by Dalkey Archive. . . A man in his early 30s travels around Korea for three years, taking subways and taxis as his transportation, and staying in hotels. Except for his blind, 13-year-old dog, he travels alone until--shortly after this novel begins--he (unwillingly at first) strikes up a friendship with another traveller, a novelist who sells her books to subway passengers. What motivates the narrator to travel is at the heart of this short novel, a novel funny and sad and filled with hope for the lonesome--which probably sounds schmaltzy, but it's bittersweet in a good way.

Paul Fulcher says

Dalkey - and the Literary Translation Institute of Korea who are sponsoring the effort - are to be highly commended for publishing the Library of Korean Literature and bringing a relatively under-translated body of work into English.

No One Writes Back is the first of the series I have read - and if this is any guide I will certainly be trying more of the series.

A deceptively simple but beautifully told story of a traveller, accompanied only by his MP3 player and his blind guide-dog (and yes, that's not a typo) who has been travelling around Korea for 3 years. He stays in motels, meeting strangers on his travels who he gives a number rather than a name, learning their stories, asking for their addresses and writing them letters (of the old fashioned pencil and paper variety). But, per his friend who is checking his mail at home, "?? ? ?? ?? ??" (Korean for "no one writes a letter (back)").

We meet him at the end of his wandering as he meets another traveller with a similar sort of story as his own (a itinerant seller of her own novel) and finally reaches the closure he has been looking for.

Why not 4 stars - well the twists and revelations at the end of the novel aren't really too much of a surprise, and the book ends on a slightly too sentimental note for my cynical taste - I had to grit my teeth as I wrote "closure" in the previous paragraph.

The book is also beautifully translated by Jung Yewon, retaining a nice balance of being rendered into clear English but retaining a lingering element of Korean culture.

Jr Bacdayan says

Over the years, as I read more and more, I noticed that my emotional connection to the books I read became weaker and weaker. I used to get teary-eyed a lot when I read, but as the years passed something inside me hardened, maybe I built an emotional tolerance for literature, maybe I just became apathetic as a person, maybe I just grew up, or maybe I just read less emotional books. However, these days, I rarely encounter a book I feel emotionally attached to. Last year out of forty books I probably had just one or two books that made me feel something. Not enough to make me cry, but enough to make me know I care.

This was different. I wept reading this. To be honest, it made me tear up quite a few times. Writing this, I can still feel a warm sensation in my chest. It's a combination of things really - the simplicity of the writing, the earnestness of the voice, and the emphasis on writing as a coping mechanism to loneliness - all of it spoke to my heart.

Eunjin Jang writes the story of a young man who went on a journey with his blind dog, Wajo, because he felt suffocated living in his own home. Living from motel to motel, he meets different people and writes them letters. All he wants is for one of them, any of them, to write back.

Reading this book offered me one thing I needed - comfort. I didn't cry just because I felt pain, I shed tears because I read words that I felt like I was longing to hear.

"Life is bearable when you have someone to write, and someone who writes you back. Even if it's just one person."

I hope you read this and find comfort in it as well.

Storyheart says

4.5 stars.

A young man leaves home with nothing but his blind dog, an MP3 player and a change of underwear. For three years, he wanders from place to place, eating convenience store noodles and sleeping in lonely motels. Each night, he writes a letter to one of the people he's met on his journey and hopes, as he mails each letter that one day, just one of them will write back. And then one day, one of the people he meets becomes a friend...

Nothing much happens in this story, yet it was completely compelling. It's the kind of novel you can't stop thinking about even when you're not reading. The dream-like feeling of the story combined with the way the author reveals, sliver by tiny sliver, the tragedy that's turned the protagonist into a lonely wanderer had me completely hooked from the first page. Highly recommended.

Reuben says

When I was 18 I had a chance encounter with a postmaster. He spoke at length about how rewarding the role of a postman was, but lamented the fact that he was struggling to find young people to take it on. He wondered if people my age even cared about letters. Coyly, I asked him if he was offering me a job. In response he smiled, and said that I seemed like I had too many opportunities ahead of me to want to become a postman.

The next day I wrote a pitiful letter in pink crayon addressed to the head of literature at Bristol University, informing him that I would no longer be taking my place to study there since, it transpired, I had little interest in books. This obviously wasn't true, but it was necessary in order to allow myself to become a postman. Perhaps in a moment of self-indulgence I had fallen for the idea that it was romantic, nomadic even, to be the fulfilling link in so many chains of communication. And besides, I've always found that long walks keep my mind at ease, so being a postman would mean being paid to live out my chosen form of therapy.

A week and a half after sending in an application, I received a very apologetic rejection. They had found someone for the position the day before my application arrived. I took a long walk out to the quarry near my house. *What was I doing?* Had my fear of reality really caused such a disruption in my perception? Had I honestly thought it was worth putting my life out of step with my peers just for an impulsive job application? Because that's at the heart of this: after a few years' worth of illness, death, personal tragedy, I just didn't feel in the same place as my peers—I didn't even feel on the same emotional continent. I'd jumped at the first opportunity to walk away from confronting these things, and I'd only just realised it.

I look back on that failed attempt to become a postman and see it as one of the best turns my life ever took. I applied to university again shortly after—different place, different course—but was resigned to a year at home. In that year both my dog and my grandfather, who were very ill, passed away, and I got to spend that time with them, which I wouldn't have otherwise. My father's health seemed to stabilise, and I finally started to address my depression. In a lot of ways it was the worst year of my life, but it left me somewhere where I could much better deal with the world around me.

*

I read Eun-jin Jang's *No One Writes Back* yesterday evening, whilst listening to David Sylvian's *The Good Son* vs. *The Only Daughter*, and drinking some questionable wine my father's friend had made in his house. Page upon page, something began to well inside me. Toward the end, it finally tore through me. I had to read the final pages behind the distortion of heavy tearfall.

*

Today, I return back to university. Earlier this year I was forced to suspend my studies because of unusual and severe head-aches which necessitated a hospital stay and lots of (often painful) tests. It dredged up all my old anxieties: that I was out of step with my peers, that I wasn't doing university or life fast enough, that I didn't deserve patience or compassion.

It has been an arduous struggle, realizing that this kind of thinking is bullshit. That just because the culture around me advocates for suffering through any and all problems until eventual death, and for downright ignoring grief and trauma—it doesn't mean I have to. Swimming against the current is agonizing, and I think it's one of the most enduring qualities of great art that it can be there to tell you that you're doing the right thing. That your journey is real, and necessary, and valid.

*

This isn't a 'review' that's going to help anyone make a decision about whether this book is for them: but for all those who have read the book, I hope you can see from my words how cathartic I found my time with *No One Writes Back*. Sometimes you fall into a piece of artwork at the perfect time in life for it to catch you.

I started reading Dalkey Archive's *Library of Korean Literature* off the back of a recommendation of this book. I thought instead I would just read the whole project. It has been incredible so far, and I can't wait to see what the next 17 books have in store.

Michael Seidlinger says

Write to make a connection in hopes of one day hearing more than your own voice, echoing in the back of your mind.

Nate D says

In numbered episodes leaping back and forth in time an isolated man wanders aimlessly between motels and reflects on the past and family history that brought him to that point. The themes of communication and alienation in modern society are familiar, but the approach is fresh and the cultural context of South Korea one I know all too little about. This becomes a kind of thoughtful, self-reflective quasi adventure story crossing the endless semi-urban landscapes of inhabited space. Meanders a bit by design, but with a careful playing out of character and plot to pull everything along to the finish.

Adam Dalva says

I love this book and will be shouting about it from the rooftops - it's a modernization of the picaresque form, as our lead, number zero, and his dog, travels randomly for three years sending letters to a series of numbers that no one replies to. It's a poignant, funny, weird, thoroughly original read, and it sticks the landing too. I don't want to summarize the plot, because every bit surprised me. This is a novel of rules, and it introduces them, follows them and breaks them in ways that maximize pleasure.

"That's why I, when the day is over, settle down in a motel or an inn and write a letter before I do anything else. Washing up, eating, and resting come later. If I wash up or eat, I feel as though the day's worth of feelings goes down the drain and the esophagus altogether. The drain and the esophagus are places unknown to me. All I know is that they are dark, smelly, black, and long. I don't want to send my travels down to such places.

Letters, however, are all right. At least I know better than anyone the route through which letters travel.

Better yet, if the address is correct, the route is neither dark nor smelly. So because I must write a letter as soon as I arrive, the motels or inns where I stay are always places of letters for me. And for me, letters are daily necessities."

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

[
Jelinek's piano book
Zazen
Rosellen Brown's Civil Wars
the book under review here as we speak ; it's just a better book 's all (hide spoiler)]

Hà Linh says

[
còn k?t qu? thì là nh? th? này:

(hide spoiler)]

Tony says

Jang Eun-jin's No One Writes Back (translated by Jung Yewon, review copy courtesy of the publisher) is the story of a young man who has been travelling aimlessly for the past three years, with only his dog, Wajo, for company. Every day, he leaves the motel he's slept at, randomly chooses a direction and sees what the day will bring. If it brings a conversation with a stranger (and if the stranger agrees to swap addresses), then they are added to the traveller's mental database, each being given a number.

Each night, before going to bed, our friend writes a letter about his day, either to his family or one of his collection of encounters; sadly, every time he calls a friend back home to find out if he's had any replies, the answer is always in the negative. This long-running routine is interrupted one day though when a woman the traveller sees on an underground train decides to follow him - the woman he is to dub 751 thus becomes the first person to join him in his travels...

No One Writes Back is a wonderful little book, simple, subtle and very enjoyable. The writer starts off by giving the reader very few details, showing us an anonymous man free of ties. As the novel progresses, information is introduced gradually, making for a perfectly-paced story where the reader is never quite sure where the book is going (but is quite happy to be along for the ride).

The traveller sees himself as a collector of stories, writing down anecdotes about the people he meets every day, a task which has become an integral part of his travels:

"Words penned while traveling do not lie; they're not for showing off, but for making you reflect on, and take care of, yourself."

p.8 (Dalkey Archive Press, 2013)

His letters are merely the outward manifestation of his thoughts. Each of the random, fleeting encounters is stored away in his impressive memory, waiting to be recalled when needed.

We slowly learn more about the young man and his situation (even learning his name eventually). For some unknown reason, he is unable to put up with living at home, constant seizures under his own roof forcing him to keep moving on a seemingly never-ending trip around the country. In his mind, he is waiting for something to end his travels, and he suspects that this might be a letter, a reply to one of the many he has sent during his journey. However, as we well know, no one writes back...

This is where the woman comes in, an itinerant writer peddling her latest novel, Toothpaste and Soap. Like the young man, she is travelling for a reason, in her case to gather ideas for a new book. Curious (and a little nosy...), she desperately wants to know more about the traveller and becomes an interruption, welcome or unwelcome, in an otherwise smooth journey. She is 751, but who is he? She decides, using his own logic, that he must be 0, a very apt, and enigmatic, choice.

In No One Writes Back, numbers are extremely important (the book itself is divided into 152 short chapters). The traveller is able to categorise people thanks to his amazing memory, allocating everyone a number and then writing to them when the time comes. This focus on numbers comes partly from the young man's mother - as he recalls when thinking of childhood:

"But more than that, you believed that all the truth in the world could be found in math. All creations are numbers. That was your philosophy in life." (p.48)

Gradually, however, we move away from the rational, logical world of numbers and into the realm of feelings and words, and as we do, we see a very different side to the traveller.

Even more than numbers though, it's the letters which define the novel. In a digital world, our hero is an analogue man, preferring to commit his experiences to paper:

"I write letters because I want to convey to someone the stories of these people, but also because I want to let someone know that a day had existed for me as well. Letters, in other words, are like journal entries to me. The only difference is that the day does not stay with me, but is sent to someone else. Journals are monopolized, but letters are shared." (p.13)

He clings to the hope that one of his letters will garner a reply, and when his hopes are dashed time and time again, the reader feels just as crushed as he does. There is a far greater significance to the letters though, one which only becomes apparent towards the end of the novel.

No One Writes Back is a wonderful story and expertly paced, with Jang drip-feeding new information at exactly the right point each time. It's written in a very smooth, simple style, and the translation appears to be excellent, making for a fluent, enjoyable read. There's more than a hint of the Murakamis about the book, particularly his early work. The start of the novel, with the loner main character calling his friend every day, is especially reminiscent of The Trilogy of the Rat. Jang has her own style though, and the way she develops the relationship with the woman is excellently done - and even Wajo, the dog, has his own story :) Towards the end, things get a little manipulative, but the events of the book never seem contrived and make for a wonderful finish.

The idea of the Library of Korean Literature is a great one; it draws people's attention and gets people to try several books, trusting that the publishers have picked a good selection of works. One flaw though is that a really good book can be buried under the idea of the series, and I hope that doesn't happen here. No One Writes Back is a wonderful read, one which deserves a higher profile. It's a book which most people would enjoy, finely balanced as it is between literary quality and readability. I'm not sure if it's going to catch the

eye of IFFP or BTBA judges (although Michael Orthofer did recently sing its praises), but it's definitely one for lovers of translated fiction to look out for :)

This review first appeared at my blog, Tony's Reading List :)

MJ Nicholls says

This stunning novel is my second venture into Dalkey's Korean Library, following the equally terrific *At Least We Can Apologize*. An unnamed protagonist travels from motel to motel meeting people and assigning them numbers, writing them letters after their encounters and patiently awaiting at least one response so he can end his travels. En route he meets the authoress of *Toothpaste and Soap* who is struggling to sell copies of her novel to subway passengers, and the two travel alongside the protagonist's dog Wajo into the final instalment of his trip, recounting past meetings all the while, and composing letters to his estranged family. This is a perfectly paced and plotted novel with some cunning tricks up its sneaky sleeves—a smoothly translated tale of loneliness, loss, and grief that leaves one champing at the bit for more.

Lindu Pindu says

I cried like a baby at the end. This book was so fleeting yet filling, like an Ane Brun song, possibly "To Let Myself Go".

The perfect portrait of under-accomplishment, our main character is travelling without an explicit purpose. What he does on the road (but not necessarily likes or anything) is meet people, assign them a number, remember their address, and send them letters. He's accustomed to being alone with Wajo, the dog. This woman, a novelist, starts tagging along and it doesn't make much sense because apparently she likes being alone too - until she tells the guy: being with him is the same being alone, so it's really cool with her.

No One Writes Back has a bit of everything, from travel to loneliness, suicide and death, with the backdrop of a complicated relationship with the fam, where regret is stronger than being thankful. Still it doesn't feel like it spreads itself thin, in fact its charm comes from all these details coming together in a strange, utterly familiar way.

5 stars all the way.
