



HC: 9780823444946 • Ages 8–12

BROTHER'S KEEPER by Julie Lee

- ★ “Debut author Lee paints this gripping and emotional midwinter escape with the eye of a wartime journalist and the determined heart of a young girl.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

About the Book

Can two children escape North Korea on their own?

North Korea. December, 1950. Twelve-year-old Sora, her eight-year-old brother Youngsoo, and her family live under an iron set of rules. When war comes, Sora and her little brother have to travel alone to safety and survive three hundred miles of war zone in winter.

Discussion Questions

- The novel is set in 1950 as the war escalates between North and South Korea. Discuss life in North Korea under the communist regime. How does the government brainwash and infiltrate the youth? Why is it no longer safe to worship? Explain the following: “You don’t need a church to preach” (p. 43).
- Explain why Sora says that Myung-gi and his family are the only people her family can trust. The Kim family plans to escape to Busan, South Korea. Explain what Sora means when she says, “I wondered if one kind of freedom led to another” (p. 24). Why doesn’t Sora’s family leave with the Kims? Discuss how Sora knows when the Kims have finally left North Korea. Why are her parents viewed as traitors after the Kims leave?
- Sora is expected to follow her culture’s traditions for women. Discuss these traditions. How is this a source of conflict between Sora and *Omahni*, her mother? *Omahni* tells Sora that a girl must have a “keen mind.” What is her mother’s idea of a keen mind? Cite evidence that Sora does have a keen mind. How does her keen mind ultimately get her and her younger brother to Busan?



- The government drafts all able-bodied men. *Abahji*, Sora’s father, hides in a hole in the back of their house to avoid the draft. At what point does it become obvious that they must leave the country? Discuss *Omahni*’s thoughts about leaving. Sora sides with her father. How does this cause yet another conflict with her mother?
- En route to Busan, Sora and her brother, Youngsoo, are separated from their parents. Youngsoo believes that their parents are alive. Why does Sora fear the worst? Explain why she keeps these thoughts from her brother. Discuss the people they meet along the way. Who are the most unsavory characters? Discuss the goodness of the old man who gives them his bullock cart. Explain what Sora means when she says, “We weren’t just running. We were being chased” (p. 121). Youngsoo becomes ill. Explain Sora’s kindness and attention to her little brother. Why does Youngsoo tell her that he wishes he weren’t the older son?
- Discuss the reaction of the family when Sora and Youngsoo arrive in Busan. Why does Sora say that arriving in Busan was “only half the battle.” What is the other half of the battle? How does Sora’s mother blame her for Youngsoo’s illness? Discuss the words exchanged between Sora and *Omahni* at Youngsoo’s death. How does it take courage for Sora to stand up to her mother?
- Things get better between Sora and her mother after their fight. How does Sora’s view of her mother change after *Omahni* admits that she thought Sora was ashamed of her? Sora is complimentary of her mother for teaching her to be strong and work hard. How does *Omahni* grow to accept Sora and her dreams? When Sora graduates, her mother makes her a new dress. Sora asks how she could afford the fabric. Explain what her mother means by, “But if you don’t have any teeth, then you live by using your gums” (p. 289).
- Discuss the significance of the world map that Sora rips from her brother’s textbook and carries in her pocket on their journey to Busan. After they arrive, she throws the map away, but Youngsoo finds it and saves it. Explain the symbolism of this act. How does this help Sora accept his death, and realize her dream of going to school?
- Discuss the structure of the novel. How do each of the three parts help readers understand the desperation of the family, and why they needed to escape? What does each part contribute to Sora’s growth as a young woman?

Guide prepared by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

About the Author

Julie Lee graduated from Cornell University with a degree in history. After working in market research in Manhattan for more than ten years, she decided to pursue writing full-time. Currently, Julie lives in Georgia with her husband and three children.

Brother’s Keeper is her debut novel. Visit Julie at julieleeauthor.com.



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