

A Murder Mystery That Refuses to Be Solved

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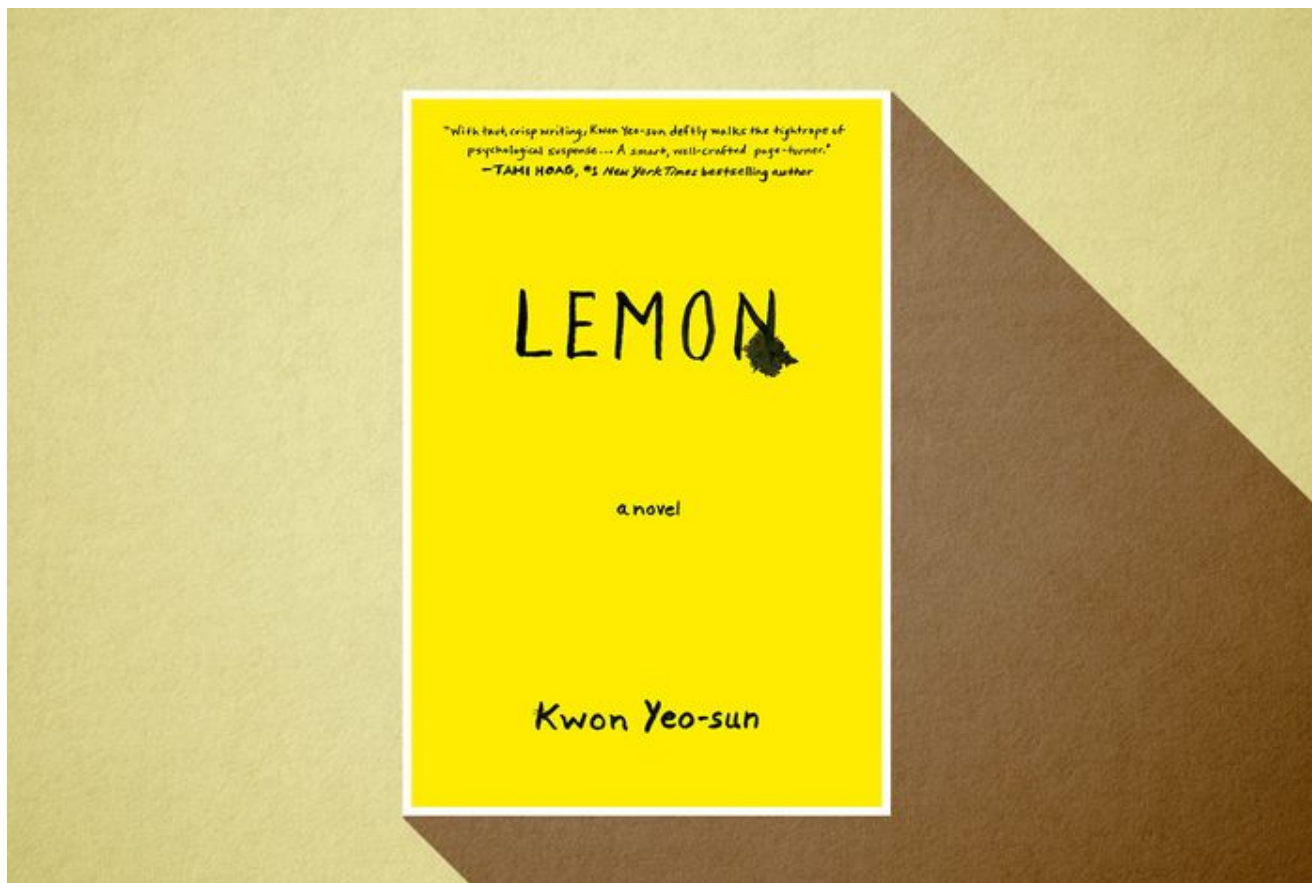


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Read the first chapter of Kwon Yeo-Sun's slim novel *Lemon* and you could easily mistake it for a thriller. The book, translated from Korean by Janet Hong, has all the elements of the genre: protagonists haunted by an unsolved murder, a cop more interested in making an arrest than finding the killer, a dead girl whose beauty has turned her into something approaching myth. But this is a murder mystery less interested in victim and killer than in the motivations of those consuming their story—those who create meaning where, most likely, none exists. That consumption is its own violence.

In the summer of 2002, 18-year-old Kim Hae-on is found dead of “blunt force trauma to the head” in Seoul. There are two suspects—the wealthy and popular Shin Jeongjun, who was driving with the girl on the day she was murdered, and the awkward delivery boy Han Manu, who saw the two in Jeongjun’s car—but, after coercive interrogation by local police, neither

are ever formally charged. The murder captivates the public for a brief, frenzied moment, then fades into the background, unresolved. When the novel begins, it's already far in the rear view. But Kim Da-on, Hae-on's sister, refuses to forget: "For over sixteen years, I've pondered, prodded, and worked every detail embroiled in the case known as 'The High School Beauty Murder'," she begins. Da-on soon reveals that she knows who the murderer is, though she doesn't name names. You might assume that by the end of the book you will know the truth as well.

Kwon, 55, has been racking up South Korean literary awards since her debut novel in 1996, and her novels and short stories have earned her a reputation as a writer of difficult fiction, formally experimental and biting in her criticism of South Korean culture and the country's government. *Lemon*, her English language debut, was originally published in Korean in 2016 as a short story called "You Do Not Know" before Kwon expanded it into the current novella, which published in South Korea in 2019. (The story was also adapted into a play.) In eight staccato chapters, which leap over years at a time and from one perspective to the next, Kwon traces the lingering effects of Hae-on's murder on three women in her orbit: Da-on and two of Hae-on's former classmates, Taerim and Sanghui.

Da-on, though three years younger than Hae-on, spent her childhood taking care of her sister, who seemed to travel through the world without any understanding of how it worked. Da-on felt as if she was forever falling short of Hae-on's beauty in life; after the murder, Da-on deals with her grief by literally trying to embody her sister, undergoing multiple plastic surgeries to look more like her. Taerim is presented as the jealous girlfriend (and eventual wife) of former suspect Shin Jeongjun, and her narration makes up the most abstract sections of the book: Delivered as one-sided conversations with a 24/7 lifeline operator and later a psychiatrist, they hint at a haunting culpability and years of trauma. Meanwhile, Sanghui, a transfer student who knew Hae-on only from afar, acts as a stand-in for the rapt audience. She offers the closest thing to an objective reporting of the events, as witness to (and sometime participant in) the co-opting of Hae-on's life and death.

The women of *Lemon* are desperate for answers, and so, too, are we as readers. Kwon brilliantly resists clarity at every step. Although Da-on is certain she knows who killed her sister, the very first thing we learn about Da-on is her fallibility. She imagines, she remembers; each time she revisits the scenes, they shift. Every chapter requires parsing: Kwon dives right into first-person narration and waits for us to catch up, and almost none of the assumptions we make are ever confirmed. In the first chapter, Da-on confesses to a crime in one quick sentence—blink and you might miss it: "That's why I did what I did, and I know I'll never be free from this crime until the day I die." It took me a second read to catch what the crime was, suggested in asides throughout various chapters—really, it took a second read to appreciate the book as a whole. As a murder mystery fan who's sometimes so impatient to find out who did it that I'll jump to the end and spoil it for myself, I finished *Lemon* somewhere between frustrated and bewildered: *What did I just read?* Hae-on's

murder, like most real-life murders, abounds with unanswerable questions beyond who did it, nagging unknowables that force you to sit with the discomfort of wanting—even feeling owed—a kind of closure that doesn't exist.

In Sanghui's first chapter, four years after Hae-on's murder, she recalls the agitation of the days following the discovery of Hae-on's body. Her fellow students obsessed over the case, using class hours to plot out timelines and argue over the facts of the police report (what exactly does "cranial injury" mean?) while their teachers were either unable or unmoved to divert their attention. As the investigation peters out, Sanghui describes a collective guilt spreading throughout the class. Over what? Their inability to solve the murder, their enjoyment in their attempts? The fact of their existence, their ability to move on? Likely all of it:

Gradually, we managed to return to our rightful place, our emotions numbed by the strain and struggle of our looming college entrance exam. We told ourselves: Some of us had to go, that's all. One had an accident, one went abroad, one transferred schools, one dropped out, but we're still here, aren't we? Ah, this is killing us. Nothing's changed. What kind of life is this? Is this living?

And just like that, the incident ended for us.

Kwon mostly foregoes physical descriptions of Hae-on and instead relies on the narrators' memories of what Hae-on's beauty felt like to them, showing us how its function and meaning could shift to meet the viewer's needs. Da-on sees her sister as the embodiment of perfection, while judging Hae-on for not appreciating her looks more: "She treated her own beauty like a pretty pebble she'd happened to find on a beach. Since she was aware that her appearance provided benefits, she sometimes used it to her advantage, but she didn't know its true value." For Sanghui, the quiet admirer, Hae-on's beauty is "devastating, otherworldly, even glacial." It renders Hae-on unreachable. Taerim, who Sanghui describes as second in beauty only to Hae-on, is venomous in her attempts to convince those around her that the dead girl was stuck-up, unintelligent, and never deserved adulation.

In all three cases, Hae-on's beauty negates her humanity, elevating her into something supernatural or reducing her to an object. Either way she is portrayed as malleable, unfeeling. Whether Hae-on is worshipped or resented or punished has little to do with her, and this is clearest in Kwon's constant shifting of her characterization. Each character ascribes intent to Hae-on's appearance, justifying whatever reaction it inspires. Her beauty becomes inseparable from violence, but the violence goes both ways. If Sanghui is the stand-in for the true-crime consumer, Taerim is the voice of anyone who's heard about a sexual assault and wondered, *What was she wearing?*

The chapters float in spare streams of consciousness. Details are minimal, lending the few remembered scenes the fuzziness of a dream. (In a conversation between Da-on and Sanghui about their shared writing class, they reminisce about reading Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; it's easy to see the reference as a nod to Kwon's own influences.) The narrators speak from the future, but it's not clear where they've arrived. This question is amplified in Taerim's chapters, which read as a kind of ouroboric monologue. Theoretically she's looking for help, but she can't stop interrupting herself long enough to ask for it. Kwon is masterful at maintaining a low level of doubt, never delivering a straightforward narrative but never straying so far from it that the work falls into incoherence. Hong's translation is spare, lyrical. There's a sense of writing around intentional gaps. What aren't they telling us?

It's not clear what to make of the title, the recurring motif of lemons and the color yellow. Perhaps the fruit's sweet and sour gestures at the coinciding appeal and ugliness of the murder, or of the victim herself. Perhaps the color signals innocence: Da-on is obsessed by the idea that, contrary to the reports, Hae-on was wearing a yellow sundress when she was killed. But maybe I'm getting carried away. We're not far from the charting of clues and linking of theories. This narrative style mimics that of the whodunnit, dropping clues and red herrings along the way, but there are other, more compelling, mysteries we're trying to solve. Your enjoyment of it will depend on how you feel about ambiguity.

Of course, there are details that tantalize us with meaning, and then there are those that just seem incomplete. Taerim turns to religion, but her feverish prayers for salvation come and go too quickly to do anything but bewilder. A secondary character's cancer diagnosis feels random; the effect it leaves on the story is unclear, and it left me wishing the ill character was given a chapter of their own. In a story about the search for meaning, any detail stopping short of significance can feel like proof that the search is futile. But with the book clocking in at just under 150 pages, I found myself wishing Kwon had given us just a little more time with the main trio. Just as I was starting to really get a sense of who they were, they were gone. What is clear is the writer's shrewd diagnosis of a culture that disempowers women—commodifying and consuming them, one after another, until their appeal wears out.