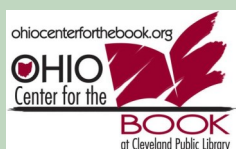


This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by Get Graphic! with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library.

We aim to promote the study of comics in spaces from public libraries to academic institutions and all outside and between.

Toolkit created by the Ohio Center for the Book Scholar-in-Residence, Valentino L. Zullo, Ph.D.



Get Graphic! Toolkit

Grass by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim

About the Comic

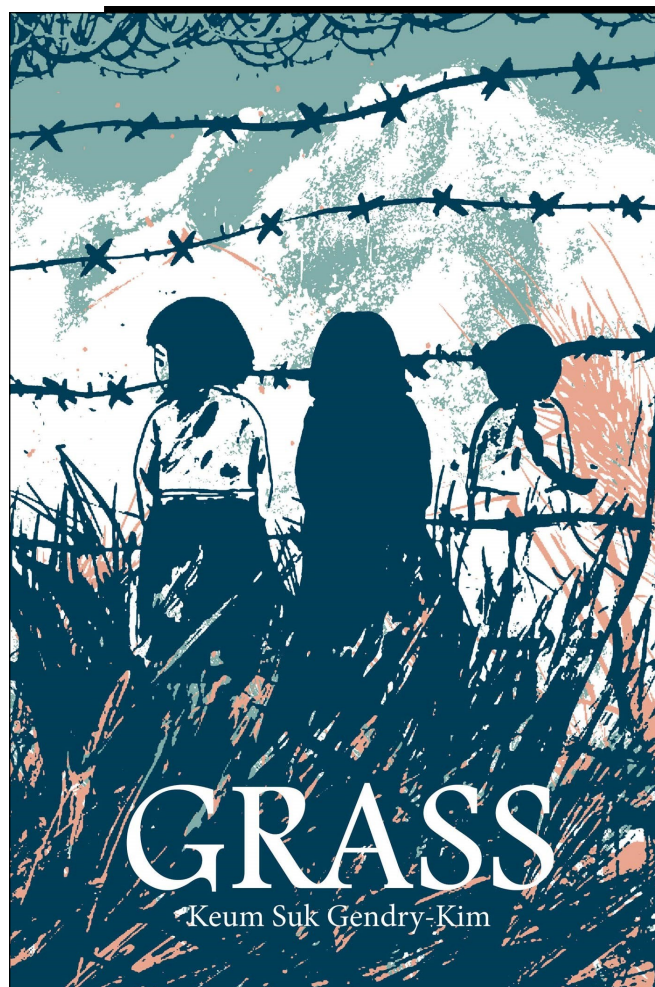
Grass documents the story of Okseon Lee. As a young child, she was enslaved as a so-called “comfort woman” for the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War.

Told through the reflective narration of her older self, now known as Granny Lee Ok-Sun, this comic documents the horrors of her enslavement and her life since being freed.

Through a series of interviews, Keum-Suk Gendry Kim archives the story of Granny Lee Ok-Sun, one of the last survivors of the horrors of the Japanese Imperial Army.

The comic draws upon Ok-Sun’s early history including her parents sending her to live with another family in the city which will lead to her kidnapping into sexual slavery.

Grass documents the experience of a woman whose story had been erased (along with many other victims) and is finally now visualized for others to bear witness to the trauma and the pain of one of the most horrifying moments in history.



Who is Keum Suk Gendry-Kim?

A cartoonist from South Korea, Keum Suk Gendry-Kim is the creator of many comics, some of which are now translated into English. She was born in the town of Goheung in Jeolla Province. Her graphic narratives include *The Song of My Father*, *Jiseul*, and *Kogaeyi*, which have been translated and are available in France. She also wrote and illustrated *The Baby Hanyeo Okrang Goes to Dokdo*, *A Day with My Grandpa*, and *My Mother Kang Geumsun*. Her comic "Sister Mija" - a manhwa about a comfort woman - won her the Best Creative Manhwa Award. Her work has been shown in Korea and Europe since 2012 and documents the pain of others including the untold history of "comfort women."



Figure 1 Grass , p. 42.

Context: Comfort Women

"Comfort women" were women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army in occupied countries and territories before and during World War II. Many of the victims of sexual slavery do not agree with the term "comfort women" which is a euphemism for prostitution. However, Keum Suk Gendry-Kim notes in her book that she uses the term because of its recognizability. The term suggests that the women were supporting these men, but these women and girls were not simply providing comfort. They were enslaved to these men. The exact number of women who were enslaved for sexual purposes is still unknown because there were so many and they were not documented. As we see with Grany Ok-Sun, she was pronounced dead by her country, so her story, like many others, was not documented.

These "comfort women" mostly came from territories occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army. In 1910, the Japanese colonized Korea. However, as their power waned and as the Japanese army continued to lose power during the Second World War, they began to kidnap these women for sexual purposes to please the members of the military. As we witness in *Grass*, many of the young women were kidnapped and brought to these "comfort stations," better known as brothels.

Today, many of the victims are deceased, but a number of those who are still alive called on Shinzo Abe, the Prime Minister of Japan, in 2007 to apologize on behalf of the Japanese Government and the Imperial army and to offer reparations. In 2015, Abe issued an apology and entered into an agreement with South Korea. However, the apology and agreement fell far short of the demands of the survivors and negotiations and lawsuits continue into the 2020s.

Questions for Discussion

1. While this is Granny Lee Ok-Sun's story, Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's own reflective narration will often interject into the story such as with the ending of the graphic narrative. Ok-sun's story is no longer simply her own but part of a shared experience between these two women. How does the inclusion of this other voice affect the story and our reading? How does Gendry-Kim ask us to think about the uses of storytelling and its communal effects by creating the two voices?
2. Historically, the story of the "comfort women" has been systemically neglected as many of these stories have remained buried, if not untold, for decades. How does *Grass* reclaim the story of these women? How does the comics form suit such stories that reclaim history? Why is the comics form suited to and so often used to tell otherwise forgotten or erased stories?
3. While *Grass* is predominantly a story about a historical event offered from the perspective of one victim's memories, Gendry-Kim uses the framing device of the present day to assert the impact and importance of this story in the contemporary moment (Fig. 2). How does this use of the present-day framing device help the reader think about the importance of uncovering this history for posterity? How does it help us to understand history as a moving target that is constantly being revised and reinterpreted to help us move forward in the present moment?
4. Gendry-Kim uses a very effective black and white line-work technique to convey Granny Lee Ok-Sun's story to the reader. How does the absence of color affect the reading process? How might this book have felt different were she to use a wash such as green to tell the story?
5. *Grass* is a story about sexual slavery enacted by the Japanese Imperial Army; and, while this particular event of trafficking ended years ago, the abduction and rape of many others around the world continues to this day. How does Gendry-Kim's story ask us to also draw attention to sex trafficking around the world today? How does the comic offer a path for thinking with others about how to bring attention to and end a practice that persists in different forms?
6. Throughout the story, there are many times where the landscapes will be depicted as taking on human-like qualities. What is the purpose of anthropomorphizing the landscape? How might it relate to the title of the comic?
7. In many ways *Grass* is a horror story, and Gendry-Kim evokes this feeling of shock and terror by using images that invoke the genre (Fig. 3), including drawing panels that are entirely blacked out with ink (pp. 202-205). How does she use elements of the horror genre to document these personal events? How does the use of horror further convey the evils acted out on these young girls?
8. *Grass*, like many comics before it, draws upon a forgotten archive. What is it about the comics form that lends itself to uncovering and bearing witness to the past. How might this story have been different if the interviews would have been conveyed in another genre such as documentary film or even a written memoir?

Interviews & Additional Questions

- Pamela Constable, "70 years later, a Korean 'comfort woman' demands apology from Japan," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/70-years-later-a-korean-comfort-woman-demands-apology-from-japan/2015/04/22/d1cf8794-e7ab-11e4-9767-6276fc9b0ada_story.html (Shortened url: <https://wapo.st/2OLlySX>)
 - In an interview, Yong Soo Lee, a survivor, responds to the name "comfort women" and states, "I never wanted to give comfort to those men," she said with a glare of disgust. 'That name was made up by Japan. I was taken from my home as a child. My right to be happy, to marry, to have a family, it was all taken from me.'"
 - Gendry-Kim also struggles with terminology in her work as she states in the note at the front of the book. Nonetheless, *Grass* does work to reclaim the stories of these women, putting the horror back into the euphemistic title these women were given. How can we learn from this comic to respect their stories and find language that better represents the torture these women experienced? How does the graphic narrative affect our understanding of the language used?
- Josh Smith and Haejin Choi, "South Korea's surviving 'comfort women' spend final years seeking atonement from Japan," Reuters, November 22, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-japan-comfortwomen/south-koreas-surviving-comfort-women-spend-final-years-seeking-atonement-from-japan-idUSKCN1NS024> (Shortened url: <https://reut.rs/3rD0n5f>)
 - In a separate interview, Yong Soo Lee criticizes Shinzo Abe for not recognizing the history of slavery of the women enslaved by the Japanese army She declares, "The survivors of the heinous crimes the Japanese committed are dying day by day, and I bet Abe is dancing for joy," Lee said, becoming animated as she described her frustration. 'They should apologize, tell the truth, and pay the legal compensation.'"
 - What is the role of a contemporary government in recognizing its history, providing reparations and taking responsibility? How does a contemporary government address past crimes?
- Paula Allen, "70 years on, the 'comfort women' speaking out so the truth won't die." *Amnesty International*, September 2, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/09/70-years-on-comfort-women-speak-out-so-the-truth-wont-die/> (Shortened url: <https://bit.ly/30ANCwh>)
 - Paula Allen describes photographing the women enslaved by the Japanese army during the Second World War. She reflects on the experience of the women who shared the pain and suffering they lived through as she states, "I photographed them because they wanted me to. They were presenting evidence, remembering, both their voices and bodies speaking of the truth. There were many who would tear off their clothes while we were interviewing them. They pointed to the areas of their bodies that had been wounded..."
 - Grass* details one such story, not in the form of photography but in the form of the drawn image. How is the comic able to capture the story and share it with people in ways different than photography? What emotional attachments does the reader have to the cartooned version of this story that might not be possible with photography?



Figure 2 Grass, p. 16.

Scholarship & Additional Questions

- Yoo Kyung Sung, "Hearing the Voices of 'Comfort Women': Confronting Historical Trauma in Korean Children's Literature." *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 50, no. 1 (2012): 20-30.
 - Sung discusses other cartooned narratives reclaiming the history of comfort women, all framed in the setting of the present day. She points to the fact that "all the books start in contemporary Korea, which fulfills the necessary condition for a therapeutic voice in that the protagonists recall their traumatic experiences in a safe space. This contemporary setting is also important for the expression of critical voices at the end of the books (26).
 - Gendry-Kim does not tell this story simply as a historical event but includes the frame of the present day conversations with Granny Lee Ok-sun. How does the setting of the drawn interview as a thread affect our reading of the story?
- Lee, Jeewon, Young-Sook Kwak, Yoon-Jung Kim, Eun-Ji Kim, E. Jin Park, Yunmi Shin, Bun-Hee Lee et al. "Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma: Psychiatric Evaluation of Offspring of former 'Comfort Women,' Survivors of the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery During World War II," *Psychiatry investigation* 16, no. 3 (2019): 249-253.
 - "The evidence of transgenerational transmission of trauma, which we found in the participants whose mothers suffered from PTSD, can be summarized as following. First, although the participants had not been traumatized themselves, they showed symptoms of hyper-vigilance including increased irritability and problems with aggression control, resembling their mothers. They also suffered from similar shame and stigma as their mothers regarding stimuli related to the "comfort woman" issue. (252).
 - The study quoted above explores the ways that trauma is passed down from one generation to the next causing emotional problems. While *Grass* does not explicitly address child rearing after trauma, it still explores the issue of unresolved trauma through the fact that Japan has not fully acknowledged the history. How does the comic explore the impact of unresolved trauma on an individual and society?
- Joshua M. Leone, "Drawing Invisible Wounds: War Comics and the Treatment of Trauma," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 39, no. 3 (2018): 243-261.
 - Leone discusses the way that comics explore traumatic experiences in an effort to health. He writes, "The practice of closure (the act of reading through images and inferring connections between them) while reading comics rehearses the same mode of cognition essential for reassembling what trauma has disjointed. Comics have the ability to create a sense of temporal ambiguity on the page through their content but simultaneously create coherence by ordering events and memories on the page. Breakdown and closure creates more comprehensible connections between seemingly unconnected panels across the space of a graphic narrative's pages. This attribute gives the medium an important and unique ability to represent trauma's damage to narrative identity" (245).
 - How does *Grass* utilize the fragmented quality of comics to visualize traumatic memory (Fig. 3)? How might the act of remembering and documenting help in the process of healing individually and culturally?



Figure 3 Grass, p. 187.

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

- Chloe Maval, "REVIEW: Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's GRASS sheds a humbling light on history." *The Beat*, August 27, 2019 (<https://www.comicsbeat.com/keum-suk-gendry-kim-grass-review/>).
- Max Fisher, "Life as a 'comfort woman': Survivors remember a WWII atrocity that was ignored for decades." *Vox*, December 29, 2015. Max Fisher, "Life as a 'comfort woman': Survivors remember a WWII atrocity that was ignored for decades," *Vox*, December 29, 2015 (<https://www.vox.com/2015/12/29/10682830/comfort-women-japan-survivors>).
- Heather Leighton, "Manhwa for the Marginalized." *Montreal Review of Books*, Fall 2019 (<https://mtlreviewofbooks.ca/reviews/grass/>).
- Susan Blumberg-Kason, "'Grass' by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim." *Asian Review of Books*, November 29, 2020 (<https://asianreviewofbooks.com/content/grass-by-keum-suk-gendry-kim/>).
- Tom Lathan, "The Shoots Spring Up Again." *Times Literary Supplement*, April 10, 2020 (<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/grass-keum-suk-gendry-kim-lathan/>).

Further Reading

If you are interested in reading stories about South and Southeast Asian history:

- *Year of the Rabbit* by Tian Veasna (Drawn & Quarterly, 2020)
- *Burmese Moons* by Sophie Ansel and Sam Garcia (IDW Publishing, 2019)
- *A Chinese Life* by Li Kunwu and Phillipe Otie (Abrams, 2012)

If you are interested in other books about young women and political revolution:

- *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon 2007)
- *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui (Abrams ComicArts, 2017)
- *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (Scribner, 2018)

If you are interested in other comics documenting the tragedies of war

- *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (Pantheon, 1996)
- *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks* by Igort (Simon and Schuster, 2016)
- *Footnotes in Gaza* by Joe Sacco (Metropolitan Books, 2010)