

Human Acts Book Review by Jenna JAN 2025

A poignant and award-winning novel, *Human Acts* is a story confronting the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea. Written by South Korean author Han Kang, a writer and poet who recently rose to fame by being the first Asian woman to win the literature Nobel prize, this work balances a brutal yet reflective portrayal of what occurred during the democratization uprising. The narrative centers around a young boy named Dong-ho who was killed by soldiers. It begins in his perspective with a unique use of the second person perspective that works to directly address the reader and bring them into the story immediately. Later, the narrator shifts multiple times in a series of interconnected chapters, and the rippling effects of Dong-ho's death are shown through the various perspectives of those he had known. These different vignettes represent forms of victims from the rebellion. From the ghost of Dong-ho's best friend who had been violently gunned down, to a prisoner recounting his experience in captivity, each viewpoint adds a piece to the jagged reality of the horrifying event.

Each vignette is also told in a manner unique to the others, whether it be through a different point of view (i.e. from I to you) or a style change. I really enjoyed the shifts because they brought a refreshing new perspective to each part of the story, and Kang did an amazing job at connecting the different chapters. I also loved the way she didn't only focus on the details of the riots; rather, she wrote about the mental effects and generational trauma that came from them.

Kang is absolutely unflinching in her realistic and succinct portrayal of the violence the soldiers exacted on civilians and rebels alike, and her uncompromising style of writing was actually what hooked me on the story. She doesn't sugarcoat the dirty, bloody nature of the rebellion and its aftereffects which is exactly what made *Human Acts* such an immersive novel.

While Kang has mainly written novels and short stories, her background as a poet first shows in her work through her contemporary poetic prose style that allows her to weave the delicacy of historical trauma with fragile human life. After I finished the book, its story—and perhaps most importantly, its characters—haunted me for weeks. The novel's deceptively simple cover hides a world strife with conflict and corruption, and it is a world we still live in today.

Human Acts is a heart wrenching masterpiece that illuminates how much hate and evil humankind is capable of while also navigating through the more quiet, introspective moments of

life, creating a juxtaposition of suffering and hope. It tells the story of hundreds of suppressed voices and touches on a piece of history that the world should know about.

To put it simply, I would definitely recommend *Human Acts* to anyone looking for a darkly enthralling historical story. Han Kang is now ranked quite highly in my list of favorite authors, and I look forward to seeing what other powerful works she'll create in the future