

GRANTEE REPORT

Sung Ju Ahn/LAS/Summer-Fall 2014

Last summer, I attended the 2014 Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. This fall, I was grateful to receive an Otis Faculty Development Grant reimbursing me for the monies I paid for Bread Loaf.

For the last six years, I had been working on my first book, a historical novel, "Midwife Shin, which takes place in 1930's and 1940's Korea when it was occupied by Japan. It is a story of one poor, powerless Korean girl, navigating a country going from a patriarchal, feudal society to a modern world, strongly influenced by the West. She becomes a nurse and a midwife, empowered by education and her work. Like the novels of old, it uses an omniscient 3rd person point of view.

Last Spring, I completed my novel but felt it was rough around the edges. This is when I applied to Bread Loaf. Founded by Robert Frost in 1926, Bread Loaf is the oldest and most prestigious writing conference in the world. Following is a video, made by the conference, which encapsulates the Bread Loaf experience and the importance of Bread Loaf to the American literary tradition.

[Telling American Stories :The Bread Loaf Writers' Conference](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4I-DiCGxgoE)

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For me, Bread Loaf was like a Disneyland for writers, a summer camp for adults. For ten days, from 9 am to 9 pm, we attended writing lectures in the morning, writing workshops or craft classes in the afternoon, professional lectures in the evening and readings at night. We ate, we critiqued, we drank cocktails, we roomed together and we breathed LITERATURE day in and day out. I found Andrea Barrett's Craft Class on "POV" and Danzy Senna's on "Turning Memories into Fiction" the most helpful to my writing. I found Natasha Trethewey's reading from her new book and David Shields lecture on "The Future of Publishing" the most thought-provoking.

But the best was the writing workshop. I was lucky enough to have Andrea Barrett as my workshop leader. Her collection *Ship Fever* won the 1996 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction, and she received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2001. Andrea is known for her historical novels with female protagonists who are often science pioneers. We were a group of ten, meeting every other day for 2 1/2 hours each. A month before the conference we had all sent in 25 pages of our manuscript and these were critiqued. Two writers per session.

I was the third writer to be workshopped. I submitted my strongest and one of the most important passages in my book. It was towards the end of the novel and tells the love story between the main character, Shin Min Hwa, and Jun, a Japanese Imperial Army surgeon.

The reaction I got from the group was puzzling and provocative. Many felt it was complete and needed no revisions, while others felt it was "too cinematic." Some people loved the lush romanticism of it and others were outraged when I stated my desire to be a "novelist who is read by millions of readers." The strong and divided reaction to my work was puzzling until I realized what Bread Loaf stands for.

Andrea Barrett is the Grand Doyenne of Bread Loaf. She is a great writer who has never found the kind of commercial success that an Amy Tan or a Jonathan Franzen enjoys. She is on the jury of the National Book Award and has always worked in academia to make a living. She is in many ways on the opposite side of where I am as a writer. Although, I love teaching and will always teach, I want to make my living as a writer. Maybe because we have such different viewpoints but liked each other as people, Andrea and I became close and shared many exciting talks: from an examination of how essential a "world view" is to a novel to the advances one could expect from a particular publishing house. She also taught me a great deal about teaching, mainly the importance of never imposing my opinion or belief on a student, but rather empowering them to have their own. She also confirmed my opinion that an open critique, where ideas are expressed respectfully but freely, is one of the best ways to support artistic and creative growth.

During our meetings, she identified "Midwife Shin" as a "high-concept, commercial-literary, historical novel" and asked if I wanted to be "Amy Tan or Margaret Atwood?" I replied, I wanted to be "Sung Ju Ahn." With the critiques and guidance I have received at Bread Loaf, I am currently polishing my book to a finish.

This semester, I would like to give a reading of "Midwife Shin," not only to the faculty during Academic Assembly, but also to the students. I would like to explore the idea of setting up a reading during lunch. We have many Asian students, especially Koreans, and I would welcome their participation as listeners, readers and commentators. I started as a playwright many years ago and I can still remember how my work could move the audience and how their comments later could provoke me into further rewrites. I experienced how the connection between an artist, the work and the audience could be powerful, mysterious and profoundly transformative for all. For me, this is what I reach for as a writer and if I can, I would love to experience this with the students at Otis.

Thank you to the Otis Faculty Development Grant for paying for Bread Loaf. My experience there taught me so much. It made me a better teacher and a writer, and with a little luck on my side, it may be the beginning of a new career as a novelist!