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Unlike other modern fictional heroes, Captain Lee, the South Korean intelligence officer in Richard Kim's novel, "The Martyred," achieves personal fulfillment only when he sacrifices his passionate principles and joins the "establishment." As part of his military job, he is required to investigate and affirm the heroism of 12 Christian ministers martyred by the Communists, thus providing hope to despairing peasants who must also meet death at Communist hands. While exploring the incident, however, Lee discovers that the 12 "heroes" aren't good and that the "cowards," who saved their own lives by confessing readily to lies and cowardice, are perversely heroic. Lee, at first, angrily denies the sentimental myths surrounding the 12 "good" men, but he eventually bends and "with a wondrous lightness of heart" joins the refugees in singing a song of homage to their homeland and the 12 "invincible" martyrs. Because the novel does not answer clearly whether Lee's decision is praiseworthy or damnable, it can be used successfully in the classroom to investigate ethical complexities and to test hypothetically the students' moral fiber. (JB)

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" . . . a must book for that gestation period in high school when kids need the dry run on all ethical complexities." *(from the covering letter to the manuscript on* The Martyred.*)*

THE MARTYRED

by Robert Geller

RICHARD KIM'S *The Martyred* (Pocketbooks, .75) may, on one quick reading, seem to be very remotely compatible with the marvelous array of contemporary paperbacks that have muscled aside the prestigious anachronisms of yesteryear.

Its protagonist, Captain Lee, is a South Korean intelligence officer. He has none of the rebellious adolescent spirit or the wry fish-and-chips philosophy of so many contemporary fictional heroes who have made it big with teenage readers. Actually, Captain Lee can only reach maturity and achieve personal fulfillment when he is able to sacrifice his passionate principles, cop out on his precious truth, and join the "establishment" in giving credence to one great big whopper of a lie.

In brief, Lee is no Holden Caufield, no Mersault, no Colin Smith, no Phinny, no Gingerman. But his idealism, his objectivity and his painful compromises make him one of the most sympathetic and believable literary figures my students encountered all year.

Lee, a young college professor, comes reluctantly to fight in the Korean War. He is fed up with suffering, with blatant propagandizing and with the devious semantics of opposing political ideologies that are paradoxically alike. He wants out of all the chicaneries; he becomes increasingly detached from his people, his job and himself.

His military job is to play detective and solve a mystery (one for which a resolution has already been tailor-made by his superiors). The mystery Lee tackles makes the plotting of *The Martyred* as slick and as tantalizingly tortuous as any first-rate whodunnit.

Twelve Christian Korean ministers have been executed by a Communist firing squad; two ministers were spared. Lee's job is to determine why the twelve were killed and to detail the glorious manner of their death. But in his investigations he is above all to affirm their heroism and martyrdom (no matter what else interferes) so that the despairing South Korean peasants, soon to be abandoned to the invading Communist armies, can meet their own death with dignity and with unquenchable faith.

The two surviving ministers are a Reverend Hahn and a Reverend Shin. Hahn has lost his sanity. Shin is critically ill, burdened with great woe and insistent on constantly relating both how his cowardice saved his life and how the beautiful heroism of the ministers earned them their death.

Too detailed a plot review here would spoil the marvelous hold that the novel has for prospective readers. Note, though, that its texture is of the intriguing pattern of the classic Rashomon theme: What and where is truth? Its 228 pages are briskly paced, interwoven via short chapters and told in a style reminiscent of the ancient parable—one that promises easy readability.

In my own classes, *The Martyred* was read in four days, without burdening even the most reluctant readers. It held no hidden meanings, presented no comprehension difficulties. The solving of a mystery motivated most students to read all of it in one or two sittings.

These days such relative success with printed material should be enticement enough to try *The Martyred*. But above and beyond its readability and its suspenseful intrigue, *The Martyred* has an even more valid claim for widespread classroom use: Captain Lee's idealism brings him—as a fictional hero—very close to the young adult nerve center. His cool detachment from meaningless

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sentiment and slogans, his angry denial of platitudes and "credibility gaps" give him contemporary stature, and, like the new breed of movie protagonists who have won the hearts of young people (from *Hud, Nothing But a Man, Requiem for a Heavyweight, On the Waterfront*), his initial unwillingness to bend or to break earns him admiration.

But Lee does indeed bend. Some way-out things happen to him in the novel. The good guys really aren't, and the bad guys—who spread lies and confess to cowardice and invite derision—are perversely heroic in both their self-denials and in their attempt to mitigate the awful pain of truth, the bludgeoning torment of the inevitable that all men face.

At the end of the novel, Lee sits on a rock, perhaps a modern-day St. Peter, and hears the jubilant chant of the surviving refugees, those who were lucky enough to escape from torture and executions. They sing praises to a God who is merciful, and pray ardently to a wondrous lie (their 12 invincible martyrs) that sustains them in their grief and bereavement.

Captain Lee sits alone; he too is desolate. His loved ones are gone. The war goes badly. His absolute truth is of small comfort now and he whispers:

> I walked away from the church, past the rows of tents where silent suffering gnawed at the hearts of people—my people—and headed toward the beach, which faced the open sea. There, a group of refugees, gathered under the starry dome of the night sky, were humming in unison a song of homage to their homeland. And with a wondrous lightness of heart, hitherto unknown to me, I joined them.

So, we conclude then that *The Martyred* is best used as a subtle evangelical text for promoting faith, for promoting compromise? Let the heavens forbid such heresy.

Its power lies in its ambiguities, its unwillingness to give any answer. It asks: Is truth to be achieved despite pain and suffering? Is not the beginning of faith a love of mankind, one which often demands sacrifice of truth and an obeisance to the sanctity of a mollifying lie?

I ended a study of *The Martyred* with this hopefully provocative essay question: "Lee's (or Shin's) lie is either heroic and praiseworthy or damnable and dangerous."

Out of 62 senior stuuents, 45 answers endorsed the heoic element, 12 bemoaned the sellout, and 5 were too confused to defend either statement.

Let me conclude this article with some sample student paragraphs and with the final plea that *The Martyred* not be used to flagellate the unflinching idealists in classrooms (precious commodities these days) but rather as a means of investigating ethical complexities and as a way to test hypothetically the moral fibre of our students, and just as important—our own.

> Lee's act, despite its dangerous implication, is beautiful. The final act of pretending to believe because he realizes the need of others for hope, is so courageous. He forsakes the one thing he has—truth—because he is aware of the suffering of his people, even if his God isn't.

> Shin's act is, despite its selflessness, damnable and dangerous because he had no faith in his people. Who is to guard truth, who is to invent lies in the name of the common people? The truth was that most of the ministers copped out, but two didn't. Why not praise the two? Is Shin a God? Does he have the right to play with truth? Then why not Stalin, Hitler, Mao—for the good of the people?

> Lying is an ugly and immoral thing which should be avoided at all costs. However, there are times when a beautiful lie is needed. Shin's lie was one of "these times." His act is heroic. He accepted torment in order to "create" a God for suffering men. He gave them hope . . . a reason to live. Because he lived a lie, he should be considered a despicable character by all moral standards. But moral standards, as we all know nowadays, are very, very flexible and Shin's act was justifiable—by my standards anyway.

> Lee's last acts are dangerous and damnable, despite their self-effacing quality. I will admit, however, that he eased the pain of reality. But is this a just pursuit? Should life's aim be ease, escape? Then why all the fuss about pot and LSD? If our aim is protection from misery and despair, should not *Brave New World* be the logical happening? I prefer not to live in a world of fantasy. I'd rather wrestle with truth than embrace illusions.