



**Wills, Jenny Heijun. (2019). Older Sister: Not Necessarily Related.  
Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.**

Reviewed by: Ana Isabella Salaveria, MacEwan University

Jenny Heijun Wills' memoir "Older Sister: Not Necessarily Related" is a heartbreaking retelling that describes the realities of Wills' experience as a South Korean adoptee. Using a mix of epistolary and first-person writing, she shares her life story as an adoptee raised in Canada to white parents who are not knowledgeable about Korean culture. Due to this, she could not participate in Korean culture and always felt like an outcast by her Canadian classmates. When she finally decided to return to Korea to meet her family and learn more about her culture, she felt like an outsider because, despite being Korean, she did not seamlessly fit into society. The underlying theme of this memoir is the emotional and physical stress that an adoptee experiences. She heavily discusses this through her retellings of cultural disconnect and family reunification. From the use of a third party to communicate with her family to the feeling of being unwanted by her biological mother, her story is an eye-opener to the struggles of these processes.

Cultural disconnect is heavily discussed throughout the memoir. In the first page alone, Wills expresses how quickly she was taken from her mother as an infant (p. 3). She described how not only was she taken from her mother, but her Korean name—Heijun—was also taken away from her and she was given an English name (p. 3). Furthermore, her English name, she states, is one

## Salaveria

that she feels does not fit her, but others are accustomed to it, so she uses it (p. 3). Wills later explains how her upbringing made it seem like she was made to be assimilated into Canadian society. She states that even her biological mother would not recognize her (p. 3) because she was raised under Western values and traditions, and her Korean culture was erased. Wills' use of the words "programmed," "disappeared," and "buried" (p. 3) emphasizes this assimilation into Canadian society and the continuing loss of Korean identity.

When she decided to go back to Korea to meet her biological mother, the cultural disconnect was still present because she was not exposed to Korean culture. However, she stated she was "reborn" in Seoul (p. 4) and that she came "back to life" (p. 4) when she was given metal chopsticks and a wooden spoon. Compared to her word choice when describing being immersed in Canadian culture, her attempt to reconnect with Korean culture gave her a sense of purpose and belonging. However, her story still expresses how she is disconnected from Korean culture, just like she is from being Canadian. She says she tried to fit in by "mimicking" (p. 4), which shows that she still has to try hard to be Korean despite being ethnically Korean.

Despite trying to fit in, she faced discrimination from local Koreans as they could tell she was different. They knew she was not raised in Korea. Wills said, "I wonder if I kept my hair light throughout the homecoming to mark myself as an outsider" (p. 33). She stood out in shops because she could not speak Korean and her mannerisms were not the same as the locals. These experiences sum up what Wills said in the memoir, which states her feelings about how she could only watch from afar (p. 32). In conclusion, Wills experiences a cultural disconnect in both Canadian society and Korean culture. Despite growing up with Western influences, not looking "Canadian" ostra-

cized her, and not being able to speak Korean and have mannerisms that coincided with local Koreans made her stand out.

On this notion of disconnect, it is important to observe how the combination of epistolary writing and first-person serves to develop this theme of disconnect throughout the memoir. Like Wills' story of being disconnected from Korean culture and her biological family, the fragments in which her story is written and the letters to her older sister can also be seen as disconnected. This stylistic choice resembles her experiences and emphasizes the emotions she went through.

Not only did Wills experience cultural disconnection, but she also described the complexities of reuniting with her biological family. Early on in the memoir, she states how her birth was the result of an affair between her mother and father (p. 6). She also says, "How gorgeous it all is until one draws back the locks of flowers and flowers and finds the poisonous seeds at its core" (p. 6), symbolizing her learning about her family's past. Furthermore, she later found out that her grandfather on her father's side was the reason why she was put up for adoption in the first place (p. 3). Despite feeling like she was unwanted because she was put up for adoption, her mother expressing to her, through translators, that she did want to keep her changed her perspective (p. 56). However, because of the cultural disconnect, Wills stated that her mother could never find the Korean daughter she wanted within Wills (p. 46). Furthermore, when she learned about her father, she discovered that he wanted forgiveness and a daughter who "would worship him" (p. 69). As a result, she fed into her father's dream and tried acting like the daughter he wanted, despite not wanting to do it.

Another aspect of reunification that made it difficult for Wills was the need for a third party

## Salaveria

to converse with her family. When Wills wanted to contact her family, the agency would not easily give away her mother's contact information and forced Wills to write letters to her that would be translated by the agency (p. 10). She also described how she and her mother needed to communicate using a third party because neither was proficient in the other's language (p. 54). Moreover, when she was talking to her father about how she was angry at her father for his actions during her birth, the social worker refused to translate (p. 67). In conclusion, this shows how difficult it is for family reunification to take place. Not only does one see the realities of their biological parents, but it is also difficult for them to communicate with each other because they do not speak the same language.

Not only did she face difficulties with learning about her culture and reuniting with her family, her experiences in the guest house left her traumatized. As Wills stated in the memoir, she stayed in a guest house for adoptees during her first visit to Seoul. In a letter to her older sister, she described how she was taken advantage of in the guest house by other men residing there (p. 57). Wills realized that some people's frustration and anger with their situations make people do unspeakable things to each other (p. 63). Not only does this show the effects of being an adoptee and feeling the disconnect from the society one was supposed to embody, but it also shows how women are treated and the gender-based violence women face.

Furthermore, in her writing, she also expresses how she struggled with eating disorders. She states that something was missing no matter where she was (p. 78). Hunger helped her cope because hunger held her together (p. 78). This shows that her experiences of being an adoptee and not knowing where she fit affected not only her mental health but her physical health as well.

The memoir “Older Sister: Not Necessarily Related” by Jenny Heijun Wills shows the harsh reality of being an adoptee from a foreign country. Her experiences show the difficulties of being disconnected from Canadian culture despite being assimilated into it and the disconnect from Korean culture. Despite being Korean, she did not fit into society because her mannerisms were unlike those of the locals, and she did not know the language. Furthermore, it also shows the realities of reuniting with family, her experiences of using third parties to communicate, the difficulties that come with it, and how her experiences affected her spiritually and emotionally.

Though I believe it is beautifully written and can be used by multiple disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and social work, I wonder how others can use this text to examine the realities of international adoption. I recommend this memoir to those learning about complex families and other cultures.