
Book Review: *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*

Michelle Zauner. *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021. 246 pp.

Tears, love, spices, and Korean groceries. *Crying in H Mart* might be the ideal child of critical food studies, Asian American affect theory, and critical mixed race studies that many have been looking for. While Michelle Zauner may be best known as the front-woman of the indie rock band Japanese Breakfast and, before that, the vocalist of Little Big League, she is in fact a creative writing major. Having won *Glamour* magazine's 2016 essay contest, Zauner made her debut as a writer with the contest-winning essay "Real Life: Love, Loss, and Kimchi." The essay, similar to Zauner's 2018 *New Yorker* essay "Crying in H Mart," is an epitome of the memoir. *Crying in H Mart* effortlessly weaves together stories of being half-Korean, caring for a dying parent, and holding onto a fleeting tether to one's culture through food.

Zauner found herself having an identity crisis, sobbing near the dry goods area of H Mart, asking herself, "Am I even Korean anymore if there's no one left in my life to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy" (4). After losing her mother, Chongmi, to pancreatic cancer in 2014, food became something more for Zauner. Learning Korean dishes and relentlessly trying to recreate her mom's taste was a way for Zauner to remember Chongmi and to become herself as a biracial Asian American. If you have ever been to H Mart, the Korean American supermarket chain that carries all kinds of Asian snacks and groceries, you may be disoriented by its variety. But if you are looking for a crash course on Korean cuisine with this memoir, you will be disappointed. Although you may find specific Korean dishes and specific brands of instant noodles, Zauner never uses a footnote to explain what they are to a lay audience. Casually inserting Korean vocabulary throughout the book is a gentle yet unflinching claim of her Korean heritage, just like how she wears her mother's hanbok while navigating Philadelphia's night life in the music video of "Everybody Wants to Love You" (2016).

What do you expect when you read the memoir of a professional musician? Certainly not the wriggling tentacles freshly chopped off of long-arm octopuses in order to win one's mother's approval, I hope. Regardless, one may find many familiar stories expected of an indie rock musician, such as arguing over bands on the internet, saving up pocket money to buy records, fantasizing about dying and the starving-artist life style, skipping classes, and making sure you know the coolest independent record labels. When Zauner

reveals how it felt to hear her parents say discouraging things to her like “I’m just waiting for you to give this up” and “You should be thinking about the colleges, not doing this weird thing,” she is presenting scenarios that may sound too awfully familiar to aspiring musicians who, like Zauner, did not grow up in a musical household (61). Meanwhile, Zauner recounts how music was the only comfort as she went through depression in high school, her first crowd surfing at Eugene’s McDonald Theatre, learning guitar, playing open-mic nights, and how these things eventually deepened the fissure between Zauner and her mother, in part leading to Chongmi’s hesitation to have Zauner back in Eugene when she was diagnosed with cancer.

While the memoir opens with a grieving daughter, the 20 essays are not arranged in any particular order, just like looking at Zauner’s unsorted family photographs and walking through a friend’s episodic memories. One will glimpse into her head and understand how Chongmi’s perfectionism and fastidiousness had shaped her in every way from day one. Zauner recalls many stories from her summer trips to Seoul, Chongmi’s native city, where her parents met and where the family lived until Zauner was nine months old. She picked up a brave appetite to impress her mother and dreamt of a life as a Korean idol because of her natural double eyelid and “exotic” look. Zauner details caring for Chongmi in her last days as she lost her appetite, kept wetting the bed, and became incapacitated. As Zauner describes it, the experience of “waiting for her to die. The last days excruciatingly drawn out,” left her unable to hide from herself (150). Zauner married fellow musician Peter Bradley two weeks before Chongmi passed away so she could be there. At the end of the memoir, Zauner recounts recording Japanese Breakfast’s first album *Psychopomp* (2016), finding her mother’s kimchi fridge in Bradley’s parents’ house, and seeing the traces of Chongmi’s presence in their old house fade away.

Like for many artists, losing a loved one is a powerful source of creativity for Zauner. *Crying in H Mart* shares the theme of grieving and reconnecting with Korean identity of Japanese Breakfast’s first two albums, *Psychopomp* (2016) and *Soft Sounds From Another Planet* (2017). For example, “In Heaven” is Zauner convincing her atheist self that Chongmi could be in a place like heaven after death, and “Diving Woman” honors the lifestyle and endurance of South Korean female divers. The titular track, “Psychopomp,” samples a voice recording of Chongmi comforting Zauner over the phone, saying it’s okay in Korean, “*Gwaenchanh-a, gwaenchanh-a. It’s okay, sweetheart.*” Zauner recounts similar events in the memoir and saying the same thing back to her mother as she gasped in pain in the hospital bed.

Although food and the mother-daughter relationship are the backbone of this memoir, popular music scholars might be particularly interested in Zauner’s bare and honest recollections of finding a place in the indie rock music world as a biracial Korean American woman growing up in the Pacific Northwest. In particular, Zauner describes her encounter with her rock ‘n’ roll muse, Karen O, the frontwoman of critically acclaimed rock band Yeah Yeah Yeahs. This aspect of Zauner’s storytelling puts *H Mart* in conversation with several recent music memoirs, including Go-Go’s bassist Kathy Valentine discussing her admiration of Suzi Quatro in *All I Ever Wanted: A Rock ‘n’ Roll Memoir* (2020) and Slits guitarist Viv Albertine reflecting on being blown away by Patti

Smith in *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys: A Memoir* (2014). Both women are also part of a lineage of great Asian women rock musicians, some of whom are of mixed race, including Fanny's June Millington and Jean Millington, The Alley Cats' Diane Chai, Blonde Redhead's Kazu Makino, and Tribe 8's Leslie Mah. It is Karen O, however, who is also half Korean and half white, who made Zauner feel like she belonged in music through her demolition of many Asian stereotypes with her unruly showmanship. Yet Zauner's wonder was originally tamped down by a fear that "if there's already one Asian girl doing this, then there's no longer space for me" (55). As an adult, Zauner recognizes this scarcity mentality's tacit racism, which never seemed to affect white guys who were trying to be the next Iggy Pop.

For casual readers of musician memoirs, *Crying in H Mart* may come off as lacking juicy "gossip" of the underground. Although different from the typical vulgarity of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, one may expect similar, if not cruder, details of slow death, delicacies, and kinship. Blended with the richness and truthfulness of Zauner's writing, this memoir is as mouthwatering as it is bittersweet to read. It touches your stomach and your heart at the same time.

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