



Free Food for Millionaires

Min Jin Lee

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FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST PACHINKO

New York Times Book Review Editor's Choice **NPR Fresh Air** Top Ten Books of the Year **USA Today**

Top Ten Books of the Year **The Times (London)** Top Ten Books of the Year

In her critically acclaimed debut, National Book Award finalist Min Jin Lee introduces the indelible Casey Han: a strong-willed, Queens-bred daughter of Korean immigrants who is addicted to a glamorous Manhattan lifestyle she cannot afford. Fresh out of Princeton with an economics degree, no job, and a popular white boyfriend, Casey is determined to carve a space for herself in the glittering world she craves—but at what cost?

Lee's bestselling, sharp-eyed, sweeping epic of love, greed, and hunger—set in a landscape where millionaires scramble for the free lunches the poor are too proud to accept—is an addictively readable, startlingly sympathetic portrait of intergenerational strife and immigrant struggle, exposing the intricate layers of a community clinging to its old ways in a city packed with haves and have-nots.

Free Food for Millionaires Details

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From Reader Review Free Food for Millionaires for online ebook

Catherine says

Most of my reading is contemporary lit fiction. Keeping that in mind, I disagree with allegations that this is chicklit or poorly written (which wasn't the view of the NYT Book Review either, btw). For me, this novel was thoroughly engaging--hard to put down, full of charm and wit, and rich with interesting interludes into characters' backgrounds. Yes, the way that it goes into those characters' backgrounds is modeled on 19th century novels, but I didn't find that dull -- for me, the book has enough contemporary flow and style that I continued to be interested (which is good, considering that I hardly ever read 19th century novels these days).

True, the first time I realized that we were going to hear the thoughts of each character, I was a little taken aback--but I got used to this.

In general, I loved the book, as I said. My only criticism would be that sometimes the pronoun usage was confusing -- occasionally when two characters were being mentioned in the same sentence, the pronoun usage was unclear.

To refer to this as chick-lit is not to get it, I think. I look forward to Lee's next book.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/01/boo...>

Lisa Fluet says

finished this book--and, I think I finished it just so I could be really thorough in any descriptions of why I disliked it so much. Min Lee is writing in one of my favorite genres--something like the upward mobility/bildungsroman for the scholarship student, but that's about all that I find to recommend this book.

If I had to sum up quickly--this book takes itself REALLY seriously, and is INTENSELY UNHUMOROUS. Not that she has to be funny, necessarily, but this is also a book that meditates upon the problem of debt (student loan, credit card, etc.) among college-educated 20-30 somethings. Since I know debt intimately, I think you have to approach it with at least SOMETHING LIKE a sense of humor. I mean, as anyone with rolling credit card debt knows, there is something pathetically funny about continuing to pay for food and clothes that you bought, consumed, and most likely gave away, years ago. But everything debt-related that happens to this protagonist is a surprising, horrible shock to her--she, like the novel, has NO sense of humor; she's smart, and therefore automatically assumes that life post-college should come much more easily. When it doesn't, she's surprised, over and over again--and one would think that she'd get the hang of things sooner, lose the smart-girl sense of entitlement (we all have to lose it at some point) and recognize, as everyone who went to college in the '90s knows, that GPA is not directly proportional to post-college income.

Also, this book has what I will call a really moronic "porn ex machina"--if you get to the last few pages, you have that in store for you.

Natalie says

Update 7/15: I'm not reading any further. I just can't stand the way Lee writes. It's like Edith Wharton's clumsy cousin wrote a book, and then piped it through a Babelfish translator into chicklit cliches circa 2001. With a small dash of Korean culture for seasoning. An unsympathetic protagonist is a challenge for any novelist, but especially for one who writes so horribly. Sure, Lee has won a number of prizes and the book's been well reviewed in a number of places, but I just couldn't read it.

7/7/07 Only about 10 pages into a largeish novel. The topic -- Korean-American inter-generational conflicts-- seems promising but the main character is kind of annoying -- and her traits (like always dressing according to fashion magazine advice) seem a bit too much in shorthand. But I'll give it another couple of evenings.

Valerie says

Completely absorbing--I was eager to return to these characters each night as my treat after a long day. Loved the omniscient point of view; it's rare in the fiction I read that I can get inside the mind of each character, and so unlike my normal life where I only get to know what I'm thinking. The author moves so deftly between characters too, even within the same paragraph. I've read clunkier versions where each chapter heading is a new character and their voice alone, but Lee seamlessly shifts between one character's thoughts and another in the same scene. In one passage the main character, Casey, checks into a hotel. And for one brief moment you shift to what the desk clerk is thinking when he checks her in, and then back to Casey. It's a marvel when this is done well. And then the actual story is good too--a contemporary tale of a young Korean woman finding her way in Manhattan. Lots of good themes explored here--the immigrant experience in America, how class affects your choices, what you make of your talents in this life.

Siria says

I picked this up because it got a glowing review in the *NYT*, and because the blurb made it sound like the exact kind of thing I would be interested in: the daughter of poor Korean immigrants, who made it to Princeton and now hopes for a career as an investment banker; the immigrant experience, the intersection of social classes and ethnic groups. Those elements were there, but where I was expecting an in-depth exploration of them, what I got was a melodramatic soap opera—and a poorly written one at that.

Warning bells were going off from the very first chapter of the book, where Casey confronts her father and leaves her family's home: it's wildly melodramatic, especially without the set-up to support the drama of the scene; the dialogue is weak; POV switches wildly between very short paragraphs; exposition of the entire lives of all four characters is dumped on us within the opening pages; it's emotionally shallow; and it doesn't live up to its promise, because what I thought would be a major thread in the book (tension between father and daughter) fades quite rapidly. The problems of that first chapter are the failings of the whole book in microcosm.

Lee tries to do interesting things: to show Korean American urban life, the struggles of an agnostic with atheism, what it's like to work on Wall Street, the difficulties of keeping a relationship alive—but her attempts to examine all these things are so half-hearted and lacklustre that they are often dropped within a couple of lines. The book likewise falters to a strange and unsatisfying halt after about seven hundred pages;

I blinked at the conclusion and was left with only a bewildered question as to who exactly had edited this mess.

Bishop says

I had been waiting for a long time to read the book. It was a page turner, peopled by overachieving *kalbi* eaters (my kind of people), full of sex, and ultimately... not all that. Actually it was kind of weak. Maybe it's me, but major plotlines involving getting internships while in business school (oh, sorry, *B school*) are not the stuff of dreams. And how many love triangles/illicit love affairs/star-crossed romances can a 550+ page book support? Apparently less than seven? The characters were introduced so clumsily that you knew from the first moment that they'd end up as somebody's paramour, or that they'd have an affair, or that they'd end up happy and in love, true love!

That being said, I did stay up late on more than one occasion reading this reverse-engineered telenovela.

Jody Julian says

2012..the year I gave out so many five star ratings, I'm shocking even myself.

This book has been called by one reviewer the 'post-feminist' version of 'Bonfire of the Vanities'. Others have panned it because the characters are unlikeable to them. My own experience is I didn't want the book to end. I'm still thinking about Casey, Leah, Unu, Ella and the other fully formed characters--even minor ones--that seemed to step off the page. Not only is this a novel of the Korean-American experience and Wall Street culture (both of which I was completely unfamiliar with), it's also an incredibly articulate and meticulous character study of the basic human themes of love, betrayal, integrity, failure, success and the quest for happiness. The characters are imperfect which makes them life-like and sometimes truly are unlikeable, yet the author, Min Jin Lee, has the gift of helping us understand the reasons they take the wrong path or hurt someone or hell, even wrack up credit cards as they struggle to find their identity.

I love character study based novels, the kind that seem to do an autopsy on the human condition. This novel did just that and more. I feel like I had a relationship with the book. Sometimes it pissed me off and other times it had me nearly crying but it made me feel. And that's why I read. Intelligent, wise and beautifully written.

Thomas says

3.5 stars

While not as iconic as her sophomore novel *Pachinko*, Min Jin Lee's literary debut *Free Food for Millionaires* still stands as an important and entertaining read with a wide cast of characters. As a couple other reviews on Goodreads noted, you might have to be Asian - and more specifically, a child of immigrants - to fully appreciate the themes and events Lee portrays in this novel. Through her characters, she portrays complex Asian American family dynamics as well as the fight for upward mobility imposed on and embarked upon by so many immigrants in the United States. Indeed, one of the most admirable themes in *Free Food for Millionaires* was money, capitalism, and the extent to which characters cut down others and/or parts of themselves for monetary wealth.

Similar to her work *Pachinko*, Lee also provides insightful commentary on issues of gender, showing the suffering and resilience of Asian American women in particular. She does not hesitate to highlight the racism of white men and the misogyny of men in general, which I appreciate. I leaned toward giving this book three stars because its middle dragged with some narratives I found unnecessary or too long, but a couple of brilliant scenes related to gender and fighting sexism toward the end of the novel pulled it up to four. And while the characters in *Free Food for Millionaires* did not blow me away, I found Casey's characterization consistent, nuanced, and well-written, so fitting for such a protagonist who is so distinctly her own.

Overall, recommended if the blurb intrigues you and you do not mind a long book. We need more Asian American writers like Min Jin Lee so I am very excited for what she will release next.

Kate Olson says

I LOVED this book! After reading and loving *PACHINKO* last spring, I knew I would need to come back to read this one and I am so so so happy that I did. Casey is such a flawed character, but she's flawed in so many of the same ways that I am.....and this made me love her so so so much. She may just be my new favorite book character, with her stubbornness and unwillingness to do what is expected of her. I love the way this book addresses immigration and class and wealth, too. The gambling addiction of a secondary character also really hit home for me, as people near to me have suffered greatly from this.

Highly highly recommended. Also, VERY different from *Pachinko*!

Beth says

For starters, here is Amazon's review:

"Casey Han's four years at Princeton gave her many things, 'But no job and a number of bad habits.' Casey's parents, who live in Queens, are Korean immigrants working in a dry cleaner, desperately trying to hold on to their culture and their identity. Their daughter, on the other hand, has entered into rarified American society via scholarships. But after graduation, Casey sees the reality of having expensive habits without the means to sustain them. As she navigates Manhattan, we see her life and the lives around her, culminating in a portrait of New York City and its world of haves and have-nots. *FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES* offers up a fresh exploration of the complex layers we inhabit both in society and within ourselves. Inspired by 19th century novels such as *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch*, Min Jin Lee examines maintaining one's identity within changing communities in what is her remarkably assured debut."

I take issue with Amazon's description of Casey's parents as "desperately trying to hold on to their culture and their identity." Perhaps this is what Lee wanted to represent, but she does not develop those two characters well enough to make this clear.

Character development is Lee's downfall in this novel. Her main character, Casey Han, apparently learns nothing in the course of the novel; instead, she skitters through life, making rash decisions. While not wealthy herself, Casey knows a lot of wealthy people so she never really faces consequences of her choices; someone wealthy always steps in and saves her. It gets tedious.

Lee also has a bit of a problem with point of view. She jumps from one character's voice to another--and occasionally she does this in the same paragraph--with no clear reason for doing so. Worse yet, the voices are not entirely distinct from one another, so sometimes you don't realize you've shifted until something doesn't make sense and you have to go back to find where the shift was.

The pacing of the book is rough as well. Lee goes from jumping months ahead to crawling through a single day. Not much keeps the reader glued to the narrative; you could easily put it down for months at a time.

Despite all this, it isn't a terrible read, just a mediocre one. I think she's got talent but needs to develop that talent and get herself a good editor. **FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES** does give one an interesting exploration of a part of American culture that I, for one, have never been a part of. The privileged characters in the book have worked their butts off to become privileged; most are immigrants and beat the odds. Casey could have been a fascinating character, but she isn't. What she is, though, is a vehicle through which the reader gets to see the world of New York high finance.

Clif Hostetler says

This is an epic length novel that's not an epic. It's a portrayal of life within the ambitious and high achieving Korean-American community in New York City during the 1990s. The book also aspires to be a romance novel of the 19th century style but with modern mores (i.e. lots of sex and not so much marriage).

As one would expect the conflict between traditional Korean and urban American culture is examined. Another theme are differences between those who are wealthy and those who wish they were wealthy. We soon learn that these same differences between rich and poor are also very real within the Korean-American community. And in the traditional Korean culture we also learn that being from the wrong place in Korea can make a difference.

However, the most visible theme of the book is the variety of male-female relationships with the book providing examples of just about every possible variation between good/happy to bad/sad. The book makes an obvious hint to be compared with the plot of *Middlemarch*. The story notes that our protagonist has read it multiple times. For readers who found that the 19th century *Middlemarch* didn't include sufficient explicit sex will find that this book makes up for it with a double dose.

There is also a reference to *Jane Eyre* but the parallel to that novel's plot is less obvious. I think the author was trying to say that this book is being written in the tradition of famous 19th century romance novels which probably explains its length.

The title of the book comes from an observation about ambitious investment bank brokers. The wealthiest were the ones most likely to elbow their way to the front of the line when the doors were opened to a free food smorgasbord. In other words, they had no qualms about accepting free gifts. Meanwhile, those of limited means were reluctant—or too proud—to accept the smallest gift because it might indicate an obligation or dependence on others.

The author's writing certainly shows an understanding of what it is like to be a member of a supportive faith community. In this case it is a Korean-American Presbyterian Church that at an official level are united by a common faith. But at a more practical level they are united by a common ethnic culture and real human friendships. This is a community that will come and visit when a member is sick. If the member is in the

hospital they will visit their room and sing some hymns, causing people down the hall to turn and take notice.

It seems that every character in this novel manifested behavior at some point that I found either unwise or unacceptable. But the story made them real and very human. The skilled writing of the narrative kept me interested even though I couldn't identify closely with the characters.

The following is from the PageADay Booklover's Calendar, July 2012:

WORD-OF-MOUTH HIT

Casey Han is a Korean American ivy league graduate torn between the worlds of her immigrant upbringing and her spoiled college friends—the latter a swirl of expensive clothes, adulterous affairs, a sharp divide between rich and poor, and in the investment firm where she works, the free food of the book's title. Casey's struggle to find her place in the world goes a long way to explaining why she travels everywhere with *Middlemarch*. Lots to talk about here. No wonder *Free Food for Millionaires* is a book-club darling.

FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES, by Min Jin Lee (Grand Central, 2008)

Elaine says

At a whopping 600-plus pages, the "poverty" theme felt like constant hammerblows, which was just tiresome (for a contrast as to how "poverty" can be rendered thematically in narrative that will touch you to the bone, check out Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*).

Casey the protagonist, as complex as she is, seems to veer between two extremes: being unhappy and whiny about not having any money and being unhappy and whiny when she's being offered help with money. She's unhappy and whiny even when she's enjoying the finer things in life (e.g. at her last farewell dinner with her colleagues from the i-bank, she's presented with a set of fabulous golf clubs, and she complains and bitches about that). At times, one felt like giving her a good hard shake: you have a Princeton degree, a law school offer to Columbia, a job at one of the most prestigious bulge-bracket investment bank, and if she had been able to keep at it, an NYU Stern business school degree. It's more than what 95% of "poor people" in America have. Add to that a wardrobe full of designer clothes, hats galore, and poor as she is, she's given presents like Rolex watches and Hermes scarves. Really, why is she bitching all the time?

That's not the only annoying thing. The mother feels like a stereotypical, cartoonish Korean submissive-demure first generation Asian -- to the point that although she'd lived in America for the better part of her adult years, she was unable to fight off her choir director's sexual assault, and later, unable to recognize it as "date-rape" and even worse, did not realize she was pregnant. Is this woman for real? On which cloud-lala does she live? There's a limit to which the non-awakened "Asian submissiveness" can be pushed to.

The other characters in this book are no less stereotypical: cookie cutter types that fail to break through their molds and worse, they fail to enliven the set pieces and situations into which the writer has thrown them. Ted, for example, is your stereotypical asshole Korean machismo -- a lying, traitorous investment banker, ambitious and voracious and crass. Ella, his wife, again the demure, submissive type, religious to a fault, the perfect angel through to the end.

In Casey's love-interest -- Unu -- lies the sole glimmer of redemption for this story and yet, although a dark

horse with his gambling obsession, he comes across as bland and uninteresting, ultimately. He is an anti-hero, he rescues Casey from her poverty, but fails to rescue himself.

The plot also skips choice-scenes that might have hurtled this story over and above the cross-cultural confrontations that cloud its pages: e.g. the reconciliation scene with the father at the hospital could have been more drawn out; the choice of "no" dialogue" seems strange for the mouthy Casey while too much space in that same sequence was devoted towards a bland, uninformative conversation between Tina (Casey's sister) and the father. Again, the scene when Casey goes on her first date with Unu could have been developed and shown -- it might have given us a clue as to the future dynamic of this couple. I'd have liked that intervening scene when Casey takes back her cheating boyfriend. She leaves him with her stuff in garbage bags and next thing we know, they're living together and engaged to be married. This story is rife with ripe plotpoint potentials like these that remain unexplored and unmined.

It's de rigueur nowadays in "high-brow" literature to end with the door closed-window open effect, and here, the door-closing, I suppose, is Casey's decision to drop B-school, turn down the Kearn Davis investment banker offer, and make hats for a living. The unresolved "window-open" effect is whether she and Unu will get back together. And yet, I find myself completely unsatisfied at the end of this labor of narrative -- forcing myself to finish by sheer will and time-investment. What about the father-daughter relationship? What about the mother? How will she face the rest of her life?

Lastly, the prose is flat and monotonous to the point of driving me stir-crazy. Every sentence in a progression of paragraphs would begin "Sabine did this", "Casey did this", "Unu did this", "Tina did this".

After reading two pages of praise for this book from America's finest reviewers, I'm left wondering: are the standards for writing good literature different for minorities? Am I supposed to laud the writer's effort here because she's a "sister"? By selling a minority writer short, are we not ultimately selling ourselves short?

Jennifer says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book.

Unlike the majority of the reviewers, I liked Casey Han. I found her pursuit of higher education, materialism, desire for religion, lust, need for independence, mass credit card debt, love of fashion, and the way she constantly seemed to disappoint her family quite realistic. Despite the fact that Casey is willing to walk away from her family, her cheating American boyfriend, her Korean boyfriend, and refuses help offered by her long-time family friend all in the name of independence, she never quite manages to make it on her own. She falls back on her new best friend, men, and Sabine all throughout the story. In the end, despite \$23,000 in credit card debt and an even larger student loan, she ends up with literally nothing thanks to her gambling, evicted ex-boyfriend. This book also gives an outsider a glimpse inside homes and relationships of Korean-Americans. This is the first Korean-American book I have read and now I would like to read more. I also hope to have the chance to read more from Ms. Lee in the future.

Cathy says

if i'd actually paid attention when i was applying to college, this might be an accurate reflection of my life. and if i was korean. and if i was religious. and if i liked making hats.

"free food" follows the post-college years of casey han, a queens-born ivy league grad who's undergoing one of those infamous "quarter-life" crises. the author, lee, keeps you interested by letting you peek into the minds of her employers, boyfriends, family, and friends.

she also gets the "1st generation asian" story spot on and i felt she was reading my mind with a lot of her character insights. i thoroughly enjoyed this book and will be rereading it. you may need to be asian to fully appreciate how carefully and accurately she depicts the class/culture clashes, but her male/female relationships are relevant to anyone who's ever been in love/lust.

Hubert says

SPOILERSSPOILERS***SPOILERS***

This book could have been trimmed by about 100 pages, but nonetheless I enjoyed it in the way I enjoy *Guiding Light*. Will they kiss? Oh my the unaccepted boyfriend is going to make a scene with her parents! Oh my! This soap opera of a novel takes us through the life of a young Korean-American Princeton graduate who's surrounded by other upwardly mobile Ivy graduates while she herself perpetually can't get out of debt on account of her shopping addiction.

The first chapter itself initializes with too much of a bang in my opinion, and peters out throughout with not enough 'bangs'. I think the best parts of the novel concern the older generation, the mother and father, their fellow church-goers, parents of their friends. Their episodes are written with a subtlety, delicacy, and poignancy that are lacking sometimes when she writes about the main character Casey or her business i-banking cohorts.

I am probably more tussled by the New York Times review of this book. The reviewer Schillinger notes that Lee's strength lies in her ability to garner the reader's "appreciation of the usual." That much I admit. But how is the "drama intensifi[ed]" by being set in an "unfamiliar backdrop" of the "tightly knit social world of Korean immigrants"? Logically that would mean that Korean-American New Yorkers would find the plot less dramatic? Odd.

Despite my misgivings I do recommend the book. The reading is fast, the characters portrayed sometimes in such caricature that I find myself chortling at them and their portrayal, and all in all somewhat fun and entertaining, and written well if somewhat wordy (carry a pencil with you and practice your copy editing skills).

And remember, with energy prices at record highs, it's cheaper than turning to ABC's *Days of Our Lives*.
