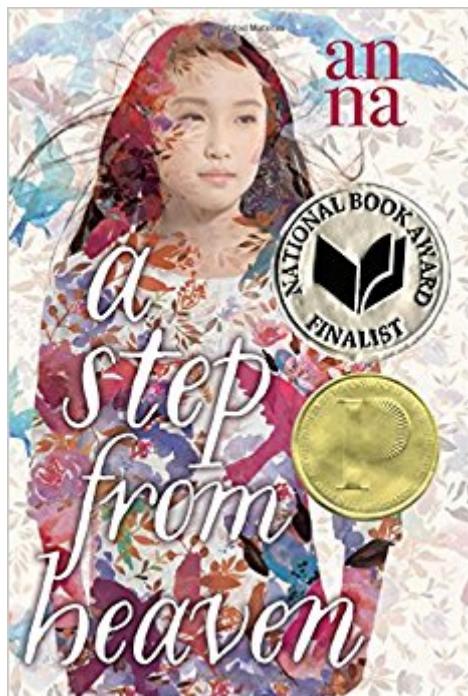


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# A Step From Heaven



## Synopsis

From master storyteller An Na comes the Printz Award–winning novel about a Korean girl who tells her firsthand account of trying to find her place and identity in America from the day she leaves Korea as a child to her rocky journey through the teenage years. At age four, Young Ju moves with her parents from Korea to Southern California. She has always imagined America would be like heaven: easy, blissful, and full of riches. But when her family arrives, she finds it to be the opposite. With a stubborn language barrier and cultural dissimilarities, not only is it impossible to make friends, but even her family's internal bonds are wavering. Her parents' finances are strained, yet her father's stomach is full of booze. As Young Ju's once solid and reliable family starts tearing apart, her younger brother begins to gain more freedom and respect simply because of his gender. Young Ju begins to lose all hope in the dream she once held—the heaven she longs for. Even as she begins to finally fit in, a cataclysmic family event will change her idea of heaven forever. But it also helps her to recognize the strength she holds, and envision the future she desires, and deserves.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Oh's appropriately girlish voice and measured reading bring to life Young Ju, quiet heroine of debut

novelist Na's dark tale of a family of Korean immigrants, which just won the ALA's Printz Award for teenage literature. At age four, Young Ju is not happy to be leaving her Korean home and loving Halmoni (grandmother) to move with her parents to Mi Gook (America), believed to be the land of great promise. Through Young Ju's experiences, listeners hear the family unravel as difficulties mount for them in the States. Young Ju's parents struggle with several low-paying jobs, handicapped by their language barrier. Young Ju's alcoholic and bitter father abuses his wife and children and forbids Young Ju to socialize with American friends. And when her father crosses a frightening line in his cruelty, Young Ju bravely takes action that sets her mother, younger brother and herself on the path to yet another new life in America. Oh's characterization, which realistically captures this powerful contemporary story and gives authentic crispness to Korean words and phrases, will keep listeners in its grip. Ages 12-up. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Grade 8 Up-An Na's 2002 Printz winning novel (Front St., 2001) is brought to full effect in this reading by Jina Oh. Young Ju emigrates from Korea with her parents when she is four. A few months later, they live in a shabby apartment in Southern California, their family expanded to include a newborn baby boy. The parents work long hours at multiple jobs, and Young Ju struggles first to understand what is going on in school and then to be permitted to participate in typically American schoolgirl activities. The pressures of immigration, language difficulties, and oppositional cultural expectations lead Young Ju's father to become a bitter and often drunk man, physically abusive of his wife and, eventually, his daughter. The stresses of the disintegrating family work on each of its members, sending Young Ju's mother into a religious foray and her brother into middle school truancy. By the time Young Ju is ready to leave for college, her father has returned to Korea and her mother has been able to establish the family in their own American home. Each of the chapters in this emotionally succinct novel might be read as a short story, although the plot-the acclimation of one young girl to a new culture and to her own family-is steady and at times suspenseful. Young Ju's narrative voice matures as she does: in early childhood, she is unclear about identity and place, later she becomes impatient with the limitations placed on her by both culture and her own understanding of what is needed, and at last she matures to a young woman who can appreciate the fact that individuals must admit to their strengths and weaknesses in order to enjoy life's possibilities. The language is rich, studded with Korean words made intelligible both by context and the reader's easy pronunciation. Tunes are sung gently and well, and there is dramatic differentiation made among the cast of characters, making this audio version an

enrichment of an already superb text. Francisca Goldsmith, Berkeley Public Library, CACopyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

An Na's *A Step from Heaven*, was one of those books that was hard to put down. I was engaged with the novel from the moment I started reading the book. It was interesting to see someone from an experience other than my own. The story is about the hardships that one has to go through to live in America, and those hardships include language barriers, finding friends who welcome outsiders into their country and their lives, and keeping together a family. I'm not sure how much of *A Step from Heaven* is based on the author's own experience ( after finding out from the back of the book that the author came to America from Korea when she was young), but I felt as if the events in the novel were real, because there was so much raw emotion behind the characters. **SPOILER ALERT!** Besides the hardships, I found this book to be interesting because of the cultural assumptions that were challenged and allowed me to think about. For instance, I know that in some Asian cultures, girls are often unwanted compared to males because these cultures are still fairly traditional and hold a lot of stigmas and rules about gender roles. I know this because one of my sister's close friends, is from Thailand and she would have had to been killed or sent away if it wasn't for her grandmother who took her in, because there are laws about how many children a family can have just because of the overpopulation, and she may have not had to be sent away from her parents if she were born a boy. I just felt so sad for Young Ju when I read the line, "I stare down at my bows. Apa did not even want to hold me." The reason it is important to mention that the boys were wanted more than girls in this culture, is because I first made the cultural assumption at first that Apa's abuse towards his wife and Young Ju were because women were looked down upon as a weaker sex, but then I soon realized as I read on that the father may have been having an affair with another woman and was just an abusive father whom didn't appreciate or deserve Young Ju and her mother. I'm glad that things got better after he left and that eventually they realized they could live their lives just fine without him, even if it would be different from then on.

I liked the honesty of the book, but it was difficult to read the parts of physical abuse, almost as if I was an innocent bystander to these things that were happening. It was certainly a great book to read, but at times a very difficult book to read. (Mainly because of the abuse)

I read this book as part of the requirement for a graduate class, and I was engaged from the very first page. *A Step From Heaven* is the story of a Korean family, told from the point of view of the

female protagonist Young Ju, who at the age of four emigrates with her family from a tiny fishing village in Korea to Mi Gook, i.e. the United States. As a young child, Young Ju thinks Mi Gook is heaven, based on all the praises heaped upon it by her relatives. However, Young Ju and her family quickly come to realize that life in the United States is not easy as both of Young Ju's parents are forced to take on menial jobs in order to support the family. The main characters are credibly portrayed. Young Ju is portrayed as an intelligent and sensitive young woman who goes against the cultural stereotype of a submissive Asian girl. She is vocal when she feels that she has been misunderstood or unfairly treated, especially with regards to her father. Apa, the father character in this story is portrayed in a negative light, yet does not come across as a caricature. As the story progresses, the reader becomes aware that there are extenuating circumstances which have caused Apa to turn to alcohol as a means of drowning his frustrations and sorrow. I did feel that Umma was rather weak-willed, and for most of the story, appeared to embody the cultural stereotype of the weak-willed and subjugated Asian wife. For many years, Umma suffers physical and emotional abuse, and watches as her children get beaten by their father, and it was hard to sympathize with this character until she sort of redeems herself towards the end. Though the story has lots of Korean cultural references, these references enhance the storytelling and do not overwhelm the story. The author's writing style is quite simple, with easy, unadorned language that conveys the main characters' experiences. Korean words and expressions are woven into the story in a manner that is not jarring, and do not detract from the reader's engagement with the story. Due to the difficult life led by the characters, the mood is bleak for the most part, though this is offset by the brilliant portrayal of Young Ju, who is kind, gentle and ever hopeful of a better life. It is this sense of hope that shines through at the end.

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