

## Charlotte Observer

*Free Food for Millionaires*

By Min Jin Lee

Review by Mindy Friddle

Casey Han has just graduated from Princeton on scholarship, when a visit to her parent's rent control apartment turns sour. "The unholy trinity of Law, Business, and Medicine seemed the only faith in town," for a daughter of Korean immigrants working in a dry cleaner in Queens, and while Casey plans to attend Columbia law school, her heart isn't in it. She chafes at her parent's rigid expectations. Her dubious career goals, her secret smoking, her agnosticism, her covert long-time white boyfriend, her flip responses, are more than her parents can bear. Her father, Joseph, who was the "last remnant of his clan and had no male heirs," will have none of it and the family dinner erupts into violence. Casey, face bruised and swollen, is banished from the household, and flees to her boyfriend's apartment, only to find him in a compromising position with a couple of girls gone wild.

So begins *Free Food for Millionaires*, an absorbing debut novel offering an entertaining and shrewd glimpse into a stratified society, where class, education, and high-powered careers seem more like shackles. They don't call those trappings of success for nothing.

Casey declines to enroll at Columbia Law School—she can't afford it—and works as a sales assistant at a Wall Street brokerage. She falls into a black hole of debt. She makes hats. Her weekend job at an exclusive dress shop barely pays for her weakness for fashion: "Even though she loved the beautiful clothes she couldn't afford, she couldn't imagine a life where she was working only for money just so she could get more stuff." And stuff is everywhere in this novel: designer labels, silver flatware services with marrow spoons, aftershave custom blended by a master perfumery in Paris, private golf courses with, "Acres upon acres of nature manicured and coiffed like a rich second wife for the enjoyment of a few entitled individuals." Juxtaposed among these gilded descriptions of wealth are mentions of student loans, maxed out credit cards, eviction notices, and gambling addictions.

As the protagonist finds herself navigating through uncharted waters—in search of financial independence and a decent relationship, yearning for a meaningful life—Casey interacts with a constellation of memorable characters, and the novel broadens its scope. A measure of Min Jin Lee's remarkable talent is her ability to effortlessly capture the thoughts of a range of characters, old and young, immigrant and native, privileged and poor. From the cheating husband, the desperate gambler, the domineering Korean father, the Puerto Rican doorman, to the

gynecologist delivering bad news, and the licentious choir director—we are privy to all their points of view.

At more than 550-pages, a novel is often labeled ambitious and sprawling. *Free Food for Millionaires* is all that, and more. It is a pleasure to enter the world of this large cast of characters, to discover the ties that bind them, to witness the web of deceit that ensnares them, to watch them fall in and out of love, betray and forgive.