

# Welcome to the Hyunam-Dong Bookshop

By Hwang Bo-Reum, translated by Shanna Tan

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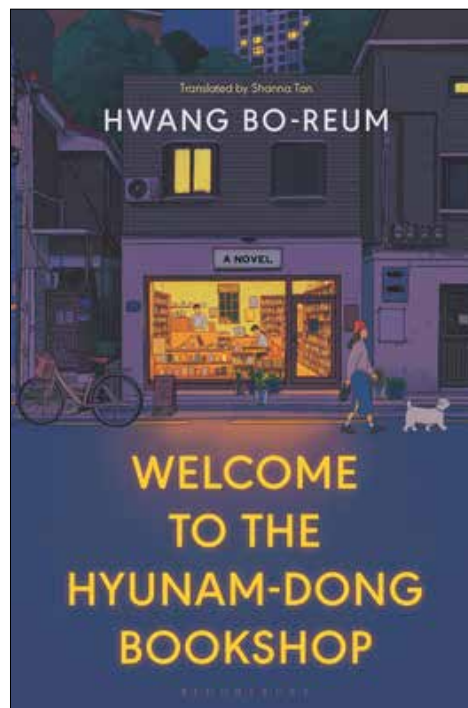
## An Exercise in Resistance?

I'm not even sure who pointed me to this book. The verdict of 'delightful, reflective and heart-warming' apparently delivered by *Woman's Weekly* couldn't possibly be what pushed it to the top of my reading list. Perhaps an imminent trip to Asia affected my thinking; perhaps the delight our daughters have in recent years taken in Korean dramas and culture convinced me that we'd have something to talk about together; perhaps it's just because I'm a sucker for bookshops and was attracted by the title. I don't recall exactly why I purchased and read this book, but I'm glad that I did.

Hardly a household name, Hwang Bo-Reum doesn't even enjoy the dubious honour of her own Wikipedia page. Her Bloomsbury profile explains that she worked as a software engineer and that this is her first novel. The three collections of her essays that preceded this do not seem to have been translated into English. Before it was published the novel won a contest on a Korean blogging platform. In other words, not that much of a track record.

Setting events in Seoul, the author tells the tale of Yeongju, a woman who has begun a new life by following her dream of owning and running a bookshop ('There was only one thing on her mind. I must open a bookshop'). Interwoven with her life are those of employees, customers and suppliers. They talk about why they do what they do, what matters to them, and how work fits into their lives. And it's these conversations that make this, I suggest, a book potentially of interest to readers of *FiBQ*.

The South Korean work scene is harsh. Recent articles in *The Economist* describe it as 'notoriously punishing', and 'a tough place for working women'. Yeongju describes how she hated her



hectic previous life. One weekend she reflects: 'Spending a restful Sunday like this made her wish she could do the same for one more day a week, but she was comforted by the thought that she . . . could go to work feeling happy' — working from rest, in practice.

The country's government appears recently to have realised that the prevailing work culture is having at least one undesirable side-effect, an 'ultra-low fertility rate'. This did not, however, stop the authorities from attempting last year to raise the weekly cap on working hours from 52 to 69 hours. Outrage, particularly amongst the youth, has resulted in their reversing

this policy. Popular resistance goes beyond this, and this book's author refers to the trend of downshifting, people giving up high-paying jobs and sometimes stopping work altogether. 'Life is too complicated and expansive to be judged solely by the career you have.'

As Yeongju reimagines her life, purpose is much on her mind. Is the bookstore there 'to provide a fair wage to her staff while also earning enough to feed herself? Or earn big profits, like any other business?' Although the bookshop revenues can't support such a step, she hires a barista — perhaps in faith? She could have started him in a part-time role, but to her new employee's surprise she insists that his position is a full-time one: 'You need rest to work, and to rest, you need a certain level of income to live comfortably'. She realises she needs to expand the scope of the store's operations 'to escape the red, to be a responsible employer'.

Faced with a friend's wayward teenager who 'sees no meaning in life', she's forced to consider the purpose of the bookshop more deeply. Having set it up according to her own reading preferences, she now wonders how it could be of help to others. As her personal renewal continues, relationships seem to become of increasing importance to her. She ponders the power that books may exert over people, and what might make a book 'good'. Ultimately, she feels, good books are written by authors who understand life, touch readers' hearts, and help them 'to navigate life'. I wonder what she might think of the *Good Book* written by Someone who certainly fulfils those criteria, and so much more.




A Korean bookshop with a woman owner  
Graphic: Generated by Gary using AI

Is the book worth the six and a quarter hours that Kindle says it should take us to read it? For some of us, yes. It's a light and undemanding read, a pleasant companion when we're sitting on a faded favourite chair after supper next to a warming fire. If we allow her, the author may stimulate our thinking as to what it would take to realise our own work- and life-related dreams. Perhaps most importantly, we may be reminded to be thankful that as we make decisions about our work and our lives we can rely on a God who loves us, cares for us and guides us. The characters in this story

display no such reliance. In a note at the end of the book Hwang Bo-Reum states 'The yardstick to measure one's life lies within oneself. And that's enough'. She's wrong. And that's why there can be no true renewal and redemption in the lives of her characters.

Her barista, mulling over the question as to whether he should have some great overarching goal in his work life, decides to do without one. 'He would focus on giving his best to the day's work – the best coffee he could make.' On the surface, a laudable attitude to

work, and one most employers would be delighted by. But believers know that that's not enough. An author friend of Yeongju decides that happiness can be found in productivity. 'To him, a happy life was perhaps a life where he used his time well.' Using time well (in the older translation, redeeming the time) is an imperative for believers in what are surely evil days (Eph. 5:16). But that's also not enough. And the errors we may see in these characters' lives surely serve as a challenge to us to ensure that our own priorities align with the Master we serve. 

1. Bloomsbury. Available at: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/author/hwang-boreum/>.
2. Available at: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/07/08/south-korean-tech-workers-are-having-a-lousy-time-at-work>.
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5. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jun/18/death-from-overwork-young-koreans-rebel-against-culture-of-long-hours>



**Gary Cundill** researches, writes and speaks on sustainability-related topics, serves as a mentor to current and future leaders, and enjoys God's creation while hiking, fishing and sailing with family and friends.