

Flashlight — 20-Minute Read Summary

By Susan Choi (2025) · Daily Book, Episode 28 · Source: Barack Obama's favorite books of 2025

The Book in 60 Seconds

One summer evening in nineteen seventy-eight, in a coastal town in Japan, ten-year-old Louisa goes for a walk along the breakwater with her father, Serk. He is carrying a flashlight. He cannot swim. They do not come back when expected. Hours later Louisa is found at the water's edge, soaked and barely conscious, with almost no memory of what happened. Serk is gone — presumed drowned, pulled out to sea, a body never found. That single night, and everything before and after it, is what *Flashlight* is about.

Susan Choi's sixth novel spans four generations and several continents to chase the shock waves of one family's catastrophe. Louisa is the only child of parents who have both severed themselves from the past: her father Serk, born Seok in Korea and raised as Hiroshi in wartime Japan, whose parents repatriated to North Korea after the war while he refused to follow and instead emigrated to America; her mother Anne, an American who cut herself off from her Midwestern family after a reckless episode in her youth. There is also Tobias, Anne's illegitimate son, whose reappearance in their lives will have astonishing consequences. Told in chapters that shift across time and characters and keep turning back to that night by the sea, the novel asks the simplest and hardest question: what really happened to Louisa's father? Shortlisted for the twenty twenty-five Booker Prize and longlisted for the twenty twenty-five National Book Award, and named to Barack Obama's list of his favorite books of twenty twenty-five, *Flashlight* is, as the Wall Street Journal called it, one of the first major American novels of its year — a monumental investigation of family, loss, memory, and the ways we are shaped by what we cannot see.

The Author

Susan Choi was born in South Bend, Indiana, in nineteen sixty-nine, to a Korean father and a Russian-Jewish mother, and raised in Texas. Her fiction has long circled questions of identity, deception, and how the truth gets bent by who is telling the story. Her second novel, *American Woman* (two thousand three), drew on the Patty Hearst case; *A Person of Interest* (two thousand eight) was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award; and her fifth novel, *Trust Exercise* (two thousand nineteen), won the National Book Award, dividing readers between those who found its structural games revelatory and those who found them maddening.

Choi has said that *Flashlight* grew from a story close to home: her own father was an ethnic Korean born in what was then Japanese-occupied Korea who spent his childhood in Japan, and the novel's buried family history rhymes with real postwar displacements. She published a short story in *The New Yorker* in August of twenty twenty as the novel's prologue — a volatile, grief-stricken exchange between a young girl and a psychologist in the aftermath of her father's drowning in Japan — and spent years expanding it into this four-hundred-and-sixty-four-page novel. Published in June of twenty twenty-five by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, *Flashlight* was greeted as her most expansive and generous book: expansive in time and geography, generous in the way it gives even its most difficult characters full inner lives.

The Story

The novel opens on that evening in nineteen seventy-eight, and it is worth staying inside that scene, because everything else in the book is an attempt to explain it. Louisa, ten years old, walks the breakwater with her father. It is dusk. Serk carries a flashlight. Neither returns at dinner time. Searchers fan out along the shore. Louisa is discovered hours later near the water's edge — soaked to the skin, cold, disoriented, with her memory of the evening broken into fragments that refuse to reassemble. Serk cannot swim, and he is never found. The official presumption is drowning, but there is no body, and there will never be a satisfying official story. A man vanishes between one breath and the next, and the novel will spend the next four hundred pages refusing to let that vanishing be simple.

From there Choi moves both backward and forward, and the backward movement is the novel's engine. Serk was born Seok, an ethnic Korean in Japan — a zainichi Korean, part of a community of Koreans brought to Japan under Japanese colonial rule who lived as permanent outsiders, discriminated against, never fully accepted, never quite belonging anywhere. During the war he was known as Hiroshi, a Japanese name that functioned as protective coloration. After the war, his parents were among the tens of thousands of Koreans in Japan who bought into the promises of postwar Pyongyang — a socialist paradise, free education, dignity — and "repatriated" to North Korea, a migration that history would reveal as a one-way journey into repression and, for many, the country's prison camps. Serk refused to go. He left for the United States instead, where he renamed himself Serk — a name that is neither quite Korean nor quite anything else — became a university instructor, and married Anne.

Anne's past is its own wound. An American woman from the Midwest, she had, at nineteen, a reckless adventure: an affair with a married man that produced a son, Tobias, whom she relinquished to the boy's father, who insisted on primary and almost exclusive custody. She attempted to put Tobias out of her mind; she pined for him anyway. Her estrangement from her family followed. Anne and Serk, two people who had each severed their pasts, found each other in America, married, and had Louisa — an only child raised by two parents who had agreed, without quite saying so, that the past was a locked room.

The family travels to Japan — Serk takes a visiting faculty position, an academic exchange year — and it is during that visit that the disaster happens. The question the novel keeps circling is why Serk took them to Japan at all, so close to where he grew up, so close to the strait between Japan and Korea, and to a coastline that, history reminds us, sat within the reach of very real geopolitical currents. Between nineteen seventy-seven and nineteen eighty-three, North Korean agents abducted Japanese citizens from beaches and coastal towns facing the Sea of Japan — at least seventeen abductions acknowledged, though dozens or hundreds more are believed to have occurred. The abductees were taken to North Korea, held in camps and compounds, and coerced into teaching agents Japanese language and culture for espionage. This is documented history, not invention, and its presence in the novel — revealed gradually, through history and the accumulation of detail — transforms the disappearance from a private accident into something far larger and more terrible: a man with Serk's biography, an ethnic Korean educated in Japan, fluent in both worlds, standing on a dark beach in nineteen seventy-eight, would have been exactly the kind of person that operation sought.

The novel does not rush to confirm that reading. For a long stretch it stays inside grief as it is actually lived: Anne and Louisa, mother and daughter, adrift together in America in the wake of loss — united, separated, and also repelled by their mutual grief, as the publisher's summary puts it. They attempt ordinary life. They cannot escape the echoes of that night. Louisa grows up in the shadow of an absent father and an unanswerable question, and Choi follows her through the strange second life of an unsolved disappearance: the therapists, the reenactments of memory, the photographs she stares at, the way a missing person never really leaves the house. And then there is Tobias: Anne's son, Louisa's half-brother, whose reappearance in their lives — a thread the novel withholds and then pays off — carries consequences that reframe much of what came before.

Structurally, the novel shifts perspective across character and decade, returning again and again to the night by the sea. Each return adds a layer: Serk's boyhood in wartime Japan; Anne's youth; the marriage; the trip; the years after. The effect is of a flashlight beam sweeping back and forth across a dark landscape — illuminating fragments, leaving the spaces between them black. The reader assembles the whole only gradually, and even then, as with any beam of light, what it clarifies depends entirely on where it is pointed.

A note on spoilers: this summary describes the book's premise, its historical context, and its broad shape, but deliberately withholds the novel's late revelations and its precise handling of what happened to Serk, because the experience of the book is inseparable from the slow dawning of its historical dimension. Readers who want the mystery preserved should treat the rest of this summary as safe — it discusses themes and approaches more than twists.

The Main Ideas, Explained Plainly

One unexplained night can organize an entire life. The disappearance of Serk is not backstory in *Flashlight*; it is the gravitational center around which every character's life orbits for decades. Choi is interested less in the detective question — what happened — than in the lived consequences of not knowing: how uncertainty, not just loss, shapes a child, a marriage's memory, a family's silence. Louisa's development, from a ten-year-old with a fractured memory to an adult still chasing clarity, is the novel's clearest portrait of ambiguous loss — the psychological condition in which someone is gone but not confirmed gone, so that grief can neither begin properly nor end.

Identity here is a survival technology. Serk is Seok, then Hiroshi, then Serk. Each name was a strategy: a Korean name at home, a Japanese name to survive wartime Japan, an Americanized name to restart in a new country. Choi writes identity not as self-expression but as camouflage and negotiation, a response to empires and wars that decided who someone was allowed to be. That the novel gives its protagonist three names is the whole geopolitical story of twentieth-century Korea compressed into one man's signature.

History is not background; it is the plot. The zainichi Koreans in Japan, the postwar repatriation to North Korea that swallowed tens of thousands of people into a totalitarian state, the North Korean abductions from Japanese beaches — none of this is decoration. Choi's argument, made through narrative rather than lecture, is that private catastrophes are often public history arriving at a single family's door. The family's tragedy makes sense only inside the history, and the history becomes comprehensible only inside the family.

Parents hide, and children pay for the hiding. Both Anne and Serk cut themselves off from their pasts — she from her family and her first son, he from his family and their catastrophic choice. The novel is quietly unsparing about the costs: the locked rooms do not stay locked. Tobias's reappearance and Louisa's hunger for the truth are the past returning, as it always does in Choi's fiction, through the people who inherited the silence.

Memory is unreliable, and that is not a flaw in the story — it is the story. Louisa's broken recollection of the evening is the novel's central formal device. The prologue — the girl and the psychologist — dramatizes how a child's testimony is shaped, questioned, and sometimes bent by adults desperate for a usable narrative. Choi, whose previous novel was famous for playing games with narrative reliability, here uses unreliability for elegiac rather than trickster purposes: to show how a family lives inside a story that will never stabilize.

Grief does not unite people automatically. The portrait of Anne and Louisa after the disappearance is one of the novel's most honest threads: a mother and daughter who share a catastrophe and are nevertheless driven apart by it, each grieving in a register the other cannot tolerate. Choi resists the sentimental idea that loss bonds; sometimes it isolates, and love has to be rebuilt on the far side of that isolation.

How to Approach the Book

Flashlight is four hundred and sixty-four pages and asks for patience. A few approaches help. First, let the structure work: the early chapters alternate among characters and decades, and it is normal to feel briefly disoriented about whose past you are in. Choi's transitions reward trust — by the middle of the book, the timeline clicks into place, and the recontextualizations begin to land with real force. Readers who like to keep a small timeline note will find it useful, particularly for Serk's early life.

Second, take the history seriously but do not read the novel as a textbook. Knowing, going in, that North Korea really did abduct people from Japanese coasts in the late nineteen seventies — and that tens of thousands of Koreans really did repatriate from Japan to North Korea after the war — will deepen the book without spoiling it, because the novel's power is in how it withholds and then releases that context. If you prefer discovery, skip the history and let Choi teach it; she does, thoroughly, in the novel's second half.

Third, adjust your expectations if you know *Trust Exercise*. That novel was enclosed, formal, and combative. *Flashlight* is expansive, linear in spirit if not in chronology, and fundamentally generous: every major character, including the most difficult, is given room to live. Reviewers who found the earlier book maddening have often found this one moving. Conversely, readers who loved the earlier book's games should know this novel's pleasures are different — breadth, accretion, and emotional payoff rather than structural vertigo.

Finally, do not rush the last third. The novel's accumulation pays off in a closing movement that recontextualizes the opening scene, and Choi's sentences — long, clause-rich, sometimes demanding a re-read — are doing deliberate work, mimicking the way thought actually circles a trauma. The density is a feature: this is a book about how hard it is to see clearly, written in a style that makes you practice seeing clearly.

Memorable Lines

Choi is a stylist whose best sentences reward attention, and the novel's most quoted passages in reviews tend to be structural rather than aphoristic. Rather than inventing epigrams, this summary notes the lines and formulations reviewers have singled out. The premise itself, as the publisher states it, has become the book's shorthand: "He is carrying a flashlight. He cannot swim." — two flat facts whose juxtaposition contains the entire mystery. Reviewers in *The Guardian* noted a mid-novel turn they described as "a jolt that added suspense and intrigue to the work," and praised how "Choi gives her cast the room they need to live; to be more than vessels for political wrangling." The *Wall Street Journal*'s description of the book as "the first major American novel of its year" has followed it ever since. Attributed quotations in this novel, as in life, do their work quietly — the flashlight itself, an object a father carries to see in the dark and that becomes the last trace of him, is the book's governing image, and Choi trusts images over slogans.

Fair Criticisms

The book's admirers are numerous, but the criticisms are consistent and worth stating fairly. First, length and density: at well over four hundred pages, with long, clause-laden sentences and a deliberately slow accumulation, some readers — including sympathetic reviewers — have found stretches that feel like an intellectual exercise, where the prose's density works against momentum. Sentences sometimes need re-reading because their purpose gets lost among their phrases. Readers who prefer lean narration may find the middle section heavy.

Second, the balance between story and history shifts as the novel proceeds. *The New York Times*'s assessment captured a common reservation: toward the end, the extensive detail about historical injustice — the repatriation program, the abductions, the camps — begins to take over, and the book can feel less like a narrative and more like a historical report or a lesson. Whether that is a flaw depends on what you came for: readers who value the novel as an act of historical recovery will accept the shift; readers invested primarily in the family may feel the family recede just when they want it most.

Third, the withholding that makes the book's structure elegant can also frustrate. The novel circles its central event for a long time before clarifying the historical frame, and readers who want the mystery's terms established early may experience the first half as withholding rather than suspenseful. Relatedly, the Tobias thread — Anne's relinquished son, whose return the publisher's copy promises will have "astonishing consequences" — arrives late enough that some readers have wanted more of him, sooner.

None of these criticisms overturned the book's reception. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize — fiction's most scrutinized shortlist — longlisted for the National Book Award, and embraced by general readers on lists like Obama's, which suggests the trade-offs landed for most of its audience. But they are real trade-offs, and a reader who knows about them in advance can choose the right mood and week for the book.

Why It's on the List

Barack Obama publishes a favorite-books list most years, and his twenty twenty-five list — shared in December of twenty twenty-five — mixed literary fiction, history, and memoir, with *Flashlight* among its fiction highlights. Obama's lists have a recognizable taste: formally assured literary novels with historical depth, books that braid private lives with public events, and a particular interest in stories about identity, migration, and belonging. *Flashlight* fits that taste almost exactly. It is also a novel by an author Obama's lists have championed before in spirit — American writers reckoning seriously with the country's entanglement in the wider world.

Beyond Obama, the book's presence on the Booker Prize shortlist and the National Book Award longlist, its selection as a most-anticipated book of the year by *Time*, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Vulture*, *USA Today*, *Forbes*, and *Literary Hub*, and the *Wall Street Journal*'s "first major American novel" framing all mark it as the consensus literary event of its season. For this series, it earns its place as a contemporary counterpart to the epics earlier in the queue: a twenty-first-century family saga in which the great forces are not war on a battlefield but the quieter violences of borders, programs, and disappearances.

What to Read Next

If *Flashlight*'s historical thread gripped you, read Pachinko by Min Jin Lee next: another multi-generational saga of Koreans in Japan, tracing a zainichi family across the twentieth century with the same attention to how empire and discrimination shape private life. The two novels illuminate each other remarkably — Lee's from inside the community that stays, Choi's from inside the family that scatters.

If the disappearance and its decades-long aftershock were your thread, try A Tale for the Time Being by Ruth Ozeki, which braids Japan, America, memory, and an unexplained absence across the Pacific, or The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen for another formally daring reckoning with war, identity, and a protagonist remade by history's demands.

And if you want more of Choi herself, go backward to *Trust Exercise* — but go warned: it is a very different instrument, a hall of mirrors about art, power, and consent that will either thrill or infuriate you, and reading it after *Flashlight* makes the range of Choi's talent unmistakable. For the nonfiction behind the novel's history, Masaji Ishikawa's memoir *A River in Darkness*, an account of a Korean-Japanese family that repatriated to North Korea and of his escape decades later, is the indispensable companion: it is the real story of the choice Serk refused to make.

A Closer Look: Three Names, One Man

It is worth pausing on Serk, because Choi builds the novel's historical argument inside his biography, and understanding his three names unlocks the book. He is born Seok to Korean parents from Jeju Island who had come to Japan — a migration produced by Japan's colonization of Korea, which lasted from nineteen ten to nineteen forty-five and drove hundreds of thousands of Koreans to Japan for labor, much of it coerced. These Koreans and their descendants, the zainichi, occupied a painful legal and social limbo in Japan: resident for generations, yet denied full citizenship and subject to persistent discrimination in housing, employment, and marriage. Serk grows up inside that limbo.

As Hiroshi, his Japanese name, he survives the war years — a Korean boy passing, as far as possible, in a militarized Japan that demanded assimilation while refusing acceptance. The Japanese name is not an identity he chose in any free sense; it is the price of schooling, safety, and invisibility. Choi is precise about this doubleness: the zainichi experience is one of being visible as foreign and required to be invisible as Korean, simultaneously.

Then comes the fork that defines his life. After the war, North Korea — with active support from organizations in Japan and the quiet approval of governments happy to reduce a minority population — promoted a mass "repatriation" of Koreans from Japan, promising a socialist paradise: free housing, education, and dignity. Between nineteen fifty-nine and nineteen eighty-four, more than ninety thousand people went, including many Japanese spouses. What awaited many of them was the opposite of the promise: suspicion as returnees from a capitalist country, assignment to low social status in North Korea's songbun caste system, and, for a significant number, the prison camps. Serk's parents believed the promise and went. Serk, skeptical, refused — a refusal that severed him from his family for the rest of his life, because communication with North Korea was effectively impossible. Every account of the novel notes this fact, but it deserves emphasis: Serk did not lose his family to death. He lost them to a political lie, while they were still alive, on the other side of a border he could never cross. The disappearance on the beach in nineteen seventy-eight is therefore the second time Serk vanishes from a family's life — or rather, the second time history takes him. Choi structures the novel so that the reader eventually understands the beach scene as a rhyme: a man already once erased by geopolitics is erased again, the same way, by the same forces.

As Serk, in America, he tries a third life: professor, husband, father, a man whose name no one can place and whose past no one asks about. The American chapter is not presented as liberation so much as another negotiation — the racism is softer, the loneliness quieter. His reserve, his formality, even his inability to swim become legible as products of a life spent managing exposure. When Anne takes little Louisa to swimming lessons at the YMCA and Serk reacts with a rage he barely suppresses — reviewers have quoted the extraordinary sentence in which his fury at the pool is itself drowned in subordinate clauses — the reader sees a man for whom water, bodies, exposure, and foreignness are all knotted together. He cannot swim because people like him were never taught, in countries that never made room; he fears the water his daughter must learn to survive. The flashlight he carries that last evening is the perfect emblem: a man who has spent his life trying to see his way in the dark, carrying the only light he has.

A Closer Look: Anne, Louisa, and Tobias

Anne deserves equal attention, because Choi refuses to make her merely the American wife. Her youthful affair and the loss of Tobias — a son raised almost entirely by his married father, a loss Anne chose under pressure and then spent a lifetime not discussing — establish the novel's second great silence. Where Serk's past was taken from him by history, Anne's was taken by shame and the sexual double standards of her era. The marriage of Anne and Serk is thus a union of two archivists of locked rooms, and Choi is interested in what such a marriage feels like from inside: companionable, even loving, but built on a shared agreement not to excavate. Louisa's childhood — loved, provided for, and surrounded by unspoken things — is the soil in which her later obsession grows.

Louisa herself is the novel's consciousness-in-formation. Choi follows her from the therapy sessions of the prologue — where a grieving child performs and resists an adult's demand for a coherent story — through a childhood and adulthood marked by the missing center. Her fractured memory of the breakwater is not a puzzle box with a key; it is a portrait of how trauma actually stores experience, in sensory shards rather than narrative. Her adult pursuit of the truth about her father, including her attention to photographs and documents, makes her the novel's investigator, but Choi keeps the investigation emotional rather than procedural: what Louisa wants is not a case solved but a father restored to story.

Tobias, finally, functions as the return of Anne's repressed past in person. His reappearance forces the family's two silences into contact with each other, and his thread carries some of the novel's most surprising consequences — which this summary will not spoil, beyond noting that Choi uses him to ask whether a family is defined by the people present, the people lost, or the people hidden. Between a father who vanished, a brother who was hidden, and parents in North Korea who vanished into a closed state, Louisa's family is a constellation defined mostly by absence — and the novel's title image inverts beautifully: a flashlight does not abolish darkness; it only shows you a small circle of it, clearly.