

‘Cancer treatment, child care, business: That pain ultimately became my writing’

‘Immigrants who became crocodiles to survive; I too was a crocodile’

“Living as an immigrant, I encountered crocodiles of many faces. Long ago, I judged them; as time passed, I pitied them; now, I no longer distinguish friend from foe. I too was a crocodile.”

Kim Hye-jin (43), an Australian-based writer who won the Grand Prize in the Short Story category at the 27th Overseas Koreans Literary Awards hosted by the Overseas Koreans Agency, candidly shared her life as an immigrant, her identity as a writer, and insights about her award-winning work “Crocodile” in a post-ceremony interview.

After majoring in Korean literature in college and completing a master’s degree in Korean language education in graduate school, she chose to emigrate in 2009, when her husband went abroad for further studies. She launched her full-fledged writing career in 2019 with the publication of her short story collection “A Room of One’s Own.” She gained attention in literary circles after winning the Excellence Award at the “2025 12th Kyobo Bookstore Story Awards” for her short story “The Cleaning God,” which tells the story of an illegal immigrant in Australia who came to the country on a working holiday visa.

Kim’s work “Crocodile” captures the faces of diverse immigrants encountered in Australia.

“There are people who must do things they wouldn’t have done in Korea. Lives spent ferrying young people, drifting through labor markets enduring abuse, revealing inhuman aspects. They wanted to be predators but ultimately resembled crocodiles -- becoming someone else’s handbag.”

The crocodile in the work is a metaphor for “people who had to endure much to survive.”

“The crocodile symbolizes the coldness, duplicity and survival instinct everyone possesses. Immigrants adopt multiple personas to protect themselves in a foreign land. I respect that way of life.”

She laughed, saying, “I never expected at all to win the Grand Prize,” but her feelings at the awards ceremony were different.

“Novels aren’t exactly money makers, you know. This award was a huge comfort. I almost cried while giving my acceptance speech.”

Early in her immigration experience, the weight of child care



Author Kim Hye-jin, the
Grand Prize winner in the
Short Story category

and making ends meet distanced her from writing. To make matters worse, she was diagnosed with a rare cancer.

“I underwent treatment for about five years, from when my child was 1 until she started school. Raising a child alone without family support while undergoing chemotherapy was incredibly difficult. But those painful moments actually helped me write the story.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as she explained that she had stopped undergoing tests to avoid the pain of cancer treatment and now runs a restaurant.

“After everyone in the family goes to bed, I always sit down at the table and start writing my novel,” she said, adding it’s then that she endures the hardships of immigrant life through writing.

Her husband and daughter acquired Australian citizenship, but she still holds Korean nationality.

“I gave up on citizenship because I felt I couldn’t be a proud writer of Korean novels if I became an Australian citizen,” revealing her deep attachment to her mother tongue, writing and nationality.

Regarding these Overseas Korean Literary Awards, Kim expressed deep gratitude to the OKA, stating, “Receiving government-level support and hospitality holds great significance.”

Asked about future plans ahead of her upcoming appearance on KBS Radio’s Literature Hall next month, she responded: “The house I build in my mother tongue is large and spacious, but the life I must maintain in a foreign language is always overwhelming. My novels are that support. I want to write slowly for a long time.” 📖