KOREAN FICTION

North and South Korea have been in the news recently, but what do Americans really know about the history of these countries? There may be gaps in our collective knowledge, but a trio of novels steps into that void, beautifully illuminating Korea's past in ways that inform our present.

'The Court Dancer,' by Kyung-Sook Shin

Inspired by the true story of a late-19th-century court dancer, Shin's novel explores themes of exoticism, assimilation and identity. After capturing the heart of a French diplomat, orphan-turned-court dancer Yi Jin ends up in Belle

Epoque Paris at the behest of the emperor, who tasks her with building a diplomatic bridge between Korea and France. Far from the gilded cage of the Joseon court, Yi Jin finds she still "could not be free of the attention of strangers, whether they were from kindness or curiosity." Even to her French husband, she's a mere token, a prize.

The novel delves into major historical events, including 1884's Gapsin Coup and the Imo rebellion in 1882, while the power struggle between China and Japan for influence over Korea looms in the background. By placing Korean history beside a Western narrative, Shin highlights the disparity between Europe and the more isolated Asian nation. At its core, "The Court Dancer" examines what countries lose in identity in exchange for technological advancement.

'The Kinship of Secrets,' by Eugenia Kim

A family is torn apart then reunited years later in Kim's second novel, which begins in 1948 as Najin and Calvin Cho travel to the United States with their daughter Miran, while leaving their other daughter, Inja, behind. What's supposed to be a short

separation turns into a long-term split after the Korean War breaks out.

Despite growing up in vastly different worlds — Inja in war-torn Seoul, where a banana is considered a luxury, and Miran with her strict upbringing punctuated by "The Ed Sullivan Show" and American junk food — the sisters both become outcasts in their own ways, with Miran enduring racial slurs and Inja getting teased for her "mother who wasn't a mother."

Kim infuses a coming-of-age story about being an outsider with the realities of the war, which forced many family separations, some of which still persist today.

'If You Leave Me,' by Crystal Hana Kim

Kim's stunning debut spans from 1951 to 1968, beginning as 16-year-old Haemi and her family seek refuge from war in the city of Busan.

There she ends up in a love triangle, forced to choose between the boy she loves and his more upwardly mobile cousin. Ultimately she caves to societal expectations that dictate she put her family before her emotional needs.

Snippets of Korea's complicated history following the war are artfully folded into the story, revisiting the student protest that forced Korea's first president, Rhee Syngman, to resign and the rise of military strongman Park Chung-Hee. Within all the political chaos is the greater question of how to honor the past while accepting the Western influences that will usher in future.

The novel is interested in something most others aren't: The aftermath. It focuses both on what comes after war — as a new country struggles to delevop its identity — and what follows Haemi's fateful decision, as the ramifications of her choice ripple out to affect everyone around her.

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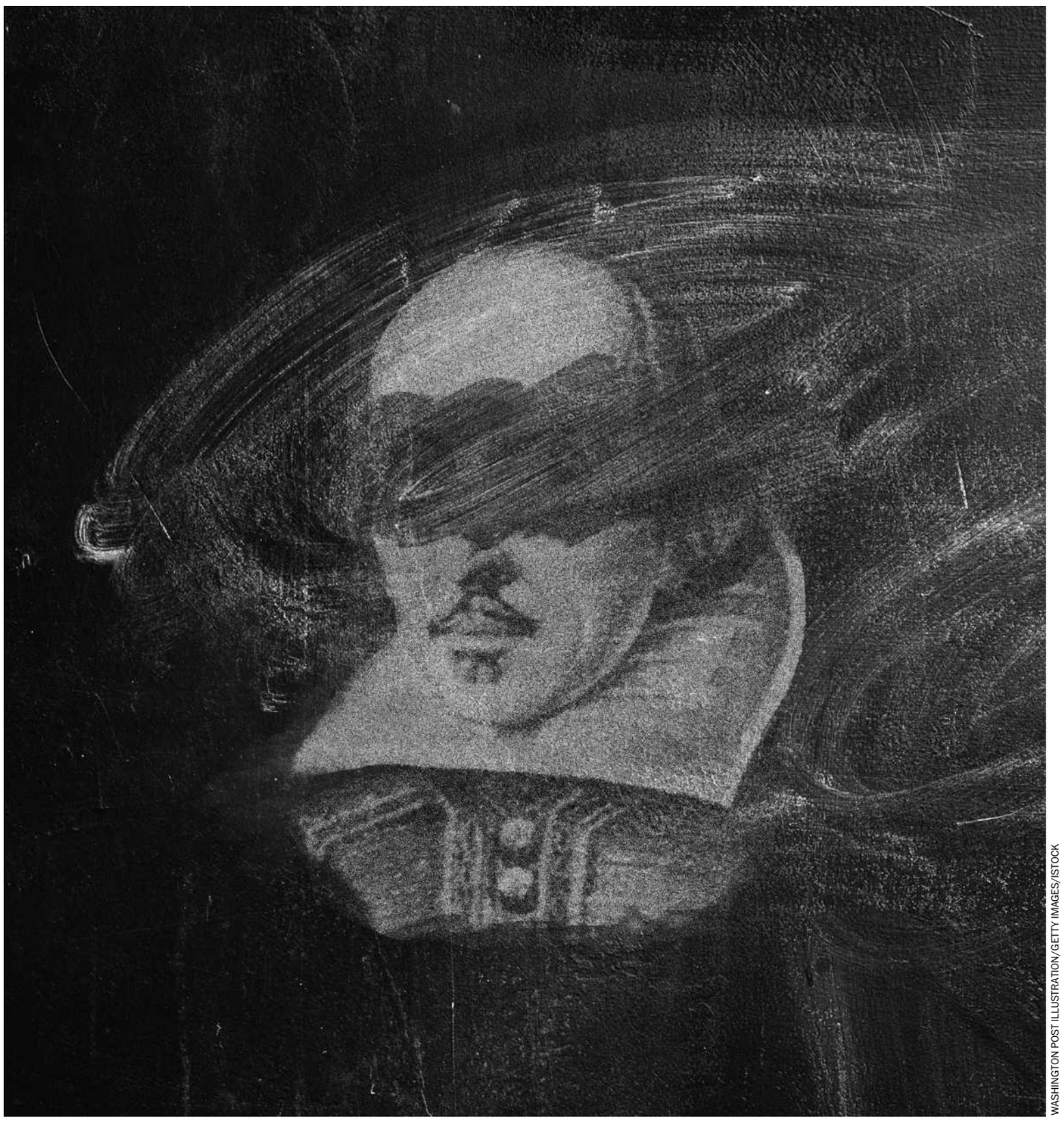

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The fool doth think he is wise

BOOK WORLD FROM **C1**

Requirement," which gave me a chance to call up Schumacher at her home in St. Paul, Minn., and fawn like a first-semester freshman. Originally, she had no plans to continue the story of Fitger's travails at Payne University. "But 'Dear Committee Members' was such a slim little thing," she says. "The form was so narrow that I didn't get a chance to go play with Fitger the way I wanted to. So after about a year, I found myself thinking, 'What would it be like for him to chair the department?' "

"The Shakespeare Requirement" provides the hilarious answer to that question.

The epistolary structure of her previous novel is gone — this is a straight narrative delivered with acrid wit — but Fitger is still here at its center, just as irritated and harried as ever. Against his will, he's been named chair of the ungovernable English department, "a funhouse of dysfunctional characters." (One is obsessed with miniature donkeys; another imitates Emily Brontë; a third wears a 15-pound necklace made of roofing nails.) They are all Olympians in the sport of passive aggression.

The plot is light on incident, high on frustration: To continue the English department's paltry funding, Fitger must somehow corral his colleagues into composing a unanimous Statement of Vision, one of those vacuous documents that deans around the world devise to drive professors mad. Fitger just wants to get a working computer, have the heat turned on in the building and fix whatever's leaking in the men's room, but his ancient colleague Professor Cassovan insists that the department's Statement of Vision include a requirement that every English major take a course in Shakespeare. Naturally, the feminist professor objects, the modernist professor balks, etc. As Shakespeare would say, "So quick bright things come to confusion."

Schumacher notes that it's no wonder satirists return again and again to the campus setting to find fodder for their wit. "The academy is filled with eccentric people," she says, "because they spend years studying some obscure thing and then you toss them into a committee and say, 'Everybody get along.' That in itself is made for comedy. It's a weird little world."

Indeed, anyone who's taught will recognize these characters, tightly bound in their arcane knowledge and rancid grievances. As a professor of creative writing at the University of Minnesota, Schumacher must surely run the risk of pricking her colleagues with her sendups of academic pomposity, but she insists that she consciously veered away from anyone she knows.

"I swear I was not making use of any real people!" she says with a laugh. "The closest I came to using any real people is *me* — as Fitger. He's like an evil little alter ego, which is part of what made him so satisfying."

Fitger is delightfully acerbic and self-destructive in these pages, raging against the dean ("the human windsock") and especially his arch- nemesis, Dr. Roland Gladwell, chair of the lavishly funded economics department. Bolstered by his performance metrics and his outside donors, Gladwell is determined to eradicate the feeble English department that persists like some tenacious mold in the basement of the Econ building.

That clash of cultures — mammon vs. art — burns through this novel, which provides a wry commentary on the plight of the arts in our mercantile era. Desperate for enrollment, the college must cater ever more cravenly to its lazy, politically correct students who grow increasingly allergic to emotional triggers — and hard work. As Fitger struggles to organize his department colleagues, fend off the rapacious economists and stall the spineless administrators, he also endures a host of personal crises, starting with the fact that his writing career is effectively moribund and he's still in love with his ex-wife . . . who's dating the dean.

Enraged by the deprivations of his underfunded department and the tedious paperwork of being its chairman, Fitger vacillates between ineffective wheedling and razor-edged sarcasm.

"Some people consider him irredeemable," Schumacher says, "but I see him as a kind of Quixotic figure. He's entirely lacking in diplomatic skills, but in his strange heart he means well."

He does mean well, and eventually he even manages to do well. And along the way, we get a very funny lesson on the frustrations and machinations of academic life.

Enrollment is now open. Don't skip this class.

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Ron Charles writes about books for The Washington Post and hosts *TotallyHipVideoBookReview.com*.

On Aug. 17 at 7 p.m., Julie Schumacher will be at Politics and Prose at Union Market, 1270 Fifth St. NE.

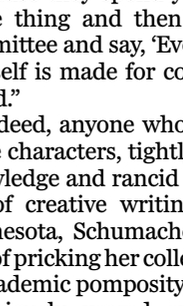
'Uplift lit' can have a little depth without touching the bottom

BY BETHANNE PATRICK

Maybe you've heard of "uplift lit," the term used for a recent crop of novels such as "Beartown," "Etta and Otto and Russell and James" and "Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine" that show an individual or community turning a difficult situation around with humor, compassion and grit. Such books inevitably get labeled "charming," "escapist" and "light."

Newcomer Libby Page's "The Lido" fits right into that category. The title, which means "shore" in Italian, is what Europeans call open-air swimming pools, and it's where Rosemary, a Brixton octogenarian, swims nearly every day, in all kinds of weather. She's committed, both because she's built a community there and because it reminds her of her late husband, George.

Twenty-something journalist Kate, a newcomer to London, seeks purpose and seems to find it when an assignment introduces her to the Lido. Before long, she and Rosemary have formed a cross-generational bond over a community protest planned over the pool's immi-



THE LIDO
By Libby Page
Simon and Schuster.
320 pp.
$25.

nent closing, and from there, subplots sprout up faster than you can perform a flip turn.

Page's novel received six-figure offers in both the United States and Britain, and it's currently being turned into a movie by the team behind the recent (and sappy) "Finding Your Feet." That kind of attention brings out critical fangs, and quite a few on both sides of the pond have been feasting, with Kirkus saying, "The stakes feel low, but the water's fine," and the Irish Times citing Page's "pedestrian prose."

But tread water for just a minute: Buried in the author's sometimes plodding style lies an unusually poignant tale of married love as the novel looks back at Rosemary and George's union. The couple, childless and working class, are the type of people whose stories are rarely told on this side of the Atlantic; perhaps that's why some of us watch terrible British movies like "Finding Your Feet." Those stories pay attention to older, wrinkled, quirky people whose wardrobes are as limited as their incomes. How refreshing, especially since there shouldn't be an age limit on uplift.

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Bethanne Patrick is the editor, most recently, of "The Books That Changed My Life: Reflections by 100 Authors, Actors, Musicians and Other Remarkable People."

Literary Calendar

THURSDAY | 7 P.M. Kelly Forsythe will read from her debut poetry collection, "Perennial," and **David Gewanter** will discuss his poetry collection "Fort Necessity," at Politics and Prose at the Wharf, 70 District Sq. SW. 202-488-3867.