



Human Acts

Han Kang · Translated by Deborah Smith

- Born in **Gwangju, South Korea, 1970**; daughter of novelist Han Seung-won
- Studied Korean literature at Yonsei University; published poetry and fiction from the early 1990s
- Family moved to Seoul months before the 1980 Gwangju Uprising
- Awarded the **Nobel Prize in Literature, 2024** – cited for poetic prose confronting historical trauma and the fragility of human life



Historical Context: The Gwangju Uprising

After the 1979 assassination of President Park Chung-hee, General Chun Doo-hwan seized power through a military coup and extended martial law. In **May 1980**, students and ordinary citizens of Gwangju rose in protest. The regime dispatched paratroopers who beat and shot demonstrators; residents armed themselves, formed a citizens' militia, and briefly held the city before the army retook Gwangju on **May 27**, killing hundreds.

For years the state **censored all mention of the massacre** and branded the dead as rioters. Only later was the uprising recognized as a turning point in South Korea's democratization. *Human Acts* is an act of counter-memory against that long official silence.

📌 The uprising is also called the **May 18 Democratic Uprising** — now a national memorial day in South Korea.

Plot Summary: A Timeline of Witness



Seven linked chapters, each narrated by a different person touched by the massacre, moving outward in time from May 1980 to 2013.

Major Characters



Dong-ho

The 15-year-old moral centre. Guilt over abandoning Jeong-dae keeps him at the provincial office; he is killed in the final assault. His death radiates through every chapter.

Jeong-dae

Dong-ho's friend, shot in the crackdown. His soul narrates Ch. 2 from atop burning bodies – insisting the dead are persons, not statistics.



Eun-sook

Survivor turned publishing editor. Detained and struck seven times for a censored text, she carries Dong-ho's memory as a private wound.



Kim Jin-su

Imprisoned and tortured after the uprising. His later suicide dramatizes how trauma outlives the event itself.

More Characters

Seon-ju

Former seamstress and labour organizer, survivor of torture including sexual violence. Approached decades later by a researcher, she wrestles with whether suffering can or should be put into words – dramatizing the ethics of bearing witness.

Dong-ho's Mother

Speaks in Gwangju dialect, addressing her dead son directly. Her grief, undimmed after thirty years, reduces the historical catastrophe to the unbearable specificity of one lost child.

The Writer

Han's barely fictionalized stand-in. Having grown up in the house the boy's family later occupied, she researches his death and reflects on the responsibility and limits of writing about the dead.

Minor Characters

Jeong-mi

Jeong-dae's older sister, also killed. Her disappearance stands for the many uncounted dead.

The Researcher

Unnamed figure collecting Seon-ju's testimony – representing the later effort to document Gwangju against official erasure.

The Soldiers

Largely faceless agents of the regime whose ordinary participation in atrocity poses the novel's central question about human cruelty.

Themes

Memory & Witness

Remembering is an obligation the living owe the dead. Writing is a fragile, necessary form of care against enforced forgetting.

State Violence & Dehumanization

The regime turns persons into things – stacking and burning bodies, branding the dead as rioters. The novel restores individuality to each victim.

The Body & Human Dignity

Han dwells on decay and the weight of a corpse not to shock but to affirm these were bodies that mattered. Dong-ho's candles are a small assertion of dignity.

Guilt & Survival

Nearly every survivor carries guilt. The book studies how conscience persists long after the event, and how survival can become its own unbearable sentence.

Solidarity & Collective Voice

By handing the narrative to many speakers, Han refuses a single hero and builds a chorus – enacting the collective courage of the uprising itself.

What Is a Human Being?

The book's deepest question: can the same species produce both such cruelty and Dong-ho's tenderness? Han holds both truths, refusing easy consolation.

Symbols & Motifs

1 Candles

Lit to mask the smell of decaying bodies, they become an image of vigil – the fragile, guttering flame of memory and life persisting against the dark.

3 Birds & the Soul (*hon*)

The soul as a bird or breath leaving the body recurs throughout, embodying the novel's belief that something in the self resists annihilation.

5 Mayflies & Gadflies

Appearing twice in the novel, swarms of mayflies and gadflies settle on clotted blood and open wounds – agents of putrefaction that literalise the body's dissolution. Yet the mayfly carries a second resonance: the adult form lives only a matter of hours or days, making it an emblem of a life cut brutally short. This connects to the novel's recurring grief over Dong-ho's truncated future – the "strapping high-school boys" he never managed to become – suggesting that the insects hovering over the dead are also figures for lives that barely had time to begin.

2 The Corpse & the Covered Face

Bodies Dong-ho tends, and the cloths laid over their faces, stand for both the reduction of persons to flesh and the human insistence on dignity even in death.

4 The Boy Who Keeps Arriving

Signalled by the Korean title *Sonyeoni onda* ("The Boy Is Coming"), Dong-ho is figured as perpetually approaching the living – a presence that will not let the past be closed.

Chapter-by-Chapter Analysis: 1980

Ch. 1 — The Boy (1980)

Narrated in the **second person**, implicating the reader as "you," Dong-ho. His quiet competence — candles, records, covered faces — sets the book's ethical baseline: *dignity as a practice*, sustained by a child when the state has abandoned it. His guilt over Jeong-dae is the seed of the whole novel.

Theme: The Body & Human Dignity

Ch. 2 — The Boy's Friend (1980)

Han shifts to the **impossible voice of the dead**. Jeong-dae's soul, bound to a burning stack of corpses, cannot leave or reach his sister. The chapter refuses to let victims become an anonymous body count — each corpse held a self with love and unfinished need. The regime's burning of bodies is rendered as an attempted erasure of selfhood.

Theme: State Violence & Dehumanization

Chapter-by-Chapter Analysis: Aftermath

Ch. 3 — The Editor, 1985 · Theme: Memory & Witness

Repression has gone quiet but not away. Eun-sook's seven slaps — counted off as a way of enduring — show the long tail of the massacre in everyday life. Literature itself becomes a small site of resistance.

Ch. 4 — The Prisoner, 1990 · Theme: Guilt & Survival

The unnamed narrator's testimony details the deliberate cruelty of detention that he and Kim Jin-su endured; Jin-su's later suicide shows trauma as a slow, continuing death. The chapter asks whether survival is always a mercy.

Ch. 5 — The Factory Girl, 2002 · Theme: Memory & Witness

Seon-ju's reluctance before the recorder stages the novel's meta-question: can suffering be spoken without being betrayed or re-inflicted? Her chapter honours both the necessity and the danger of testimony.

Ch. 6 — The Mother, 2010 · Theme: Solidarity & Collective Voice

In dialect and direct address, the mother reduces the historical catastrophe to one lost child. Her enduring grief refutes any notion that time heals or that national reckoning settles the account for those who loved the dead.

Epilogue — The Writer, 2013 · Theme: What Is a Human Being?

Han's stand-in reveals the personal thread — the shared house, the research, the grave — and reflects on the ethics and limits of writing atrocity. The book closes not with resolution but with a fragile promise to remember, and the boy still coming toward us.

Key Passages & Their Significance

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Dong-ho lighting candles (Ch. 1)

Establishes the boy's tenderness and the theme of dignity: a child performing, calmly, the care the state has refused the dead.

Theme: The Body & Human Dignity.

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Jeong-dae's soul watching his body burn (Ch. 2)

The novel's boldest formal move – narration from beyond death – insists the dead are persons, not statistics, and gives voice to the erased. **Theme: State Violence & Dehumanization.**

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Eun-sook counting the seven slaps (Ch. 3)

Turns quiet, later repression into something countable and bearable, showing how survivors ration their endurance. **Theme: Guilt & Survival.**

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Seon-ju's hesitation before the recorder (Ch. 5)

Stages the ethics of testimony: the risk that speaking re-wounds, set against the duty not to let silence win. **Theme: Memory & Witness.**

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The mother's address to her dead son (Ch. 6)

Reduces the historical to the intimate – one parent, one child – so the massacre's scale is felt as personal loss. **Theme: Solidarity & Collective Voice.**

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The writer at the grave (Epilogue)

Collapses fiction and reality, framing the whole book as witness and a debt paid to a real child. **Theme: What Is a Human Being?**

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Contemporary Relevance



State Violence & Accountability

Gwangju's pattern – crackdown, cover-up, slow reckoning – echoes in contemporary authoritarian responses to protest worldwide, from Myanmar to Belarus.



The Ethics of Testimony

Seon-ju's dilemma resonates with today's debates around survivor testimony, trauma journalism, and the risk of re-traumatization in the age of social media.



Censorship & Counter-Memory

The novel's resistance to state-imposed silence speaks directly to ongoing battles over historical memory, monument removal, and the rewriting of school curricula globally.



Literary Witness Tradition

Alongside Primo Levi, Svetlana Alexievich, and Toni Morrison, Han's Nobel recognition affirms literature's irreplaceable role in preserving what official history erases.

Key Facts at a Glance

The Book

Full Title: Human Acts

Original Title: 소년이 온다 ("The Boy Is Coming")

Written: c. 2013–2014

Published: 2014 (Korea); 2016 (UK); 2017 (US)

Translator: Deborah Smith

Genre: Historical / literary fiction; testimony novel

Setting: Gwangju, South Korea, 1980–2013

Extra Credit

A real house. In the epilogue Han reveals that the boy at the novel's heart lived in the very Gwangju house her own family had left – making the book partly an act of restitution to a real child.

The Korean title. *Sonyeoni onda* means "The Boy Is Coming" – a present-tense arrival that keeps the dead boy perpetually approaching the reader, rather than the past-tense finality the English title suggests.

📖 Related works: Primo Levi · Svetlana Alexievich · Roberto Bolaño's *2666* · Toni Morrison's *Beloved*