

I WANT TO DIE BUT I WANT TO EAT TTEOKBOKKI

Boldy Breaks The Silence Around Mental Illness

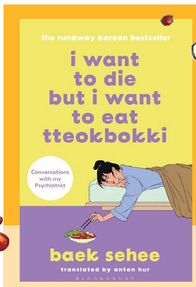
By Jennifer Lee — *21 April 2023*

Sehee Baek's crowdfunded book "I Want to Die but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki" became an unexpected bestseller when it was first published in Korea in 2018. Since then, a second volume had been released, and a theater adaptation had been made. Its success allowed it to become translated into seven Asian languages and has now been translated into English by Anton Hur in 2022.

"Tteokbokki" is a common Korean street food with cylindrically shaped white rice cakes slathered with a gooey spicy sauce derived from the Korean chili paste "gochujang." The book is the first of its kind to be published in Korea for a couple reasons: it is ***the first book that openly talked about mental illness from the perspective of the patient***, and it was in an unusual format because aside from several personal essays, it is mostly comprised of conversations in dialogue format with her therapist. In Korea, there is a strong social stigma against seeking professional help for mental health issues, so it was extremely **COURAGEOUS** of Sehee Baek to publish and share her private sessions with a wider audience.

Baek writes she had been *"introverted and sensitive"* ever since she was a child and that based on her diary entries, she was *"deeply not a born optimist."* After many years of going *"in and out of a funk that was inevitable as* **bad weather,"** she decided to see a therapist and was diagnosed with **DYSTHYMIA**, a mild but long-term form of depression.

After her diagnosis, she discovered people had not heard of this condition before, which led her to write about it in her blog. When she received a comment from someone saying, *"I thought I was reading my own diaries. I have exactly the same symptoms as you do. I am in a very dark place right now, but I see a* **glimpse of light** *when I read your words,"* she realized sharing her experience could help others.



I want to die but I want to eat tteokbokki – Bloomsbury Publishing, London U.K. – 208 pages – 2022

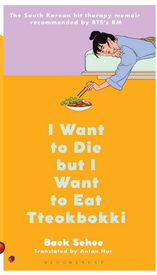
Buy on book on Amazon here!

In an interview with The Korea Society, she said, *"I wanted to meet people like me and maybe I can help them a little. I had no issue with disclosure, so why not tell people? This is the mental illness I have and these are the conversations I have with my therapist, and this is how I try to heal myself. If I share my own journey, maybe someone else can also tell their own story."*

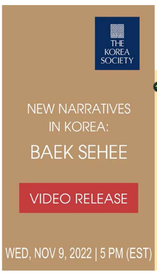
Having read many accounts of mental illnesses from professionals, Baek wanted to avoid the contrived and distant tones these accounts often had, which led to her choosing the dialogue format. *"At first, I took the transcript and tried to write it in essay form, but* **it didn't feel effective enough,"** she said to The Korea Society. *"The dialogues read better– there was a sense of rhythm. I also wanted it to feel raw with minimum filtering, while editing the transcription, I tried to keep the revision to a minimum. I wanted* **the sense of uncertainty and imperfections to remain that felt more like me."**



Baek believes one of the reasons her book has been successful is its title. She chose it because it accurately depicted the dual SET OF EXTREMES that often exist in her mind. *"I always considered myself to be contradictory. I am very extreme. It's either all or nothing. I thought when I am happy, I should just be deliriously happy when I felt miserable and sad and depressed. I should just be miserable."* She said to The Korea Society, *"when I was severely depressed and having thoughts of suicide, I was at this uncontrollable stage where I was thinking* **I should just get ready to die, but I was so hungry,** *so I was eating 'Tteokbokki.' At that moment, I just hated myself. How I know,* **such feelings can coexist.** *At the moment of the deepest despair, you can still feel hunger. You could be laughing but then suddenly cry, or cry then laugh."*







THE KOREAN SOCIETY – NEW NARRATIVES IN KOREA

In this episode of New Narratives in Korea, Baek Sehee discusses her bestselling book, her success and the challenges of dealing with mental health.

Baek Sehee is a successful young social media director at a publishing house when she begins seeing a psychiatrist about her — what to call it? — depression? She feels persistently low, anxious, self-doubting, but also judgmental of others. She hides her feelings at work and with her friends, but she's constantly spiraling, overthinking, and worrying. The effort is exhausting and overwhelming and keeps her from forming deep relationships. This can't be normal. Is this normal? But if she's so hopeless, why is she always craving her favorite street food: the hot, spicy rice cake, tteokbokki? Is this just what life is like?

Watch the full interview to learn more!



Order Baek's continuation of her hit seller. I want to die but I STILL want to eat tteokbokki. Released in August of 2024.

Order on Amazon by clicking the image above!

In the book, some of the topics Baek discusses are her insecurities, her low self-esteem, her tendency to be critical of others, her obsessions, her desire for attention, her need to please others, her relationships and friendships, and much more. The advice I found most valuable was to embrace one's limits and imperfections, to allow oneself to process the emotions one is feeling, and to recognize when one is going down a rabbit hole of negativity and change focus. Though Baek is aware her condition will not be shared and understood by all, I think many will find some commonality with the things she struggles with, and in that way, **IT COULD HELP THESE PEOPLE BY AT LEAST KNOWING THEY AREN'T ALONE.**

"Don't be **ashamed** or dislike yourself for your own **darkness**. Your own **struggles**, don't avoid it... This may be a cliché, but **life is hard for everyone,** and I am the only one who can take care of me. **No matter** what ails you."

- Baek Sehee

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