

## ***Finalist, High School Category***



Essayist: Jeehyo, age 15, James Madison High School

Advocating for: *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop*  
by Hwang Bo-reum

In the depths of the bustling lives that we all live, there is always a moment where we realize that we need to slow down - to stop and heal our burnt out, sore minds and bodies. Maybe that rest would be pulling out from the freeway into a temporary place to stay for the night, or signing the final contract for the quaint, forever home in a small neighborhood, away from the voracious, ambitious city. Originally written in Korean, *Welcome to the Hyunam-dong Bookshop* is a cozy, slice-of-life novel that leads the reader into the heart of this charming bookshop, as Yeongju slowly transforms it into a safe space for her and her customers, each character eventually finding their true calling.

After suddenly abandoning her high-flying job and demanding husband to open a bookshop in the corners of a small neighborhood, Yeongju faces intense grief and uncertainty. Wanting to leave behind the tears, Yeongju finds healing by immersing herself into the bookshop. She carefully chooses each book to add to the floor-to-ceiling shelves and readily hosts book events to meet the satisfaction of the customers. As Yeongju contentedly greets each customer and enthusiastically leads each book discussion, the bookshop becomes a haven for an assorted group of customers, including a teenage boy questioning life, his troubled mother, and many more, all struggling to keep afloat. With the magical powers of this sanctuary, maybe Yeongju and her customers will learn the way of life. This is the Hyunam-dong Bookshop.



I think that this book deserves more recognition among all readers, and though it does not compare to the thrilling, tear-jerking fiction books that race up the bestseller list, its own niche story is one that everyone needs to hear. Lucky readers who pick up this slow, simple narrative should not expect an exciting, “cannot put down” plot, or a complicated trope. Instead, go in with lightheartedness, and truly appreciate the quiet, laid back storyline. Truly recognize the worth of the complex, philosophical topics that it covers and the thoughtful insights that it shares. Truly understand the intent and message of each carefully crafted chapter that the author delicately placed as they strive to share the true meaning of life and happiness.

In this fast-paced world of high expectations, especially in this privileged DMV area, I have always felt pressured to take on every high-flying opportunity, take the highest-level classes, and win every race. This has left me feeling tired and overwhelmed, but I always told myself, “When I’m rich and successful, I’ll be happy.” After reading this book, I realized that the “attend a good school, get a good job, find a good husband” recipe does not have to be the only path to success and happiness. I can find my own success in my own dreams and in my own story. I would recommend this warm, quirky book to anyone who wishes to fully embrace life, and would hope that they can find healing in this cozy, welcoming bookshop.