

Praise for Island of Fantasy

“The book is at its most probing when the author plumbs the depths of his loneliness and comes to grips with the reality that not only is the grass not always greener, but that everyone is searching for greener pastures or, in this case, an island of fantasy.”

—*Korea Times*

“This is an easy book to recommend: a thoughtful, thorough memoir by a writer with a subtle sense of humor and an easygoing way of expressing himself, filled with interesting characters, amusing anecdotes...and some enlightening information on both Korea and on how ESL programs tend to work. It's a lot of fun.”

—*Trenchman.com*

“If anyone is considering traveling to Korea to teach, you should definitely order a copy of this book. I used to follow the story when parts of it were posted on the author's website. It's an interesting and humorous story and should provide you with a little insight of what it's like to find yourself in a strange country teaching English.”

—*Robert Spear (<http://homepage.mac.com>)*

“The book was really funny and things that happened to Shawn in the book are the same things you will be thinking to yourself, happened to you sometime during your time in Korea in one way or another. However, some of things such as the jock itch problem he had, I have never had to worry about here fortunately. The book is definitely worth checking out.”

—*GI Korea (<http://jetiranger.tripod.com>)*

“If you were dissatisfied with your life, would you answer an ad for mail-order English teachers in Asia and put yourself in the hands of strangers? Well, Shawn Matthews did! He writes with great presence. I couldn't put the book down as I suffered and laughed with him to the end. Now I'm hooked and waiting for the sequel.”

—*T.R. Thornton*

“The description describes the book perfectly. This book has been one of the best books I've read in a while. Shawn accurately describes his experiences to the point where I can play a video of it in my head. Not only is the book VERY funny, but you'll want to jump in there and help him out at various points. Good job!”

—*Chris Garson*

Praise for Korea Life Blog

“Shawn has consistently provided some of the finest descriptions and commentary about everyday expatriate life in Korea that you’ll find anywhere. In fact, I’ve always felt that people who really wanted to learn about life in this country should be reading KLB.”

—*The Marmot* (www.blog.marmot.cc)

“I was just reading Korea Life Blog. One thing I admire about this blog is the author's upbeat nature and humor. It is easy to become pessimistic about Korea, but the author of the blog, Shawn Matthews, always maintains a positive attitude. It is good to see a blog such as this one.”

—*The Rathbone Press* (<http://rathbonepress.tblog.com/>)

“This was one of the first blogs I found from abroad where I wanted to go originally. I learnt pretty much everything I needed to know about esl via his blog.”

—*Plark* (<http://plark.blogspot.com>)

“The man who launched a thousand blogs, your friend and mine, Mr. Shawn. He gets the thing that makes blogs interesting: one individual's perspective whether it be good, bad, happy, sad, weird, familiar, or a stray dog pooping all over his floor. ”

—*Swiss James* (www.lostseouls.com)

“Korea Life Blog, created and run by Shawn Matthews, was voted as one of the best Korean weblogs by Flyingchair.net.”

—*The Korea Times*

“I had never even heard of a Blog before, until I ran into KLB by chance, through a random Interent search. I have enjoyed reading and viewing the stories and photos that made his blog so popular. Thanks to the link off KLB, my blog has gone from something that was only meant for family and friends back in Canada, to a hobby that I keeps me busy throughout the week.”

—*Mike* (<http://gyopolife25.blogspot.com>)

“Yeah, sounds like a great website. I never heard of it before, but I’m sure it’s good. Can you give me the money now?”

—*Homeless Harry*

Island of Fantasy

A Memoir of an English Teacher in Korea

Shawn Matthews

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Disclaimer

This book describes the author's experience while living and teaching on Koje Island. Some names and identifying details of individuals mentioned in the book have been changed to protect their privacy.

Island of Fantasy

A Memoir of an English Teacher in Korea

Chapter 1

“Why do you want to be an English teacher?” asked one of the eight faculty members sitting around the interview table. It was a standard question, one I had answered several times including on the application and at the screening interview a few days beforehand.

“I love working with high school students,” I repeated mechanically. “They are so full of energy and enthusiasm. I want to harness that energy and channel it into creative outlets. Kids these days are so caught up in TV and computer games they don’t take an interest in literature anymore. All I have to do is find out exactly what they are interested in, what they’re passionate about. Once I make that connection, I know I can inspire kids to read and write about what they like—much in the same way my high school English teacher inspired me.”

Though most of my answers were contrived to sound professional, this one was partially the truth. Or at least it had been at one time. My high school English teacher really did inspire me; I had wanted to be just like him. That was until I practiced teaching in a real high school as part of the education program at my university. There I realized firsthand the horrors of my mistake. High school students were not actually young,

enthusiastic beings eager to learn. They were emotionally unsteady, disrespectful imbeciles and demons from the very core of hell—much as they were when I was a student myself.

How could I have forgotten so easily? How could I have been so idealistic?

Regrettably, by the time I came to this realization, it was too late; I was a senior in my last semester. At that point it would have been impossible to change majors and graduate on time. Having already amassed twenty grand in student loans, continuing my education was out of the question. With no other alternative, I graduated with the degree, worked for a stint as a substitute teacher—part time fill-in jobs which only re-enforced my resolve not to be a teacher—and then avoided the profession entirely for a few years by working a variety of unrelated jobs. Bills piled up. Not being able to make ends meet, I was forced to reconsider the teaching field.

The panel included several aged teachers, the head of the English Department, the vice-principal and the principal himself, all sitting at the end of a large table, all scrutinizing me silently.

“But how can you really inspire these kids?” asked one of the teachers skeptically. “Isn’t that being a little naive?”

“If you fail to inspire them,” asked another, “what then?”

“I can barely inspire my kids to stay awake,” joked a teacher whose nose was shaped like a carrot.

“All this inspiring is fine and dandy,” said the principal. “But what I want to know about is spelling. Is it really possible to teach spelling? And if so, how?” He lowered his glasses and watched me closely. The room was silent, my mouth dry.

“S-spelling?” I stuttered. “Oh, right, no problem. Well, I firmly believe it’s possible to teach spelling. For example, let’s take the word ‘spelling’ itself. S-P-E-L-L-I-N-G. Spelling. It’s easy, see? How did I know how to spell that? Well, because of

my teachers, I guess.” Frantically, I searched for a better answer, but my mind kept drawing blanks. There must be a way to teach spelling, but what was it? I remembered one of my education professors talking about it. What had she said? Unable to recall, I blurted out the only thing I could think of: “If hired, I’m going to consult with the other teachers about how they teach spelling and pick the method that’s working best.”

I cringed and sunk into the chair. “Well, I’ve heard all I have to hear,” said the principal after an awkward amount of silence. Apparently, his only concern was that kids could spell. Even though I nailed most of the interview, it didn’t matter; I failed the key question, and he was no longer interested.

Outside, I shook my head and sighed. A long-winded sigh. My father’s sigh. In the car, I cursed and ripped off my tie and blasted Radiohead’s *Let Down*. On the way home it dawned on me: *active reading*. That was it! The most effective way to improve spelling is to read regularly. Why couldn’t I have remembered that? Damn! I punched the steering wheel, causing the horn to beep and the guy in front of me to turn around and give me the finger. Screw you, too, buddy!

A bunch of bills stuck out of the mailbox. I cursed and threw them on the floor. Clara, my cat, dashed to the back room. No messages on the answering machine either. Of course not. I didn’t expect *she* would call. Off with her new boyfriend, I assumed, in his convertible. No doubt he had a convertible. No doubt he had everything I didn’t have, the bastard!

Eventually, I felt guilty for scaring Clara. As if she had anything to do with the dismal world in which I lived. “Come here, girl,” I called cheerily. Nothing. I tried patting my leg. Again, nothing. As a last resort, I grabbed a can of her favorite soft food, *Chicken & Liver Chunks in Gravy*. The very moment I pulled open the lid, she sprinted so swiftly she slid across the kitchen floor and into the wall, bumping her head. Unfazed, she

purred and gulped down the food as quickly as I dumped it in her dish.

Certain I had failed the interview, I got online and wearily browsed more teaching ads. A moment later, I came across something unusual: an ad announcing teaching jobs in Asia. I glanced at the link and moved on. Soon, though, I started to think. It was an idea I had flirted with before, living overseas, and I had even obtained a passport. Not long thereafter, I gave up on the idea because, well, I had no money. The idea of *working* abroad never occurred to me, what with all the hurdles and hoops one must encounter and the cost of setting up. Then again, I really didn't know how it worked. I clicked back to the link.

I read about teaching in China and Japan and Korea. To my amazement, private Korean schools, called *hagwons*, were offering airfare in advance and a free apartment. What? It seemed almost too good to be true. I looked for a catch, but there was none—at least none that I could see, anyway. In fact, the perks got even better. The salary was similar to mine, yet the taxes and the cost of living were less. Much less. The deals included inexpensive national health insurance and a month's bonus pay upon contract completion. All they required of me was to be a native English speaker and hold a four-year degree. Any degree. That mine happened to be in English education, while unnecessary, could only be advantageous, I assumed. Fascinated, I made a fresh cup of coffee and continued to research. Clara purred in a ball on my lap; Radiohead rang out of the speakers.

I scoured an ESL forum where English teachers in Korea discuss their jobs. Many grumbled about poor conditions: too many classes, split shifts, disrespectful students, working on Saturdays, little or no communication with the boss, short vacation time, and the like. A couple reported their passports

had been held by their boss and not returned. I found a blacklist: a list of schools to be avoided. I read practically every entry. Fortunately, in addition to these complaints, I found that other teachers were having the times of their lives. Many were pleased with the opportunity to bank a lot of money while exploring the country. Some had a rough time of it initially, but had learned their way and moved on to greener pastures. Some were lucky from the get-go. Others had been there for two, three, even four or five years, even gotten married there. Surely it couldn't be all that bad, then.

Because I was so interested, so absorbed in the idea, I chose to ignore most of the downside.

I stayed awake half the night and the next night and the night after that. The exciting prospect of moving to Korea carried me through the banality of daily life. At the time, I was employed as a mental health counselor. As one of the program participants described the voices in his head, I fantasized the voices of beautiful Korean girls. I became so intent, so obsessed with the idea, that the thought of *not* going seemed ever more farfetched.

Now that I was fixated on the idea, I needed to decide where exactly to teach. Most people were in Seoul, but I wanted my experience to be unique. Where could I go? Suddenly I had a brilliant idea. One of those recruiters, I thought, can help me avoid a bad situation and find the best possible job and location. I did a search online with overwhelming results. Everyone and his dog were trying to recruit English teachers for South Korea. Finally, I just picked one at random. His name was Mr. Wong, and he had an office in Toronto. Unfamiliar with Korean names, I figured he must be Korean. Surely, then, he would be the most helpful. Prepared for a lengthy interview, I gave him a call.

"Hello, you have the reached the *Wong* number," he answered, I guess with a joke.

“Hello, Sir. My name is Shawn. I'm from New York State, and I'm interested in teaching in South Korea.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed. “Mr. Shane, you come to right person. I'm recruiter! I can do for you. This is not problem. What is your e-mail? I send you many job on e-mail now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Don't you want to know anything about me?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Shane. That's important. Please tell me about you.”

“I'm American, and I have a BA degree in English education. I have some teaching exp—”

“Mr. Shane! This enough information. Job for you is not problem. I send you e-mail now with many job offer.”

“But—”

“Please tell me your e-mail. Many job wait for you.”

“Slow down, I have some questions first.”

“Yah? I can answer question. This not problem.”

“First of all, I don't want to teach in Seoul because—”

“Mr. Shane. You don't have to teach in Seoul if you don't want. This not problem. Just give—”

“And I'd like to know more about Korea. Can you tell me about it?”

“Sure, sure. Not problem. Korea great place, Mr. Shane. Very great place.”

“That's it?”

“Korea very exciting place, too.”

“How long did you live there?”

“What you say, Mr. Shane?”

“Aren't you from Korea?”

“Well, not exactly, Mr. Shane. I'm from China, but I live in Canada now.”

“So, how long did you stay in Korea?”

“Yah, well, I never been there.”

“Then how do you know—”

“Mr. Shane. Do not worry. You are foreigner. Korean think all foreigner movie-star. You be very popular, very happy there. Foreigner always happy in Korea. I know this. I'm recruiter.”

“And I can't speak Korean. Will this be a problem?”

“Not problem, Mr. Shane. You are English teacher, not Korean teacher. You just teach English and everybody happy.”

“Then how about the students? What are they like?”

“Student never problem.”

“Really? But I heard—”

“Mr. Shane, you are teacher. In Korea, teacher same as priest. You don't have to worry about student. Student always quiet and respect teacher.” While I knew he was exaggerating and would tell me anything to keep me hooked, I figured at least he could find me a decent school in a good location. I gave him my e-mail address and hung up amused and delighted. If only it were this easy here in my own country.

Later, Mr. Wong sent me an e-mail requesting a photo and copies of documents, including my passport and university degree. The photo, he said, was most important and to “send immediately.” I didn't have a professional digital photo. All I had on disk was an old picture with my eyes crossed. Nonetheless, I sent it and clarified I would send a better one as soon as possible.

During the time it took to drink a cup of coffee, Mr. Wong e-mailed back an eye-popping list of job offers. Every school in Korea was in need of a cross-eyed teacher, it seemed. To my bewilderment, however, most of them were in Seoul. There were two others: one in a city called Kwang-ju and one more that really caught my attention: a new school on a small island called Koje-do. This job offer came with a curious note from the director himself, a Mr. Kim. Somehow, though I had

never met him, he referred to me as an “outstanding teacher” and said he would like me to teach at his school “without further aduement.” He would have Mr. Wong send me a plane ticket shortly, provided I answered yes immediately. Otherwise, he said, he would have to choose another of “many highfully-qualify and expertly teachers” who have been “hoping and wanting patiently” for a chance to teach there. The end of the e-mail was from Mr. Wong:

Mr. Shane, this very urgent. Many teachers want these jobs. You have to be like race car. Reply with other documents and job you want APSA! Then school send you contract. You bring that and original diploma to Korea. Everything like magic. When you reply, next is watch mailbox for plane ticket.

Even though Mr. Kim's special note sounded unconvincing, the idea of living on a small island really got me. I scanned the internet and found a little information about Koje-do and several photos. Seductively dubbed the *Island of Fantasy*, it seemed beautiful, consisting of wooded mountains and surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. There, I thought, I could have a unique experience in an unspoiled part of Korea while being just 45 minutes by ferry to Busan, Korea's second most populous city. Additionally, because of its geographical location, the weather was supposed to be mild: cool winters and pleasantly warm summers.

After checking the blacklists, I decided to take that job and replied to Mr. Wong's e-mail. A couple of minutes later I received a contract. It was short and basically stated I would teach 25 teaching hours a week for a certain sum of money. Seemed rather easy, I thought, imagining 25 hours a week as five classes a day with quiet students who thought of me as their priest. It was also five hours less than most other schools

were offering. To me that meant they must be laid-back islanders, people that prefer sunshine and beaches to hard work and study. The contract was probably a formality, a required document to process my visa. The only downside I could see was the payment schedule: once per month. Then again, I supposed such a system would make it easier to save money. I would get my pay, wire home the bulk to pay down my bills, then budget the rest.

In addition to sending these documents, I requested at least a week to prepare. No one would be able to drop everything and leave for Korea in one day, and I needed time to wrap things up with work, friends and family. Later that night, at 3:00 in the morning, Mr. Kim's wife called. Apparently she was unaware of the time difference, much less my need for sleep.

"Please, you must come now," she said.

"Hello? Who is this?" I mumbled, half asleep.

"I'm Mrs. Kim. Please come now."

"Mrs. Kim? Oh, hello there! I'm very sorry, but I can't come until next week. I have to leave notice at my job and say goodbye to my family."

"We need you now. Please come. We need the great teacher for student happy. All student wait for you."

"I am very sorry. I can't come now. I'm sleeping."

"Please come now," she repeated bluntly and firmly.

"I'm sorry, I need one week. I think that is pretty fair. I have to—"

"One week long time. We need you now. Students wait. Parents wait, too. Don't disappointing."

"Look," I said, irritated. "I'm very sorry. You will have to find another teacher then."

"No, no. I ask Mr. Kim to wait. Have a nice day. Goodbye."

When I came around, I wondered if the call had been a dream. I felt apprehensive. That was until I got a phone call from the Human Resources Department of the high school where I had interviewed. The secretary thanked me heartily, but was sorry to say I didn't get the job. "The principal decided to go with someone who has a little more experience teaching spelling."

"That's fine," I replied smugly. "I've accepted another job anyway—at a *hagwon* in South Korea. Can you spell *hagwon*? Ha! I didn't think so." I hung up the phone triumphantly. Though the triumph was a bit unusual, it made me feel good nonetheless.

That same day I did some further research into teaching in Korea and discovered information about an E-2 visa which, unsurprisingly, Mr. Wong had failed to mention. This was the appropriate visa needed for a foreigner to teach legally in Korea, and was valid for one year or the duration of the work contract. According to the information, the visa could not be issued in Korea though. I called up Mr. Wong.

"This not problem."

"That's it?"

"Mr. Shane, you are about to embark on amazing trip. Don't worry. School process all documents for you. Next is send you to Korean Embassy in Japan to pick up visa. School pay everything. Don't worry—you're American. E-2 visa not problem for you. You have good time in Japan, too. Japanese think all foreigner movie-star. I know this. I'm recruiter."

"Well, why don't they just issue it in Korea? I'm going to be working *there*, not Japan."

"Mr. Shane. If they did like that, you not get the free trip to Japan. Think of it glass half full, not half empty."

“I guess that’s true,” I said. “I always wanted to see Japan. But what do I do beforehand? According to this information, I should not work in Korea with a tourist visa.”

“This not problem, Mr. Shane.”

“Well, of course this not problem for you! This problem for me. And my name is not—”

“I call you back.”

Later: “Mr. Shane, I spoke with Mr. Kim. He say don't worry and no problem. He take care of everything. You just get ready to Korea. You like family now.”

“All right,” I sighed frustrated. “I’ll look into it a little more. Thanks.”

Back online, more research. It was called a “visa run” and did seem like standard procedure for schools that needed a teacher quickly. However, I still felt uneasy. Perhaps I was foolish to rush the whole thing. Maybe I should search around for a different school, get the visa arranged before leaving. There certainly are enough jobs to choose from. On the other hand, I really want to go and soon. If I put it off, I may never follow through, probably find more excuses and end up stuck in the same rut I’ve been in.

There was also the island to think about. If I turned down the offer, I may never find a job there again. And in my mind, I already inflated Koje-do into an ideal, a sort-of Korean Hawaii—magical, mysterious, extraordinary—far away from the depressing and ordinary life of Syracuse, New York. The teaching aspect seemed secondary anyway, only five classes a day with what I assumed to be studious, respectful and obedient students, completely unlike the horrid monsters I had taught before. Besides, I had just failed another interview, and the thought of filling out more applications made my head pang. Going to Korea was a risk, but so was staying here

depressed. Not only would I have an amazing experience, I would be able to save money and pay my bills.

Above all else, I was attracted to the idea of having an aura like a movie-star. A broad smile spread across my face as I imagined crowds of happy Koreans cheering for the English teacher, beautiful Korean girls in lingerie pampering me and feeding me grapes.

Chapter 2

“What?” yelled my mother, swinging around, her eyes bright and round. “Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind?”

“It's just for a year, and I'll probably be back in six months.”

“No you won't! They're communists! You don't know communism. They'll kill you—don't think they won't. They'll accuse of being a spy and shoot you dead. They torture people there—you'd better believe it. Do you want bamboo shoots shoved under your fingernails? Do you want your head cut off? If you're lucky you'll rot in a cell somewhere. You don't know. If you're father was here he'd tell you.”

“Mom, I'm going to South Korea, not a war. You're thinking of North Korea, or somewhere in China. Actually, I don't know where you're thinking.”

“Yeah, well, your father fought all them in Vietnam. He'd shoot you himself if he could hear this lunacy.”

While Mom was usually a pessimist, she was educated and I knew her gambit. She said such absurd things to scare me, a mother's technique to keep her child safe and by her side. Now my research on Korea was paying off: “Yes, Mom,” I replied. “Dad fought in the *Vietnam War*, not the *Korean War*.”

Some Koreans even fought in Vietnam alongside us. And our soldiers fought alongside the Koreans in the Korean War. They fought together against the communists of the north. After the war, South and North Korea retreated to their own sides of the 38th parallel. North Korea is communist. South Korea is a democracy, not unlike ours. “

“Yeah, well, any day now those North Koreans will fly down the mountains and start their killing again. They'll kill you first—don't think they won't.”

“There's little chance of that happening now. Not too long ago, Kim Dae Jung of South Korea received the Nobel Peace Prize for creating a positive relationship between the two Koreas and making advancements toward reunification. And just in case there is any danger, we have over 30,000 troops there now and an embassy that will arrange my departure in the event of an emergency, which, of course, is very unlikely.”

She was surprised that I knew that so much. Quickly, she changed tactics. “You'll fall in love, I know you. You'll meet some desperate Korean girl. Don't think she really loves you. They'll do anything to get out of that place. Are you kidding me? As soon as you get here, it's goodbye to you, sucker.”

“Now you're imagining the Philippines, Mom. South Korea is not poverty-stricken. They're a modern, industrial society. They're not desperate to get out. Not everyone wants to come to America either, you know. And thanks for your confidence in my ability to keep a girl.”

“The plane will crash. That's the end. You'll get somewhere over the Pacific Ocean and the plane will go down. Oh God, I can see it all now. They'll run a memorial about you in the news. 'He was a gifted man, but made a foolish decision.' Are you ready for that? You know that will be the end of me, too. You're my only son. And don't think for a minute that life-vest they give you will do any good. You'll be dead—don't

worry. And if you're not, you'll drown. You don't want to drown—trust me. Those planes go down all the time.”

“They do not, and you know that's not true! More people die every day in car accidents than all plane crashes combined.”

“Now that I think about it, you've never even been on an airplane. Are you crazy? Your first time flying and to South Korea? What happens if you get up there and panic. Some people do, you know. You'll make a scene. They'll arrest you...”

The more this went on, the more outrageous her arguments became and the more she realized I was intent on going. Finally, as a last resort, she broke into tears. “Oh, Shawn,” she wailed, pulling me close. “Please, don't go. You're my child, my life. My only son. I don't want you to go. You promise you'll come back?”

“I promise.”

“Yeah, sure,” my boss said. “Now about the progress report—”

“I'm serious, George.”

He raised his eyebrow and looked me in the eye. I often made jokes at work, so I wasn't surprised he didn't believe me. This time I kept a straight face.

“You're serious?”

“Yes.”

Examining me carefully, he put his hands on his head and let out a long sigh. Because of the low pay for mental health counselors, people were constantly coming and going, and George was responsible for keeping the office fully staffed. “Last time you talked about going west to Colorado. Now it's Korea?”

“This time I'm sure. The plane ticket is paid for and on the way.”

“Only one week's notice? You know we need two.”