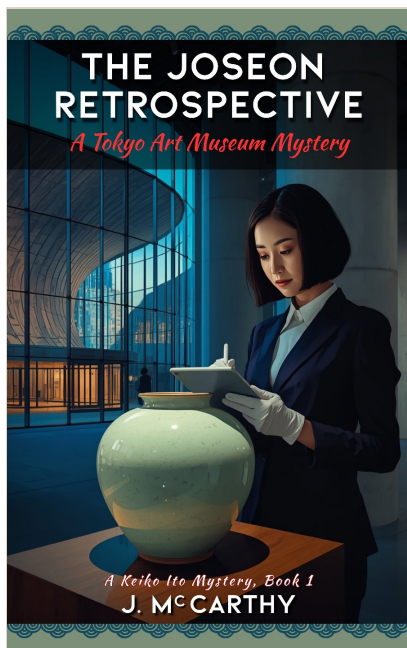


BOOK CLUB KIT

THE JOSEON RETROSPECTIVE

A TOKYO ART MUSEUM MYSTERY · A KEIKO ITO MYSTERY, BOOK ONE

BY J. MCCARTHY



For the librarian. This kit is designed to make it effortless for a reading group to adopt *The Joseon Retrospective*. Everything a book club needs is here, ready to print or circulate: discussion questions, historical context, and a set of documentary materials drawn from the novel's own world. The kit may be reproduced freely for book-club and classroom use. A copy of the novel will be available for your collection in October 2026 through Ingram (iPage) and Baker & Taylor.

WHAT'S IN THIS KIT

- 1 The Reading Group Guide** — Twelve discussion questions, deliberately spoiler-free, so the guide can circulate before every member has finished the book.
- 2 The Provenance Timeline: The Moon Jar's Ledger** — A chronology tracing the central object from its making in c. 1685 through confiscation, private holding, and repatriation — reproduced here only through the day the case begins. The novel completes the ledger.
- 3 A Glossary of Institutional and Curatorial Terms** — Twenty-three working definitions: the terms as a registrar uses them, not as a dictionary would.
- 4 A Note for American Readers** — The institutional context behind the case: what a registrar does, why a condition report is a legal instrument, and how a badge log works.
- 5 A Note from the Author** — A letter to reading groups from J. McCarthy.

THE READING GROUP GUIDE

Twelve questions for discussion. Nothing below gives away the solution — groups with a member still finishing may proceed safely.

- 1** Keiko tells us she does not investigate crimes; she reconciles records. Where in your own life has the paperwork known more than the people did — a receipt, a calendar entry, a message log that settled an argument memory could not? Tell the story. Did the record's version feel fair?
- 2** A registrar's work is nearly invisible when it is done well, which is to say it is nearly always invisible. Who does Keiko's kind of work in the places you know — and what does the novel suggest we owe them?
- 3** Dr. Yun Se-bin is present in the novel almost entirely through what she left behind: her research, her handwriting, her choices about what to preserve and where. What kind of person emerges from those traces? What do her choices suggest about what she valued, what she feared, and whom — or what — she trusted?
- 4** The 1938 letter records the taking of a family's possession in language so administratively calm that the taking reads, at first pass, like a favor done for the paperwork. Where else — in history, or in the present — does official language do this kind of work? Why is calm prose so effective at hiding things?
- 5** For generations, the Yoon family's ownership of the moon jar rested on no document at all: possession was the record. Museums, courts, and markets all demand paper as proof of belonging — a standard the colonial confiscation itself helped write. When cultural objects are at stake, is that standard just? What would a fairer test of belonging look like, and could an institution actually apply it?
- 6** The story is set inside a Japanese institution confronting objects taken from Korea during the colonial period, written from the Japanese side of that history. How does the novel handle that vantage point? What did you know about this history before reading, and what surprised you?
- 7** The National Art Center Tokyo is real, and really is a museum with no permanent collection: everything arrives, is documented, is exhibited, and goes home. How does that institutional fact echo through the novel's themes of custody, belonging, and impermanence?
- 8** The novel gives sustained attention to routine — the commute, the apartment, the cat, the correctly filed form. Is routine a comfort for Keiko, or armor? Did the quiet domestic rhythm change how the murder landed for you?
- 9** Many chapters close by stepping briefly ahead of themselves — a glimpse of what a moment will later come to mean. How did those small flashes forward change the way you read? Did they build dread, reassurance, or both?
- 10** The museum must investigate itself while being investigated. Where does the novel draw the line between loyalty to an institution and loyalty to the truth? Do any of its characters seem to confuse the two?

- 11** The novel relies heavily on the case's actual paperwork — letters, checklists, floor plans, and timelines. Did reading these in-universe documents change your understanding of the story? Why might a mystery about records rely so heavily on the records themselves?
- 12** The Joseon Retrospective names an exhibition — but a retrospective is also an act of looking back. What is this novel looking back at? And who, in its world, gets to decide how the past is displayed?

THE PROVENANCE TIMELINE

THE MOON JAR'S LEDGER



OBJECT. Celadon moon jar (*dal hangari*). Joseon dynasty, c. 1685. Height 12 in.; diameter 13 in. Two-section construction, joined at the equator; characteristic asymmetrical silhouette. Pale celadon glaze, gray-green at thickness, shoulder pooling blue-gray. Fine crazing throughout. Hairline crack, upper shoulder — stable, logged.

ACCESSION REFERENCE: on loan. Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation. Joseon Ceramics Retrospective, National Art Center Tokyo.

DATE	LOCATION	STATUS	HANDLER / AUTHORITY
c. 1685	Joseon (Korea)	Made. Maker unrecorded.	—
c. 1685 – 1938	Yoon family, Jongno District, Keijō (Seoul)	Held. Domestic possession across generations. No written record; possession was the record.	Yoon family
October 1938	Government-General of Korea, Keijō	“Administrative transfer.” Object taken. Family notified; claims declared extinguished. (Letter on official letterhead — reproduced in the novel’s appendices.)	Acquisitions officer, Government-General
1938	Private collection, Japan	Acquired. Recorded as lawful purchase.	Yamashiro Kenji
1938 – 1991	Yamashiro collection, Japan	Held privately. Off public record for fifty-three years.	Yamashiro estate
1991	Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation, Seoul	Repatriated to Foundation custody. Provenance recorded as “Japan, prior private collection.” Gap unexamined.	Korean Cultural Heritage Foundation
2007	National Art Center Tokyo — archive	Yamashiro records donated to NACT at the building’s founding. 1938 correspondence enters institutional archive (Box 14, Folder 3).	Ishida Hisashi, estate counsel
Tues. 20 Oct. 2026	NACT, loading dock / registrar’s office	Arrived on loan. Courier-accompanied. Condition report opened at inspection, filed in triplicate, countersigned.	Senior Registrar Ito; courier Dr. Yun Se-bin
Thurs. 22 Oct. 2026	NACT, basement service corridor	Archive reference to 1938 confiscation entered into the record by courier.	Dr. Yun Se-bin
ENTRIES BEYOND THIS POINT PENDING. The remainder of this ledger is completed by the novel.			

The ledger is reproduced only through the day the case begins. One entry, above all, remains open. **RESTITUTION: PENDING.**

A GLOSSARY OF INSTITUTIONAL AND CURATORIAL TERMS

Working definitions — the terms as a registrar uses them, not as a dictionary would.

accession — The formal act of recording an object into a collection: the moment a thing becomes an entry. An accession number follows the object for the rest of its institutional life. NACT holds no permanent collection, so nothing in this building is accessioned; everything arrives, is documented, and goes home.

badge log — The chronological record of credentialed door events produced by the building management system: badge, door, direction, timestamp. Cameras record what they were pointed at. Badge logs record what happened.

building management system (BMS) — The integrated software that runs a modern institutional building — climate, power, access control — and keeps a log of all of it. The building's own ledger, kept whether or not anyone is reading.

buncheong — Korean stoneware of the early Joseon period, dressed in white slip and decorated quickly: brushed (hakeme), stamped, incised, or painted in iron. Prized for confidence rather than polish.

catalogue raisonné — A complete scholarly catalog of an artist's known works, with each object's provenance, condition, and attribution argued in print. The term keeps its French spelling even in institutions that have Americanized every other catalog they own.

celadon — A family of glazes running gray-green to blue-gray, the color produced by small amounts of iron fired in a reduction kiln. Thin, it goes translucent over the clay; thick, it pools.

chain of custody — The unbroken documentary record of who held an object, when, and under what authority. Where the chain has a gap, the gap is itself information.

condition report — The registrar's clinical description of an object's physical state at a fixed moment: every crack, loss, repair, and anomaly, measured, photographed, and countersigned. Opened at arrival and closed at departure, so that any change between the two has a date.

conservation — The discipline of stabilizing objects against time; distinct from restoration, which makes things look whole, and from curation, which decides what things mean. Conservators answer to the object.

courier, accompanying — The lender's representative who travels with a loaned object and holds authority over its handling until the receiving institution signs for it. The object's advocate in someone else's building.

crazing — The fine network of controlled fracture that accumulates in a fired glaze as glaze and clay body expand and contract at different rates across decades. A record of time passing, not a defect — and distinct from a crack in the body itself.

environmental log — The continuous record of temperature and relative humidity in a storage or exhibition space. Objects tolerate conditions. What they cannot tolerate is change.

Government-General of Korea — The Japanese colonial administration that governed Korea from 1910 to 1945, headquartered in Keijō — the colonial-era name for Seoul. Its Cultural Property Management office in this novel is an invention; the administrative practices it stands for are documented history.

incident room — The room a museum sets aside when something has gone wrong enough to need one.

loan agreement — The contract governing an object's travel: term, insurance, environmental conditions, handling requirements, credit line. The lender sets the conditions; the borrower signs them; the registrar enforces them.

master credential — A staff credential permitting building entry at any hour, held within the Security Division as part of the oversight role. In a building where every door writes to the log, a master credential changes what a person may do — not what is recorded.

moon jar (dal hangari) — A large Joseon jar thrown in two halves and joined at the equator while the clay was still soft, so that each one carries a gentle asymmetry no other jar shares. Named for its resemblance to a full moon; classically white porcelain. The example in this novel is an unusually early one carrying a celadon glaze.

provenance — The documented ownership history of an object, from its maker to its present holder. The word means origin. The work means paper.

registrar — The museum professional responsible for the documentation, movement, and legal standing of objects: condition reports, loan agreements, storage locations, insurance values, and the files that make all of it findable afterward. Curators decide what objects mean. Registrars keep the record of them true.

repatriation — The return of a cultural object to its country or community of origin.

restitution — The return of an object to those from whom it was wrongfully taken. Narrower than repatriation, and rarer — because it requires the taking to be named.

triplicate, filed in — Three copies of a document: one for the file, one for the lender, one for the department. A record that exists once can be lost. A record in triplicate has witnesses.

work order — The facilities record of maintenance performed: what, where, when, on whose authorization. Dull by design, which is why nobody reads them. Which is why they matter.

A NOTE FOR AMERICAN READERS

The National Art Center Tokyo (NACT) differs fundamentally from major American art museums in that it maintains no permanent collection. It functions exclusively as an exhibition venue: approximately 150,000 square feet of gallery space in Roppongi dedicated to hosting temporary loan exhibitions. All objects displayed at NACT are borrowed from external institutions and must be returned in precisely the same condition in which they arrived.

That responsibility belongs to the registrar.

A Senior Registrar such as Keiko Ito is responsible for receiving each object, documenting its condition in legally binding detail, maintaining it under rigorously controlled environmental conditions, and overseeing its return at the conclusion of the loan period. Her condition report — a comprehensive, multi-page record of every observable aspect of an object's state — is countersigned by a representative of the lending institution and filed in triplicate across three distinct institutional repositories. This document serves both as a conservation record and as a legal instrument. When an institution disputes a return and claims an object was damaged on arrival, everything comes down to the registrar's log. If that file is sloppy, incomplete, or missing entirely, the museum loses its shield. A flawed report is an institutional disaster, the kind of administrative failure that leaves a professional completely exposed.

TWO OTHER DETAILS MATTER FOR FOLLOWING THE INVESTIGATION

The building runs on two entirely separate systems. The security system — cameras, incident logs, security concern requests — is administered by the Head of Security. The Building Management System, which records every door entry by staff ID badge along with environmental readings throughout the building, is administered separately by the Facilities office. They are different databases with different administrators. This distinction becomes important.

A “badge log” in Japan is what Americans would call a keycard access record: a timestamped list of every staff member who entered a given area, identified by their Staff ID number. Name resolution — confirming whose number belongs to whom — requires a separate lookup.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear readers,

Thank you for choosing *The Joseon Retrospective* for your group. This is a quiet book, and it holds a quiet conviction: that keeping an honest record is a form of care — and sometimes, when the record is kept long enough and read closely enough, a form of justice.

The history beneath the story is real. During Japan's colonial rule of Korea, a very large number of Korean cultural objects left the peninsula, many under circumstances the paperwork of the period recorded in careful euphemism. The documents in the novel are inventions; the pattern they represent is not, and the work of tracing and returning such objects continues today. If your discussion touches that history, I hope the book proves a respectful companion to it.

If your evening has room for only two questions, I would point you to the first and the last in the guide: where in your own life the paperwork knew more than the people did — and who gets to decide how the past is displayed. Everything the book cares about lives somewhere between those two.

Keiko's next case, *The Unsigned Falcon*, arrives in Spring 2027.

With gratitude,

J. McCarthy



JMCCARTHYBOOKS.COM · CONTACT@JMCCARTHYBOOKS.COM