It must have been over a year and a half now since I read Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, and I might be in the minority of people who didn’t enjoy it so much. It was because of this I hadn’t picked up *Human Acts* sooner but I’m glad to have finally got around to it. I value this book a lot more than her other, and I feel it is an important read if not just to learn more about a horrendous act in 1980 South Korea.

This book was a challenge to rate within the five-star system that Goodreads values it’s books, but as you can see I finally decided on four stars, the explanation of which I hope will be implicit within the rest of my review. I would however be curious as to how the translation may have altered my experience of the book, which I certainly considered given the translator’s note in the preface of this edition.

*Human Acts* is a bold retelling of an atrocious historical event that happened in Gwangju (mostly focusing on the month of May in 1980). This is a strange blend of fictionality, historicity, and non-fictional settings and events. And quite frankly, I believe it is a feat of writing that can (and perhaps should?) make us question how we learn and read about history in schools. Split into six parts and an epilogue narrated by Kang herself, we are made privy to characters who are real people and stories that whilst perhaps collected through other voices, could nonetheless have been true. Some of the parts are more memorable and powerful than others, however each are uncomfortable but necessarily so. There is no fear for the reader’s comfort in this book and the brevity from Kang’s use of language in unashamed descriptions of humans reduced to bodies and meat is poignant and truly solidifies the ever presence of humanity and ‘human acts’. I was glad to have learnt about these events in a way which made them so much more real and evoking than a sensationalised news report or dull historic account found in an academic book which tries too hard to be objective. Kang has a personal attachment to the characters and city and that truly is what makes this work worth all the stars I had given it, and perhaps more.

For me however, some of these parts didn’t hold as much poignancy as they perhaps should have or could have. In reflection I am sure this down to just personal preference over the usage of the second person. Many parts are told in second person, and I couldn’t quite immerse myself or find a way in to relating to these parts, their ultimate meaning and emotion were subsequently lost to me. As a reader, and probably an affect from secondary school, I find the use of second person to be
too much like instructions. When someone tells me I’m doing something, and I am not doing it, I feel like I must abide even if I don’t want to, and then I lose the connection. I wonder if also a Korean person reading this in second person would feel a lot more connected to the words as it is a shared history of Korea itself, there is an element of it being part of their identity and their nationality. Were I to read something from a shared history of my own (like the Bloody Sunday massacre as referenced by the translator) I would feel a lot more as if it were a part of my cultural identity which allows me access to be that second person.

*Human Acts* is ultimately something of universal value and feeling, and whilst I may not have experienced the same whilst reading it as others may have done, I still think it is a masterful work of prose. Deborah Smith, the translator, must have had a tough time on her hands to do the original piece justice, but I personally believe she succeeded. I’m glad to have read this book, and I am intrigued now to give Han Kang another chance with her writing, to succeed where *The Vegetarian* failed in my eyes.