

Book Summary

Kim Yudam's < *이완의 자세* > (lit. 'Posture of Relaxation or 'Relaxed Posture') is a coming-of-age novel that primarily follows the story of its protagonist Yura, whose life has revolved around a Korean bathhouse, along with that of her mother, who works as a *ttaemiri* in that bathhouse—scrubbing dead skin off of womens' bodies.

Yura's mother used to work in a cosmetics store, but after an unfortunate encounter with an MLM scheme she was forced to begin living and working in the bathhouse with Yura. She initially had to practice her skin-scrubbing methods on Yura to improve her skills, and even after becoming a popular *ttaemiri* worker she maintains an impersonal distance between herself and her clients.

Yura is treated as a proxy for her mother's dreams, and her mother wishes to see her become a successful dancer where she herself could not succeed. Whether or not the rough treatment she experienced from her mother at a young age played a part, in the local dance academy she continues to struggle to relax under the well-intentioned and guiding hands of the director. Although dancing was initially also Yura's dream, she eventually decides to quit it and has to face her mother's dismay.

The novel also tells the stories of some of the people Yura encounters in the bathhouse, and explores their relationship with her. Chairwoman Oh, the owner of a foreign imports store, is a frequent patron of Yura's mother's services and has her own smaller character arc within the story. Oh is diagnosed with breast cancer and receives surgical treatment, and later has a significant impact on the bathhouse's community when she returns with her fresh scar on clear display. The vulnerability in her actions has a positive effect on the other local women who bear similar surgery scars, making them feel comfortable enough to resume visiting the bathhouse without any shame

in their appearance. Oh's cancer later relapses and has a significant impact on the tense nature of Yura and her mother's relationship.

One of the only males the reader is introduced to is Mansu, the child of the bathhouse's owners and Yura's junior in age. His parents also wished to see him become successful in a particular field-for Mansu, baseball-but he was forced to quit due to a shoulder injury. Although the reader is introduced to Mansu's mother mourning the loss of his dreams in the first chapter, it takes a long time for him to appear as a character himself. Despite this gap, he plays an important role in marking what could be considered the beginning and ending of Yura's growth in the book.

In the afterword of the novel, Kim Yudam wrote that she has been thinking about the hearts of people who live with dreams that had not been achieved for a long time, and how those who fail to achieve their dreams should continue to live their lives. This notion is well explored through the plot of <이완의 자세>; although the novel doesn't provide a neat and clear-cut ending to Yura's story, the reader is able to see her begin to learn how to relax both figuratively and physically, and perhaps learn from her experiences as well.

By [Destiny Harding](#)

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