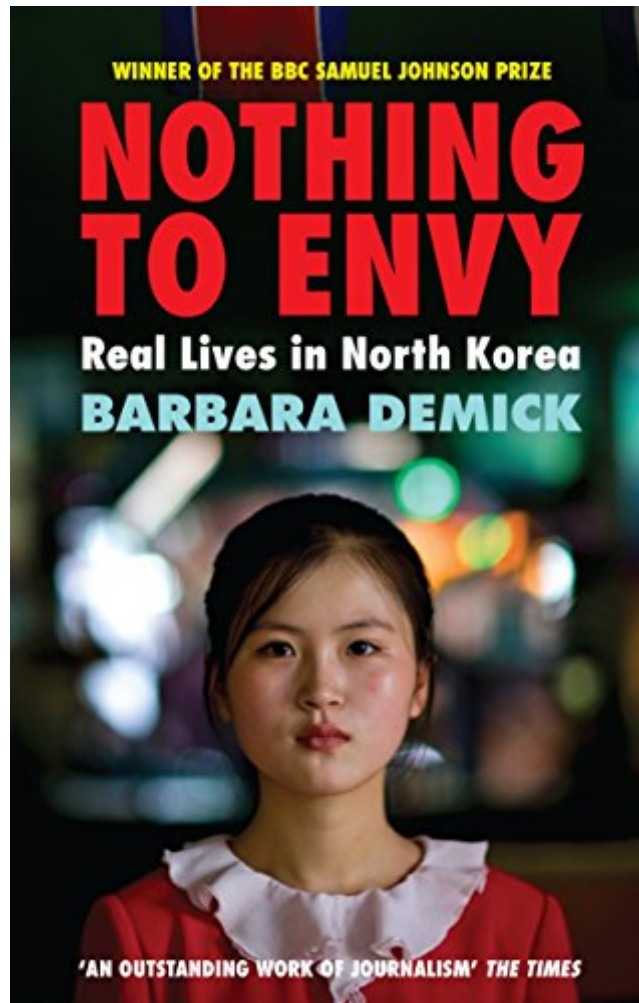




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Nothing To Envy: Real Lives In North Korea



Synopsis

North Korea is Orwell's 1984 made reality: it is the only country in the world not connected to the internet; *Gone with the Wind* is a dangerous, banned book; during political rallies, spies study your expression to check your sincerity. After the death of the country's great leader Kim Il Sung in 1994, famine descended, and *Nothing to Envy* - winner of the 2010 BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction - weaves together the stories of adversity and resilience of six residents of Chongin, North Korea's third-largest city. From extensive interviews and with tenacious investigative work, Barbara Demick has recreated the concerns, culture and lifestyles of North Korean citizens in a gripping narrative, and vividly reconstructed the inner workings of this extraordinary and secretive country.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book has a different format compared to many North Korea books. In this book, the author starts with telling the story of the lives of several North Koreans in various walks of life. Of course, we know from the beginning, that regardless of how unlikely it seems, at some point all of these people are going to escape North Korea in order to be able to tell their story. We learn the story of

how these individuals grew up and lived in North Korea, their thoughts about their government and now Eternal Leader Kim, how they lived through the starvation years of the 90's, and the long road leading to why they decided to defect (or in 1 case, was tricked by a family member into defection, and how they finally were able to defect to South Korea. We learn what happened to some of their family members left behind, about their attempts to rescue family members trapped in North Korea (some successful and some not), and the sometimes harsh adjustment to the freedom and capitalism of South Korea. The author details the difficulty and perils involved for North Koreans to defect and safely make it sanctuary in South Korea. We learn about a young man left an orphan whose father had been Party member, a pediatrician whose greatest dream was to be allowed to join the Party, a housewife with 2 young children and an abusive husband, a young woman and her "forbidden" boyfriend, a factory worker who had absolute loyalty to the regime, and several more. The stories are poignant and heartwarming, showing vividly the humanity of people trapped in North Korea. This book also covers the operation of the government and its regimentation over people's lives from a historical viewpoint, how this all changed (slightly for the better) during the starvation years of the 90's, and the newer changes (for the worse) under Kim Jong-un. Also covered are the issues and problems involved as former North Koreans adjust to a life of capitalism and freedom in South Korea. I recommend this book for anyone who wants to go beyond the history of and current living situation in North Korea, to hear the stories of real people surviving in and then escaping from North Korea.

While eight years have passed since this book was published, little has changed with North Korea in terms of their isolation from the rest of the world. Told through stories of defectors, Demick's book is a gripping account of what life is like behind a repressive, totalitarian state, built upon the cult of personality where the citizens of North Korea live in a country that resembles 1957 not 2017. There are so many unforgettable stories in this book, the one of Mi-Ran and Jun-Sang, read like a Shakespearean tragedy. As these two young teens carry on a secret romantic (and non-sexual relationship) violating societal and class norms, the reader understands the true personal loneliness that a totalitarian society exerts not on the individual, the inability to trust even those closest to them. As Jun-Sang's schooling leaves him far away from Mi-Ran, we understand the extent to which a famine consumes the country, killing even the healthiest, and causing citizens like Mi-Ran to consider the unthinkable, fleeing the country through China in order to make it to South Korea to survive the catastrophe unfolding before their eyes to the family and neighbors. "Nothing to Envy" is a brilliant book in how deeply it humanizes the people of North Korea, pawns of a corrupt, maniacal

family that has exerted absolute control over 20+million people for nothing more than power. Outside of the ruling family, everyone else is a dispensable pawn, only valuable in so far as they further the ends of Kim Il-sung and his heirs. Demick gives voice to the untold stories that represent the millions unfortunate to be born into a repressive totalitarian society, virtually all with little hope and no control on their ultimate destiny, most fortunate to have food to eat to live for another day. This book is just as important a read today given how little conditions have changed for North Koreans.

A different book from the defectors' biographies, Demick's journalistic background makes her justify some of the more extreme parts of the life stories of her 6 interviewees: so that the stories are as believable as they are incredible. It is hard to believe that in this day and age a whole nation can be isolated from the rest of the world by fear. How can a government allow its people to starve, so that it can pursue a nuclear weapons programme? The relationship that the author had with the defectors gave them the confidence to talk about their former lives, and how they escaped, which whilst cathartic must also have been very painful, especially for those who left loved ones behind in N Korea. It is hard to imagine going for months without a proper meal, or having so little to eat that you just die. Reading the book you feel that you get to know the characters and their ultimate embracing of the S Korean way of life, which is so very different from what their indoctrination in the North has led them to believe. If you don't know much about what did and still goes on in North Korea, read this book.

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