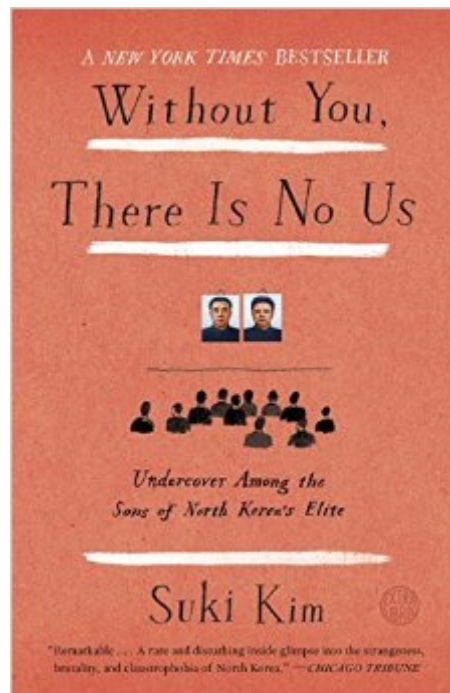


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Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among The Sons Of North Korea's Elite



Synopsis

A haunting account of teaching English to the sons of North Korea's ruling class during the last six months of Kim Jong-il's reign. Every day, three times a day, the students march in two straight lines, singing praises to Kim Jong-il and North Korea: Without you, there is no motherland. Without you, there is no us. It is a chilling scene, but gradually Suki Kim, too, learns the tune and, without noticing, begins to hum it. It is 2011, and all universities in North Korea have been shut down for an entire year, the students sent to construction fields except for the 270 students at the all-male Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), a walled compound where portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il look on impassively from the walls of every room, and where Suki has gone undercover as a missionary and a teacher. Over the next six months, she will eat three meals a day with her young charges and struggle to teach them English, all under the watchful eye of the regime. Life at PUST is lonely and claustrophobic, especially for Suki, whose letters are read by censors and who must hide her notes and photographs not only from her minders but from her colleagues evangelical Christian missionaries who don't know or choose to ignore that Suki doesn't share their faith. As the weeks pass, she is mystified by how easily her students lie, unnerved by their obedience to the regime. At the same time, they offer Suki tantalizing glimpses of their private selves their boyish enthusiasm, their eagerness to please, the flashes of curiosity that have not yet been extinguished. She in turn begins to hint at the existence of a world beyond their own at such exotic activities as surfing the Internet or traveling freely and, more dangerously, at electoral democracy and other ideas forbidden in a country where defectors risk torture and execution. But when Kim Jong-il dies, and the boys she has come to love appear devastated, she wonders whether the gulf between her world and theirs can ever be bridged. *Without You, There Is No Us* offers a moving and incalculably rare glimpse of life in the world's most unknowable country, and at the privileged young men she calls "soldiers and slaves." From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

The ruling Kim clan (no relation the author) has created a monster, mostly to itself. The people of North Korea are so isolated they have no idea about anything outside their country, and enormously little about what goes on in it. By breaking down the family unit, they have destroyed links, safety nets, support and community. Everyone reports on everyone else. Minders, monitors and counterparts are everywhere. All have the power to denounce. New buildings are designed to be transparent; there is little or nothing in the way of privacy possible. Permission is necessary to go anywhere. Roads are so empty, rurals sit on them as outdoor gathering places. Individuals are totally controlled. They are told where they will study, who they will be friends with and what they will do, all day every day. This is the North Korea in which Kim Suki taught English to elite students (of wealthy, powerful parents). There is a dreary, grinding sameness to the days. Choices are essentially zero. She had to be careful of every word she spoke, because no one is allowed to know what life is like anywhere else. Teachers had to ensure they didn't sit with the same students in the cafeteria as it would arouse suspicions. Her all male, mid twenties students were as teens are in the USA, champing at the bit to see a Harry Potter film, pining for parents who were not permitted to see them (assuming they could even find them), and feeling totally constricted in what should be the most creative, productive, chance-taking parts of their lives. Instead, it is a life of the military drudgery: long pointless hours guarding empty halls, being reassigned to new "buddies" (totally abandoning the old ones) and boring, minimal food.

I have always been fascinated with learning more about the secret state of North Korea. To me it has always been very interesting to see photos and videos of a people that seem to have lost track of time, stuck in the past. I knew some of the conditions that North Koreans experience because of documentary, photos, videos and books I had read, but never was I given a glimpse into the elite of North Korea. After reading this book in reality there seems to be no major difference between the elite and poor in North Korea other than the fact that the elite have a little more, materially speaking. But both sets of people in this type of society face the same fears everyone their faces on a daily bases. This book is divided into two parts. In the first part of the book we are taken on a small

journey as you learn about the life of the author. I was moved to think what culture shock she must have experienced when she explains having to move to the United States during her early teenage years and having to adapt to a new language and society. I love how Kim uses these experiences in order to relate them to the subject of the book which in turn would be her stay as a teacher at the PUST School in North Korea. The first half of the book speaks concerning her first visit years before to North Korea and the impact it had on her life. I did sense a feeling that Kim suffered from depression, because many times in the book we are taken back to her personal life and memories and in this I felt that these memories brought tears and sadness to her life. I couldn't help but think how she must have felt as she was writing this book. Could she have stopped writing and reminisce on the words that she was typing? Could she have stopped for a moment to take a deep breath?

Kim took a remarkable risk in "posing" as a missionary English teacher in order to live and work inside North Korea. As a result she is able to bring some of the tales about North Korea -- most of which appear to be true -- down to the human level. But there are a number of shortcomings that left me feeling more disappointed than enlightened. The first is Kim herself. The first 30% of the book is heavily autobiographical, for no apparent reason. She "loves" her students before even two weeks have passed, which devalues the unnamed "lover" in New York she refers to consistently but rather pointlessly. She has passages of overly flowery language that seem to have been taken from a novel not written; strangely, but thankfully, they disappear by the 2nd half of the book. Those sections would have been better served by giving us information on things like how many students were at the school, and how many teachers there were, and whether this was meant to replace a normal college education or merely supplement it. She frequently mentions that things are "forbidden", but never conveys how this information is conveyed to the teachers. Various things are "approved", but again there is no description of how this happens. Are written submissions made? Do teachers ask their minders face to face? Does the (foreign) college president play any role in the decisions? Then there's the question of why these students are studying English in the first place. The Doctrine of Self Reliance that is a critical part of North Korean behavior prides itself on not needing the outside world (with the possible exception of China).

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