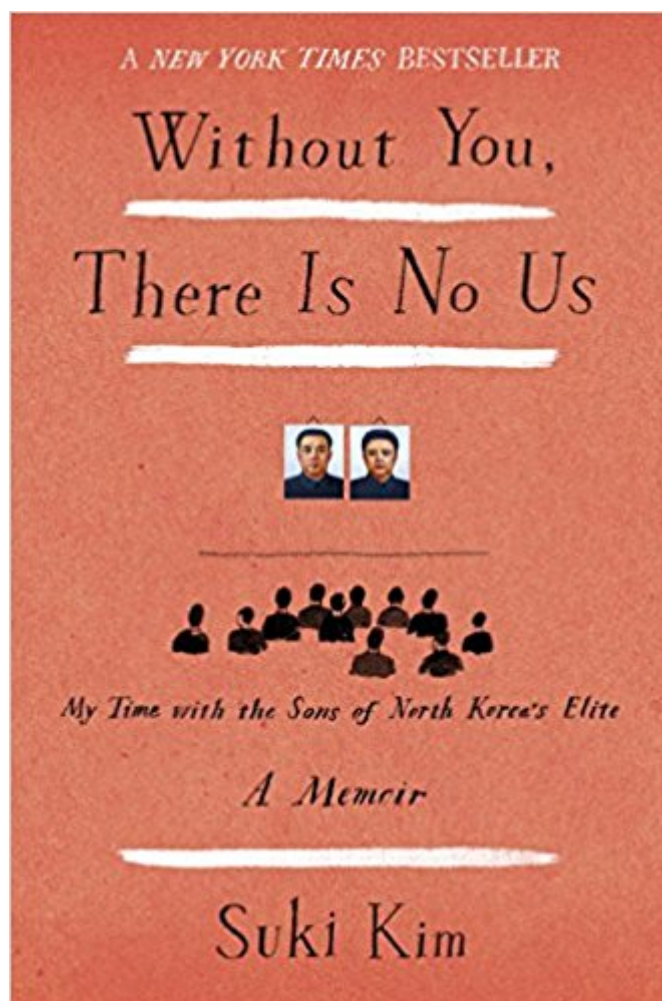


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Without You, There Is No Us: My Time With The Sons Of North Korea's Elite



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."

Book Information

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Crown; 1st edition (October 14, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307720659

ISBN-13: 978-0307720658

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 1.1 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 650 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #281,845 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #72 in Books > History > Asia > Korea > North #182 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Educators #261 in Books > Travel > Asia > General

Customer Reviews

A New York Times Bestseller "Chilling" reminds us that evil is not only banal; it is also completely arbitrary." • New York Times Book Review "Quasi-apocalyptic, but amazingly not speculative" "I devoured [it] for its wry and rare observations on that inexplicable land." • Daniel Handler, The Wall Street Journal "Daring...Kim finds that paranoia is contagious and can become chillingly routine. 'My little soldiers were also little robots,' she writes before departing, mourning not only that she must leave, but that they must stay." • Boston Globe "Remarkable" "A deeply unsettling book, offering a rare and disturbing inside glimpse into the strangeness, brutality and claustrophobia of North Korea" Kim's book is full of small observations that vividly evoke the paranoia and loneliness of a nation living in fear and in thrall to its 'Great Leaders' "Her portraits of her students are tender and heartbreaking, highlighting the enormity of what is at stake." • Chicago Tribune "A book about censorship, trust, fear, love, and truth, seen through the prism of a school that functions as a comfortable prison" "The title comes from a song the students sing in honor of 'The Dear Leader,' including the lyric, 'Without you, there is no us.' Within that title, and this book, is a multitude of truths." • Philadelphia Inquirer "Sometimes personal histories retain a potent electromagnetic force, [like] Suki Kim's rivetingly topical look inside the most isolationist country on earth." • Vogue "Enthralling...Reveals the perplexing innocence and ignorance of one of the world's most secretive countries." • O: The Oprah Magazine "A devastatingly vulnerable account...Kim's stark and delicate language, intertwined with the suspense of being an undercover journalist in a foreign-yet-familiar land, truly humanized North Korea for me." • Slate "Touching, beautifully written...A rare, intimate portrait of life in the world's least-known country: grinding poverty for the masses, bland tedium for the ruling class, no fun, no freedom, and fear for all." • Katha Pollitt, Salon "[Kim's] account is fascinating" "She is an outsider telling an inside story" "Her relationship with her students is the most interesting part of her book" "It is tempting to treat the cult of the North Korean Kim dynasty as a grotesque joke, as the makers of The Interview, the recent Hollywood movie about an assassination plot against the current

"Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, have done. Suki Kim, quite rightly, does not. The oppression and starvation of millions of people, and a gulag that enslaves up to 200,000 prisoners, many of them worked to death, is really not that funny. Kim got a close look at some of the cult's manifestations. Her frustration and rage about the waste of young lives and talent crushed by a horribly oppressive system is entirely justified. Being punished for dissent is bad enough. But to be forced to parrot lies and keenly applaud one's enforcers is a form of constant mental torture." — Ian Buruma, *New York Review of Books* "A vivid, uncompromising and intensely personal account." — *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* "A starkly revealing look at this hermit nation...Kim opens herself as well as the DPRK to scrutiny...Moving and emotionally evocative." — *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* "Offers great details about [the students'] blinkered worldview. A frank depiction of North Korean life." — *Foreign Policy* "Readers intrigued by Kim Jong Un's recent extended absence from public view can gain insight into the repressive system that shapes North Korea's ruling class from Suki Kim's new memoir." — *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* "We in the West know almost nothing about life in North Korea, including even how its elites live (read Suki Kim's terrific *Without You, There Is No Us* for one of the few accounts)." — *The Nation* "Suki Kim's compelling reports for *Harper's*, *The New York Review of Books*, and others have expanded and deepened our understanding both of life in the North, and the West's profound misapprehensions about it. [This book is] a fascinating, if deeply fraught document about the education of the North Korean elite, an aspect of the country that until very recently has been almost completely occluded. Kim's access to the boys constitutes the unique nature of her book [and] illuminates just how sheltered they are." — *Los Angeles Review of Books* "[An] extraordinary and troubling portrait of life under severe repression. [Kim's] account is both perplexing and deeply stirring." — *Publishers Weekly*, starred review "A rare and nuanced look at North Korean culture, and an uncommon addition to the 'inspirational-teacher' genre." — *Booklist*, starred review "A touching portrayal of the student experience in North Korea, which provides readers with a rare glimpse of life in this enigmatic country...Well-written and thoroughly captivating." — *Library Journal*, starred review "Strangely terrifying. A beautifully written book that greatly expands the limited bounds of what we know about North Korea's ruling class." — Barbara Demick, author of *Nothing to Envy* "Terrifying and sublime, *Without You, There Is No Us* is a stealth account of heartbreak. Suki Kim, brilliant author of *The Interpreter*, penetrates the soul of her divided country of origin, bearing witness to generations of maimed lives

and arrested identities. This look inside totalitarian North Korea is like no other." —Jayne Anne Phillips, author of *Lark and Termite* and *Quiet Dell*"This superb work of investigative journalism is distinguished by its grave beauty and aching tenderness. So skilled is Suki Kim in conveying the eeriness and surreal disconnect of the North Korean landscape that I sometimes felt I was reading a ghost story, one that will haunt me with its silences, with its image of snow falling upon a desolate campus, with the far laughter of her beloved students." —Kiran Desai, author of *The Inheritance of Loss* "Like an explorer returned from a distant planet or another dimension, Suki Kim has many extraordinary tales to tell, among them how different—and how awful—life is for those who live in North Korea. The devil is in the details here, for her gritty narrative focuses on everyday events to reveal how repression shapes daily life, even for the most privileged. Yet Kim also bears witness to that part of the human soul that no oppressor can ever claim." —Carlos Eire, author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana* "In language at once stark and delicate, Suki Kim shatters the polemic of North and South Korea. She couples an investigative reporter's fierce desire to strip away the fiction of the Hermit Kingdom with an immigrant's insatiable hunger for an emotional home, no matter how troubled and no matter how impossible." —Monique Truong, author of *The Book of Salt* "Combining a great novelist's eye for character and a skilled journalist's grasp of politics, *Without You, There Is No Us* helps us understand North Korea like nothing else I have ever read or watched. The elegance of Kim's prose and her great compassion for ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary situation kept me turning the pages, riveted by her story. This is a book that rejoins North Korea with humanity." —Suketu Mehta, author of *Maximum City* "What a unique book this is! It delivers a beautifully and bravely observed inside account—startling, insightful, moving—of the planet's most notoriously closed and bewildering society. But what I liked best about it was being in the company of Suki Kim's voice—so intimate, vulnerable, obsessive, resilient, confiding and charming." —Francisco Goldman, author of *Say Her Name* and *The Interior Circuit*

Suki Kim is the author of the award-winning novel *The Interpreter* and the recipient of Guggenheim, Fulbright, and Open Society fellowships. Her essays and articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, and the *New York Review of Books*. Born and raised in Seoul, she lives in New York.

After reading these two books, back to back, I have decided to review them both together and

encourage other interested readers to do the same! There is not much I can say after reading the two books, "Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea" by Jang Jin-sung and "Without You, There Is No Us" by Suki Kim. They both tell a similar story of a particularly inhumane country, North Korea, but from different perspectives. It is difficult to sit here, in the United States, and read these two books while trying to understand or comprehend what we are reading. While I have traveled world wide and have taught, as a professor, in different countries, I have never in my travels come across someplace described, I think honestly and truthfully, as primitive, as imprisoning or as controlled as is North Korea. Jang was part of North Korea's elite with access to Kim Jung-il. He was a poet and highly placed in North Korea's department of internal propaganda. In other words, he was the ultimate insider. It was his position to read foreign, mainly Southern Korean, literature. Then Jang was to write articles and poetry, in which the North Korean readers would assume he was South Korean, extolling the virtues of Kim Jung-il. As such he became jaded with what he saw in North Korea, particularly after a trip to his childhood city and finding what has become of childhood friends. He witnesses poverty and famine first hand and begins writing a secret poetry regarding his thoughts. He begins sharing items with a college friend who he recognizes as also disillusioned about North Korea. One of these is a South Korean book which is lost by his friend. Knowing that the outcome would be death of both of them, they escape using their elite credentials to a border town and then, to China. A good part of this book is their travails in China as fugitives and then his escape to South Korea. The second book, by Kim, is the story of a South Korean-American who is selected by a religious group to teach English to the elite sons of the leaders in North Korea. She writes of her essential imprisonment in a university, the lack of the barest essentials of common life elsewhere and of the inability to freely convey ideas while teaching. Everything is guarded in what is said and what is acted on. The students, she realizes are competent liars in what they will say and do. She must communicate with the students in English and she is forbidden from using Korean, her mother language. So many subjects are taboo that normal conversation is almost not possible. And yet, she is there to teach everything to students while being allowed to say almost nothing! Everything is vetted by the Koreans, whether it is her minders, Korean counterpart censors or even her fellow teachers. The students, despite being of the sciences, know nothing about the internet and are not allowed access to it. The students are kept in military order, not even allowed to talk to their parents who are just in some cases across the wall of the university. So both the teachers and the students are, in effect, prisoners. These two books, one by an insider and one by an outsider, will leave you depressed about North Korea. What can be said of a nation that willfully starves its peoples? What can be said of a nation where everyone must think and do the same thing? What

can be said of a nation where death is the only exception to worshipping its leader? What can be said of a nation where critical thinking is a death sentence, in fact, even reading of unauthorized critical thinking is a death sentence?

This is a beautiful and wrenching account of a journalist posing as a Christian missionary in one of North Korea's only universities. Suki Kim spends two semesters teaching the sons of North Korea's elite families and experiences the oppression and brainwashing that pervade every aspect of life in North Korea. Reading this book is like reading a dystopian society novel like George Orwell's 1984--except that the totalitarian society actually exists and is oppressing real people. This book will transport you to a sad, otherworldly place but it's worth the difficult journey because only by folks like us understanding the isolated Other can we ever hope to influence our government's leaders to exercise their foreign policy with regard to North Korea with a mixture of firmness AND compassion.

If you are interested in what is going on in North Korea, this book is a must read. It gives you great insight into the youthful, college-attending upper class leaders of the regime. The book is content current...Pyongyang University of Science and Technology is in the news as we speak due to arrests of its teachers. This fact alone gives witness to the bravery of author Suki Kim to put herself in harms way to be able to gather the facts so the world can know what this country is doing to control its citizens. The book is so well written that, in spite of the horrific nature of its underlying theme, it is truly an enjoyable read from an entertainment perspective.

When Suki Kim was thirteen living in South Korea, her father's business went bankrupt. Because bankruptcy was an offense punishable by law, Suki and her family fled to America. In her heart, however, Suki has always felt her home to be Korea. She feels displaced, melancholy, and haunted by stories of Korea and the tragedies of those family members who disappeared into Kim Jong-il's Hermit Kingdom. In this context, Suki, a successful novelist, writer, journalist, and professor, infiltrates North Korea posing as a Christian missionary and as an ESL teacher where she teaches college-age boys English. There is a tension between what she knows and what she can tell the boys; what mythology the North Korean presents of itself and the hell that is the true reality. Kim must navigate these disparities while aching with melancholy as she contemplates her family members who disappeared there. This is a book about torment, deception, and myth-making. The hell of Pyongyang is not just its appearance, but its symbolism. As we read, "But it was not Pyongyang's physical attributes physical

attributes that made it so ugly in my eyes. It was what it stood for. It was the most horrible city in the world to me, and every time I saw it in the distance, on the horizon, outside the van window, I felt disheartened. Pyongyang was the Xanadu of North Korea—the city the rest of the country slaved to feed. It was a greedy, bloodsucking monster, and sometimes I wished it would just go up in smoke.

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