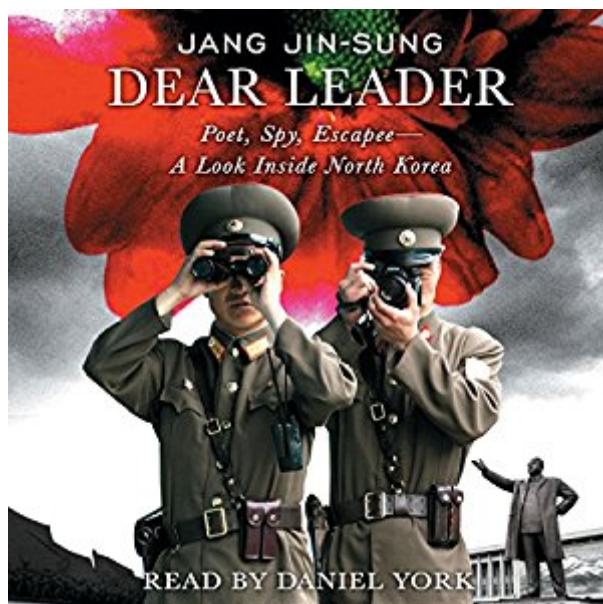


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Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee - A Look Inside North Korea



Synopsis

In this rare insider's view into contemporary North Korea, a high-ranking counterintelligence agent describes his life as a former poet laureate to Kim Jong-il and his breathtaking escape to freedom. "The General will now enter the room." Everyone turns to stone. Not moving my head, I direct my eyes to a point halfway up the archway where Kim Jong-il's face will soon appear. As North Korea's State Poet Laureate, Jang Jin-sung led a charmed life. With food provisions (even as the country suffered through its great famine), a travel pass, access to strictly censored information, and audiences with Kim Jong-il himself, his life in Pyongyang seemed safe and secure. But this privileged existence was about to be shattered. When a strictly forbidden magazine he lent to a friend goes missing, Jang Jin-sung must flee for his life. Never before has a member of the elite described the inner workings of this totalitarian state and its propaganda machine. An astonishing exposé told through the heart-stopping story of Jang Jin-sung's escape to South Korea, Dear Leader is a rare and unprecedented insight into the world's most secretive and repressive regime.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is the sort that can save lives – hopefully even 25 million of them. It is the most absorbing read that this reader has had in many years. Why is it better than the many noteworthy books on North Korea that have been published before? Because it was written by a

high level insider - one of the country's chief propagandists - who also happens to be an articulate and sensitive writer, with a vastly different perspective from that of a Westerner or a "common" (if there can be such a characterization) North Korean escapee. It's not just a searing indictment of the Kim dynasty or a political dissertation that details the organization and functioning of a Stalinist dictatorship. It's not just an intimate account of unimaginable human suffering that has been inflicted on a nation's population over the past few decades by an evil regime. It's not just a thrill-a-minute international espionage story that follows two high-value defectors as they flee, starving and penniless, across the winter landscape of Korea and Northern China, hunted by security forces from both countries. In fact, it is all of these story lines, plus more. The range of its setting stretches from privilege to privation. It is a depiction of a place that seems surreal and hallucinogenic, though it is only too real. It is a story of a man's awakening from a blinkered life to a wide world beyond his imagining - both its horrors and beauty. It is about his coming to terms with terrible truths and the equally terrible lies that he had helped to perpetrate. It is a buddy story about two young men on the run who share every human emotion possible - from valor to shame to frailty to brotherly love. And perhaps most importantly, it is an epic poem, written by a talented story teller. As such, the book touches the reader in ways that no other account of North Korea has done before. By interweaving original poetry and lyrical descriptions of artistic expression into a John le Carre thriller, there is something for everyone. It runs both wide and deep. As such, it has the potential to reach an audience that is broader than any book on the subject. One can only hope that it does, and that by burrowing deeply into millions of readers, it changes the perspective and energy of the global dialogue on North Korea.

At times, North Korea seems like an indecipherable enigma, impervious to attempts by outsiders to understand or to find rationales for its actions. At other times, the Kim family state seems straightforward: a land ruled by a gang of thugs who regard the state's resources (including its people) as its personal possession and plaything, and who cynically deploy crude and simplistic anti-colonial and anti-Western ideological slogans as a substitute for policy. Jang Jin-Sung's book tends to support the latter view, depicting a regime run by a paranoid and power-hungry leader who cares little for what happens to anyone but himself. Jang's book is part memoir, part exposé. The core of the book is an account of Jang's decision to escape North Korea, along with a friend. Jang, a poet personally honored by "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il, had been

working in a department of the Workers' Party responsible for relations between the two Koreas which really meant anti-South Korean espionage and propaganda. Part of his job was to write poems in a South Korean "voice" praising North Korea and the leadership of Kim Jong-il. In order to do his job, he was part of a select group of Party members allowed access to South Korean newspapers, books, and magazines, as well as Western consumer products sent in as foreign aid. Though he was not part of the true power elite, he was in many ways a regime insider. His observations, therefore, have an aura of both credibility and disillusionment. Beyond the dramatic story of Jang's escape, survival in China, and eventual relocation in South Korea, the book contains valuable and damning observations on North Korean history and politics. Jang had access to party insiders, as well as to historical documents unavailable to most people. So while his account is that of a very young man, it carries the conviction of the disillusioned and recently-enlightened, which one can see in his wide-eyed outrage when the shackles fall from his eyes and he sees the Kim regime for what it is. Jang offers valuable insights on a variety of topics, including Kim Jong-il's rise to power and the ruthless competition with his father and the elder Kim's allies that accompanied it, leading in turn to further ruthlessness and the rise to dominance of the Organization and Guidance Department within the Korean Workers' Party. Jang also discusses the kidnapping of Japanese citizens to train North Korean spies, and the North Korean view of diplomacy as essentially a counterintelligence operation, which partly explains why Western governments find diplomacy with North Korea such a frustrating undertaking. Jang is a romantic, and naïve in many ways. He says that reading a book of poetry by Lord Byron was one of the key factors in his disillusionment/enlightenment, as Byron's openness in expressing emotions stood in stark contrast to the bottled-up North Korean society in which the only acceptable object of devotion was the state as embodied in the person of the leader. The heart of the book is Jang's account of his decision to leave North Korea after some contraband materials to which he had access but which he allowed to pass out of his hands were discovered. He had to leave quickly, without much preparation, accompanied by the friend to whom he had loaned the materials. They carried little with them other than the clothes they were wearing, a notebook full of Jang's poems, and some cash, which would come in handy later. They were lucky to escape the scrutiny, and the guns, of North Korean border guards, but their story of escape and survival is not simply a tale of crossing the Tumen River that forms North Korea's northeastern border with China. Jang chronicles just how difficult it can be for an escapee even after crossing the river. The South Korean consulate in the Chinese city of

Shenyang and many Korean churches were no help. Jang spent a month on the run, during which time he had to rely on luck and the kindness of individuals to survive and eventually make his way to freedom. That he did make it is a testament to how deeply motivating the desire for freedom can be. This is perhaps a useful reminder for any of us who accept our liberties too casually.

Jang's epilogue is both a moving conclusion to the story and a sober reflection on what the presence of thousands of North Korean escapees means. On occasion the book reads a bit too much like a translation, or maybe the translator is just rendering too literally in English

Jang's way of expressing things in Korean. But that's a small thing. This book is well worth reading for anyone interested in the inner workings of North Korea, and how one North Korean of a sensitive frame of mind found the desire, then the need, and ultimately the courage to leave in the hope of liberating body, mind, and heart. In addition to Jang's own story, the book reinforces the conclusion that North Korea is not just a failed state, but what might be called a diminished state. The friend who urged me to read this book said that it convinced him of what he already thought—that North Korea is really run by just a very small number of people. It's hard to argue with that. For Kim Jong-il, as for his son after him (the current ruler), it appears that being "leader" is an ego trip for which his whole country of roughly 25 million people pays a horrible price.

I absolutely loved this book...It was a real eye opener for me! I always knew the countries ruling family along with their military elite were nothing but a bunch of murderous thugs...I just never understood how bad it all really was! Human rights do not exist in this country as the leadership utilizes starvation and executions as a means of punishing and controlling their population. A public execution in a village central market for a poor starving rice farmer who was accused of stealing a bag of rice! Citizens executed for merely watching unauthorized foreign videos & books! What I cannot understand is, how long is the world going to stand by and allow this corrupt leadership to continue to starve & execute it's population before taking action! Life for the average North Korean citizen is not better than living in one of Hitler's Death camps or Stalin's Gulags! Wake up world....& rescue these poor helpless folks from their misery!!!

An excellent book that offers profound insight into the inner workings of North Korea. Unlike most escapees from North Korea, the author is well educated, and a very talented writer. The book reads like an action novel, when it is an actual account of his experiences escaping a tyrannical regime. A

very good read.

A very enlightening look at life in the oddest country in the world. How long can the North Korean government remain propped up? While the book was a bit "wordy" at times with political background material, the gripping story itself made it worth the read.

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