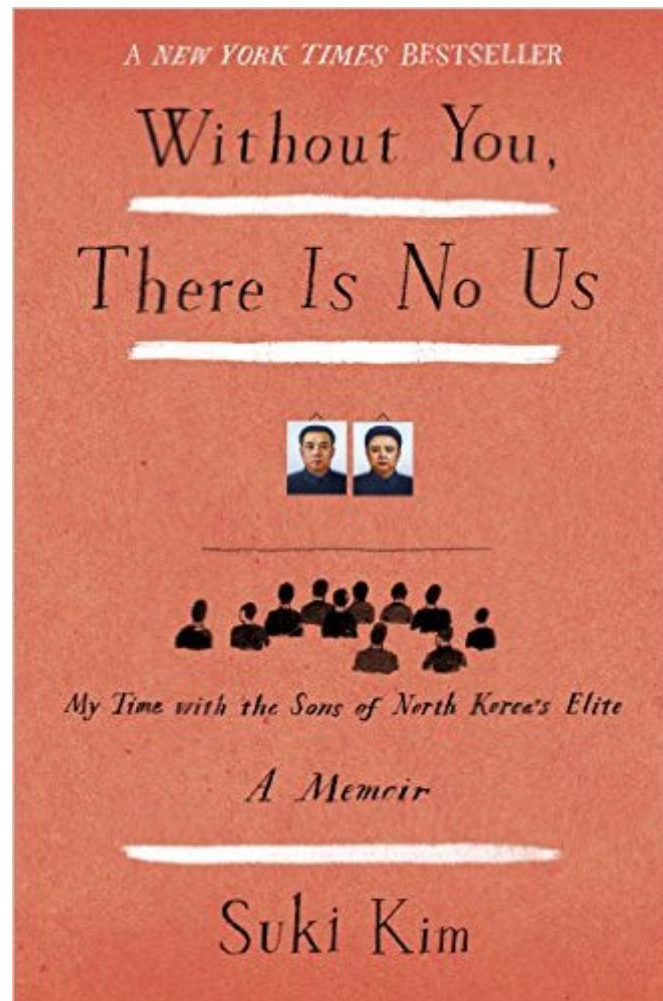


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Without You, There Is No Us: My Time With The Sons Of North Korea's Elite



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."

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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. The internet is of course off limits, so even these students had no way to research their specialty - technology. Instead they have an offline intranet, as useless as it sounds. The concept of phoning anywhere in the world on Skype - pure fantasy, not even worth believing. They are constantly preparing for war. They are taught to want to kill all foreigners. The draft is ten years for men, seven for women. Prospects outside the army are even bleaker. It is all the more intense because the author didn't just visit, she lived it with them. She kept her notes on USB sticks, never allowing her thoughts to remain on a hard drive that might be left unattended. She had to be careful about the other teachers as well, mostly Protestant fundamentalist missionaries. It gets to her, and she cries often. The lack of human contact, let alone compassion, keeps the tension level absurdly high. In the end, some human connections were

made, tentatively, under the cover of creative writing assignments. But that was all. The book is as powerful an indictment of North Korea as any ever written, despite (or perhaps because of) its total lack of access to the power brokers and decision makers. There is no talk of politics or philosophy. Juche is a fact of life, period. This is real life in North Korea, where paranoia is mainstream. David Wineberg

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). So why are it's Best and Brightest being exposed to the potentially subversive effects of foreign teachers while studying nothing other than English? Similarly, but far more seriously, Kim never addresses the fundamental question I hoped to have answered: Do the students really believe all the propaganda, or are they playing along because to do otherwise would be dangerous? Perhaps it's unfair to expect her to know the answer, as her interactions with her students are limited: by formal rules (see above), her students' fear of crossing the line, and her own self-censorship. But ultimately it feels like only the top layer of the onion has been peeled, and there are still many more layers between us and genuine understanding. Finally, her perspective is limited by the fact she taught at an all-boys school with students selected from amongst the best and the brightest. There is not a single encounter with a North Korean woman, unless you count the old lady who asks a busload of people from the school

why they're suddenly using her toilet. Rare trips to the foreign markets are interesting, but they give no sense of what daily life is like for an ordinary citizen. Groups of villagers gather in the road, hungry -- according to Suki -- for human contact. But we have no idea what they talk about, or why the road was a better option than -- say -- someone's living room because they are mere images seen out the tour bus window. Perhaps I'm asking more than anyone could have obtained, given how tightly controlled the country is. And there's no doubt Kim has moved the ball forward in terms of our understanding by pulling together a number of interesting glimpses of a small and arguably unrepresentative segment of society. But if you're looking to truly understand what life is like under The Great Leader, you'll finish this book only slightly satisfied.

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