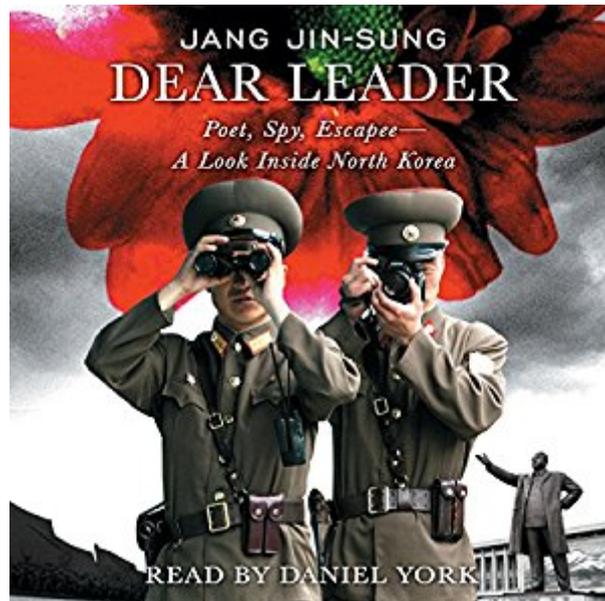


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Dear Leader: Poet, Spy, Escapee - A Look Inside North Korea



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 â€” 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.

This was the most beautifully written and moving account I've ever read of an escape from N. Korea. It is an incredible story from a man who enjoyed a life of privilege compared to the privation that the majority of NK is suffering. One can see why Mr. Jang was such a well respected poet laureate (and at such a young age) from his home country. He is an incredible writer. This book moved me to tears so many times. So often, I visualized his pain and despair, his courage, and his indescribable exhilaration when he finally succeeded in his hard fought quest for freedom. All Americans should read books about this country because while we complain about our own petty suffering, most of us have really no idea what true human suffering is all about. It's interesting because I was in the midst of a deep depression when I picked up another book (Nothing to Envy by Barbara Denick) about regular North Koreans and that book—plus the subsequent (perhaps 20) others I read, lifted me complete out of my depression. This is a fascinating read. Most people in his position would have never dreamed of escaping such a privileged existence—if only for the sake of loved ones. It was only *after* he had given a forbidden book to a trusted friend who had subsequently lost it, did he and his friend realize they had no other solution but to escape. For them to stay would have certainly meant their detention at one of the famous 'gulag' prisons of NK but it would have likely meant the persecution of his loved ones. I believe his primary motive for leaving NK was to spare his family—although I cannot imagine how he must suffer to this day wondering

about their health and safety. The book really does read like a thriller--I couldn't put it down.

If you are a fiction-only reader, I assure you that, even though Dear Leader is a true story, it is indistinguishable from a great novel. The story has the pacing and revelations of The De Vinci Code. It depicts two dystopian societies that are, dare I say, more intriguing than those in 1984 and Brave New World. As with the Hunger Games or Divergent, you will quickly find yourself emotionally invested in Jang's fate and that of his friends. This is the best narrative I have read in years, and the fact that it is a memoir makes it all the more heart-wrenching and profound. Jang allows readers to live in his head and see through his eyes in a way few memoir writers do. For example, Twelve Years a Slave, Man's Search for Meaning, Angela's Ashes, and The Diary of Ann Frank are indisputably great and intimate memoirs, but they do not involve an awakening that one's dearly held articles of faith---beliefs around which everyone one knows has been required to organize their lives-- are an elaborate deception. Another unique difference is that Jang makes a decision to pursue truth despite the risk to himself and those he loves. Under North Korean law, it is a capital offense to seek information about the outside world. After the offender is executed, his family and closest friends are imprisoned indefinitely unless they prove they had no knowledge of the crime. Lastly, Jang has the soul of a poet and understands the value of words. Even though this book was written in Korean, Jang writes beautifully and chooses his words thoughtfully. His memoir is not merely a call to action or a tribute to the innate curiosity and courage at the core of all people. Jang writes with his reader in mind, and he wants to give a small gift to each reader who joins him on his journey.

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