



Across the Tumen: A North Korean Kkotjebi Boy's Quest

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As North Korea undergoes a devastating famine, Yeong-dae loses both his parents and is forced to beg on the streets. Soon, this young boy sets off on a desperate journey to China to find his sister. This inspiring tale offers a glimpse into the horrors faced by North Korean children-and their indomitable will to survive.

Across the Tumen: A North Korean Kkotjebi Boy's Quest Details

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Celticfaerie says

I received this book as a Goodreads giveaway. It was an interesting read that showed the struggles that North Korean people go through. Students should read it in schools to get a better understanding of how others in the world live.

Melanie says

I thought that this was a really great read that highlights a really important human rights issue in a very accessible way. I highly recommend this book to others that are interested in the Koreas and/or human rights.

Yoo Kyung Sung says

This contemporary realistic fiction novel is about the survival journey of a North Korean boy, Yeong-dae. The Tumen is a 324 miles long river that forms roughly a third of North Korea's border with China. The name Kkotjebi (fluttering swallows) is a term for teenagers who temporarily fled to China in search of food and went back to North Korea when they had fed themselves (Song, 2013, p. 162) so the Kkotjebi and the Tumen are two symbolic icons for North Koreans' last chance for survival. As the story begins Yeong-dae is a fourth grader, but as he gets older, his life turns upside-down. His life is considered normal, which is almost the same as privileged during the time he lives with his parents and siblings in North Korea. Soon, however, he loses his supposedly normal privileged life after he experiences a series of family tragedies. His father, after he cannot get food in exchange for the food stamps he received from his work, is hurt during his first attempt to pick wild mushrooms. His mother is sent to prison for stealing goods at her work to pay Yeong-dae's school fees and buy food for her children, and she is killed in the prison. Eventually Yeong-dae has no other option but to become a Kkotjebi in order to survive and remain emotionally and physically independent. When Yeong-dae learns that his grandmother also has passed away from starvation, he realizes that there is nobody who can shelter him. Even his baby sister, Young-ok, who always cheers him up and is his purpose to live, dies from starvation. After he loses his baby sister, it becomes clear that he needs to find his older sister. Yeong-dae decides to cross the river on the border to go to China to find his sister, Young-rahn, who ran away to seek work in China and support her starving family. Yeong-dae takes tremendous risks crossing the river to search for his sister. He is repeatedly told that Young-rahn might be a victim of human trafficking and forced marriage in China. With the help of another Kkotjebi member, Yeong-dae successfully arrives in China, but North Korean agents arrest him. Accused of being a South Korean spy, he is put in jail and tortured in extremely painful ways despite being a child. The ending remains hopeful, yet leaves mixed feelings of hope and concern for Yeong-dae and other people in North Korea since this is a realistic contemporary issue. Kkotjebi's story and survival journey mirrors layers of human rights issues in North Korea. The harsh living conditions in North Korea, officially called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), reveals how this government fails to protect its people. The idealism of the government cannot save or rescue people from harsh reality daily suffering from poor quality and irregularly distributed small amounts of food, insufficient essential necessities, and basic human rights. Kkotjebi is a symbol of a failing government. In International Migration studies, groups like Kkotjebi that leave a country because of

food shortages are called environmental refugees (Song, 2013, p. 162). Interestingly, few North Korean migrants are recognized as political refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) argues that North Koreans in China are refugees since no matter what their reason for leaving their country (food or economic opportunities), when they return, they face the fear of persecution (Song, 2013). The story does indicate what is like to live as a North Korean refugee in China, living in ways that are secretive and dangerous due to the risk that they might be caught by North Korean agents or Chinese police. Such secretiveness makes it more difficult for Yeong-dae and Young-ok to find each other since North Korean refugees cannot openly reveal their real names and identities. Although this book may seem too harsh and depressing for teen readers in the U.S. due to the difficult realities, the book also shows humanity's good side through concerned people who care, support, and cry together despite the challenging situations. For example, a neighbor shares corn powder when Yeong-dae and his baby sister lose their parents. She checks on them and serves an adult's role in society even though her life is difficult as well. His aunt also shares her food although she and her family suffer from a shortage of food and essential necessities. When Yeong-dae and his friend cross the river, an elderly Korean-Chinese couple provides food and shelter. Yeong-dae is able to meet a Korean pastor who helps North Koreans for their successful journey of Seoul Train in Underground Railway, which is North Korean defectors' migration routes that include North Korea, China and five South-East Asian countries before they reach South Korea. The author, Young-sook Moon, has published a wide range of children's fiction and biography books in Korea. Most of them have powerful social justice themes in terms of rights for teenagers and children during the WW II Japanese compulsory occupation era in Korea. Moon invites children and adult readers to think about themes of enforced labor against children and their forced relocation to Siberia, Russia, Mexico, and Japan. In the author's note in *Across the Tumen*, Moon notes that she wrote this book after she traveled the border area between North Korea and China. In her note, she recalls her memory of looking at the North Korea side near the Amnok River. During her trip, she was told that factories in the North Korea side have stopped working and most of the trees were cut and consumed as last resources. Most of the land now is used for cornfields, which is a main food resource. Characters in this story reveal a great sense of romanticism for simply eating white rice since people in Young-dae's community must eat things that are not considered edible in order to give small comfort to their empty bellies. Most importantly, the author learned that many people were killed when they attempted crossing the Amnok River. Seeing dead bodies under the frozen river surface is not a rare experience. Moon highlights the need to raise awareness of the issues of the harsh living environment and human rights in North Korea. Many teenagers choose to be Kkotjebi for a living and many of them also die from starvation or are victims of persecution if they are caught. Female refugees are often the targets of human trafficking for forced marriage or sexual exploitation in addition to forced labor. Moon talked to a number of writers who are Korean defectors and studied essays written by Korean defectors for this book. Unfortunately, Yeong-dae's story is quite contemporary and realistic. *Across the Tumen* is Moon's first chapter book translated into English and republished in the U.S.

Thelma Melendez says

This story seems ripped from the headlines of the plight of North Korean children, but is told from the perspective of the young and vulnerable Yeong-dae as he looks for his sister. A work of fiction, but I definitely read it as a documentary. Would totally recommend!

*I received a copy of this book via Goodreads Giveaways

Charlie says

I won this book thru Goodreads.com and was a First read winner.

This book was an easy read because it was written for children. Not the young but the older children.

Well written and apparently pretty accurate about North Korea according to several reviewers. I'll take their word for it.

It is about a young North Korean boy that desperately tries to keep his family together and seeks a better life OUTSIDE of North Korea. It's a tough thing to do. The author does an excellent job in keeping the reader on edge.

Kme_17 says

I received this as a first read. This was a very good read. I also think it should be read especially for a younger audience. A very much a page turner. Action packed tale. I am glad I read this book.

***Johnna* says**

****FREE GIVEAWAY WIN****

A simply written, but poignant story that could be any child's plight today in North Korea. The narrative was fast-paced and easy to follow, even though I know very little about the history and circumstances of that particular country. Equal parts brutal, heart-wrenching and hopeful, this book was a quick, but good read.

Sandra Stiles says

Across the Tumen is one of those stories you start reading and can't put it down until you finish it. This is a fictionalized account of one North Korean boy's escape across the Tumen River into China. Although this is a fictional account the author has made it clear that this continues on today. Most of my students here in America have no idea how wonderful their life is. They have no idea how the children of other countries suffer. Through Yeong-dae's story we watch a family torn apart by starvation. We see the depths members will go to for each other and the price it will cost them. Most importantly we see what lengths someone is will to go to, the dangers they are willing to accept when they realize their country has lied to them. If you are a teacher wanting to get across the point of propaganda and its effect on a people, then this is definitely the book to read. This book will make you sick to your stomach, make you cringe, definitely make you cry both tears of sadness and joy. But most importantly this book will make you feel lucky you live in America. It will make you wonder what you can do for others out there. After all, isn't that what a great book does? It makes you feel. I definitely recommend this book to everyone young and old.

Want to know more or see some pictures of places mentioned in the book? I recommend this website here.

I won a copy of the book. The views expressed here are my own.

Meghan says

I received this book as part of the Goodreads First Reads book giveaway promotion program. I was skeptical at first because this is a YA book, but I was quickly drawn in to the story. The story takes place in North Korea during the 1990's. I was very intrigued by not just the story but the information that I learned about North Korea during this time. Although this book is a work of fiction, the author drew inspiration from true stories about that time. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn about the area, or to anyone who feels like their life is difficult. The struggles and extreme poverty that people went through during this time were unbearable and the story did not take place that long ago. I think that young adults would benefit from reading this because hopefully they would realize how good they have it in America. Having grown up in a democracy, I never really pictured what it would be like to grow up in a country without rights. Thank you good reads for giving me a chance to learn and to read something that I wouldn't never have picked up off the shelf.

Anthonia says

A very good well-written story. I enjoyed reading it. It gives the reader a inside look of the struggle in North Korea, and the tragic lives of those who live there. Loved reading the histroy of both north and South Korea it gave me an insight to their culture and ways. This book is a must read.

D says

The author consistently tells us things - emotions, plot points - rather than showing them, and most of the characters are cardboard cutouts. That said, if you don't know how difficult it was to live in North Korea during the Arduous March, or how tough it is to defect (which remains the case even today), it's a good starting point for learning about it. The facts are fine; the story just isn't well-told.

David Duncan says

Across The Tumen, by Moon Young-sook, is my seventy-fifth book that I have received and read from Goodreads. Really a great book to read. A real accurate description of life in North Korea, South Korea, and China. This story is about a young North Korean boys named Yeong-dae Lee, Nam-sik trying to escape across the Tumen river from North Korea into China. This is a fictional book, the author makes it clear these actions of trying to escape North Korea are going on to date.

Using-dae is a story about a young boy who tries desperately to keep his family together and seeks to have a better life outside North Korea. In the story Yeong-dae's life is turned upside down. His oldest sister Yeong-ran runs away from home at a young age with a promise of having a job, making money to send home to her parents. His father Mr Lee dies, days later from a fall off mountain hunting mushrooms. His mother has to get a job, is caught stealing foods from the government to feed her family, and is sent to a concentration camp, never to be heard or seen of again. Yeong-dae at the age of eleven is left to raise his youngest sister. With no money, or food, they have to beg for any scraps of food to eat. Yeong-dae tries his best to take care

of Yeong-ok, but she ends up dying of starvation and sickness. Yeong-dae is left alone and he decides to cross the Tumen into China to find his oldest sister. The first time Yeong-dae gets caught a couple days after crossing the Tumen and is returned to North Korea, where he is constantly punished and beaten severely. The second time he crosses the Tumen, he is able to find his sister after going through so much to find her. I will not go into the story any further, only to say that this author did a great job of writing this book. He makes you feel great that you come from a country that you are free to be able to go wear you want, and have a full stomach. I would recommend this book to anybody.

LLL Reads says

I was happy to win a review copy of ACROSS THE TUMEN from a Goodreads giveaway.

This is an important book and a very good read. Although it deals with serious subject matter this is a great book for middle grade and YA readers as well as adults. This first hand account keeps you absorbed in the story. I recommend it highly. From the very beginning the plight of this boy's situation makes for a tense page turner.

Patricia Kaniasty says

Fantastic story. I loved everything about this book. The characters were wonderful and the educational side of this book was great. I learned a lot about N. & S. Korea and China.....things I never knew. Engaging read for all ages.

Linda says

There are few opportunities to read about life in North Korea so it is really impossible for me to know if it is an accurate portrayal. If it is even close to accurate, and I have no reason to think that it is not, then life in with the Dear Leader is not something any of us would like to experience.

The story follows a young boy growing up in North Korea through multiple challenges--father dies, sister leaves for China thinking she will earn money to send home while actually being sold to a strange man, another sister dies, mother is sent to prison--that lead him to first become a kkotjebi (beggar) and eventually to try to escape to China. It is not a happy story but it is ultimately hopeful. It gave me new appreciation for the importance of learning more about other countries, especially those about which we are given little information. There is definite excitement and unexpected difficulties in the story which will keep people reading.

My one criticism of the book is more with the translation than with the story. At times it feels very stilted and awkward.

This is a book for middle school readers, or so I am estimating, but will be appreciated by older readers as well.

