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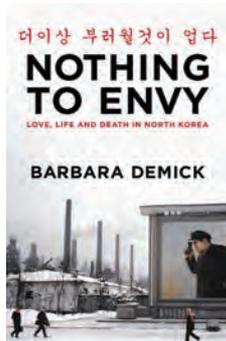


# Inside the hermit kingdom

Brad Laver reviews

## *Nothing to Envy: Love, Life and Death in North Korea*

by Barbara Demick  
(HarperCollins, 2010, 336 pages)



Sometimes it's the simplest things that cause the most brilliant epiphanies. Think Newton and the apple.

Despite a lifetime of propaganda and indoctrination, for many North Koreans their view of the world can change almost overnight.

For one former North Korean soldier it came whilst clipping his finger nails. The clippers he was using were made in America. He was amazed by the sharp clean edges they left behind. And then it hit him: 'If North Korea couldn't make such a fine nail clipper, how could it compete with American weapons?' He defected a few years later.

*Nothing to Envy: Love, Life and Death in North Korea*, by Barbara Demick, is the story of ordinary North Koreans who have all managed something extraordinary—they escaped from the clutches of one of the world's most tyrannical regimes. Indeed, the similarities between North Korea and the dystopian nightmare Orwell imagined in 1984, are striking.

*Nothing to Envy* gives a brilliant account of the real North Korean experience. It's a story seldom heard before. Hardly surprising given North Korea is still the most secretive country on earth.

Tourists are rarely allowed into

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North Korea (investigative journalists writing books about North Korea, even less frequently), and when they are, the visit is limited to the capital Pyongyang only. Even then, the tours around the city are highly choreographed, with two guides accompanying tourists at all times (one to ensure the other isn't being bribed). 'Thanks to our dear leader Kim Jong-il', Demick remarks, is a phrase used by the guides with strange regularity.

The North Korean government goes to great lengths to ensure that nobody from the outside ever gets to see the real North Korea. While many countries heavily censor it, North Korea is the only country to have almost entirely rejected the internet. There is no international postal or telephone service and listening to South Korean radio or television is punishable by death.

But even if you could move freely around North Korea without the 'help' of the local guides, Pyongyang's residents are hardly representative of the average North Korean. Traditionally Koreans have measured their success by their proximity to the seat of power—usually the imperial palace. Before the Korean War this meant living as close to Seoul as possible.

Not surprisingly, North Koreans don't get to choose where they live—the Workers Party decides this for them based on a class order that is once again eerily reminiscent of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Following World War 2, newly installed president Kim Il-sung made it his first order of business to weed out friend from foe. Each North Korean was put through eight background checks to determine their *songbun*—their social ranking.

North Korean society is broken into 51 categories which are part of 3 broad classes—the core class, the wavering class, and the hostile class. You can never rise up through the social order, only fall down. Only those high up on the pecking order get the privilege of living and working in Pyongyang. For the average North Korean, this means living in a city like Chongjin.

In the course of writing *Nothing to Envy*, Demick interviewed over 100 North Korean defectors, but the book zeros in on the stories of just six—all from the northern city of Chongjin, near the Russian border. Chongjin, she explains, was chosen deliberately because 'I believed that I could verify facts more easily if I spoke to numerous people about one place.' She adds 'I wanted that place to be as far from the well-manicured sights that the North Korean government shows to foreign visitors—even if it meant I would be



North Korean houses

writing about a place that was off limits.’

If the measure of one’s standing in North Korea is one’s proximity to Pyongyang then many of Chongjin’s residents sit on the bottom rung of the societal ladder—about as low as you can go without residing in one of the country’s many gulags.

Those interviewed paint a bleak picture of Chongjin. The only respite from the depressing shades of grey that overwhelm the landscape are the depictions of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il in the propaganda posters which dot the city’s streets. As an industrial town, Chongjin was hit hardest following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Without the Soviet Union to provide raw materials at ‘friendship prices’, the factories for which Chongjin was known, shut down almost immediately. But like all other North Korean cities, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant Chongjin was plunged into darkness. The government simply couldn’t fuel the nation’s power stations anymore.

For some of those interviewed by Demick, like Mi-ran and Jun-sang, the darkness became something of a saviour. The cover of absolute darkness allowed many North Koreans to do many of the things that are simply not allowed during the day. For Mi-ran and Jun-sang—whose families sat too far apart in the social order—that meant beginning a

forbidden relationship that would last 9 years and only end when Mi-ran fled the country.

But for most the darkness was just symptomatic of greater problems that existed. No electricity meant no industry, which meant no exports, which meant the North Korean regime was unable to import enough food to feed its population. To avoid starvation, many North Koreans resorted to what they were always told was evil—capitalism.

For Song Hee-suk (Mrs Song as she is now known in South Korea), this was a particularly difficult step to take. Mrs Song was a true believer—a model citizen, literally up to the day she escaped. She recalls later: ‘I lived only for Marshal Kim Il-sung and for the fatherland. I never had a thought otherwise.’

Reluctantly, she began buying and selling produce at the flourishing—but still very much illegal—farmers markets. In the end, it was Mrs Song’s entrepreneurial spirit which ensured that she and her daughters survived a famine which claimed the lives of approximately 2 million of her fellow North Koreans. Tragically, she notes that the ‘people who did what they were told—they were the first to die.’

Before the famine, the people of North Korea were quite content. They had food, shelter, education and healthcare. There were almost no defections to South Korea. In fact during the Great Leap Forward of the 1960s many Chi-

nese actually defected to North Korea. Their lives may not have been perfect, but they were assured their South Korean cousins were far worse off. In school the children sung:

Our father, we have nothing to  
envy in the world.

Our house is within the embrace  
of the Workers’ Party.

We are all brothers and sisters.

Even if a sea of fire comes to-  
wards us, sweet children do  
not need to be afraid.

Our father is here.

We have nothing to envy in this  
world.

But the politics of starving changed things. Where once people feared to make even a slightly disparaging remark about Kim Jong-il’s height for fear of imprisonment, they were now openly questioning their government—the fear of execution by your government just isn’t as frightening when you are starving to death.

Just 71 people defected to South Korea in 1998. Since then the number defecting has risen to between 1,000 and 3,000 annually. In addition there are hundreds of thousands of North Koreans illegally living in China. Countless more have died trying to cross the Chinese-North Korean border.

But for many North Koreans, assimilating with the South Korean way of life is a difficult experience. Although she suspected more thought the same way, of the 100 people Demick interviewed, only one admitted she regretted making the journey: ‘I wouldn’t have come here if I knew what I know now’ she lamented. But these feelings are generally short-lived.

Once the shock of living in a world that is almost entirely alien passes, few North Koreans look back. They embrace their new found freedom and prosperity, and grasp with both hands every opportunity it affords them. These are the North Koreans who truly have nothing to envy.

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