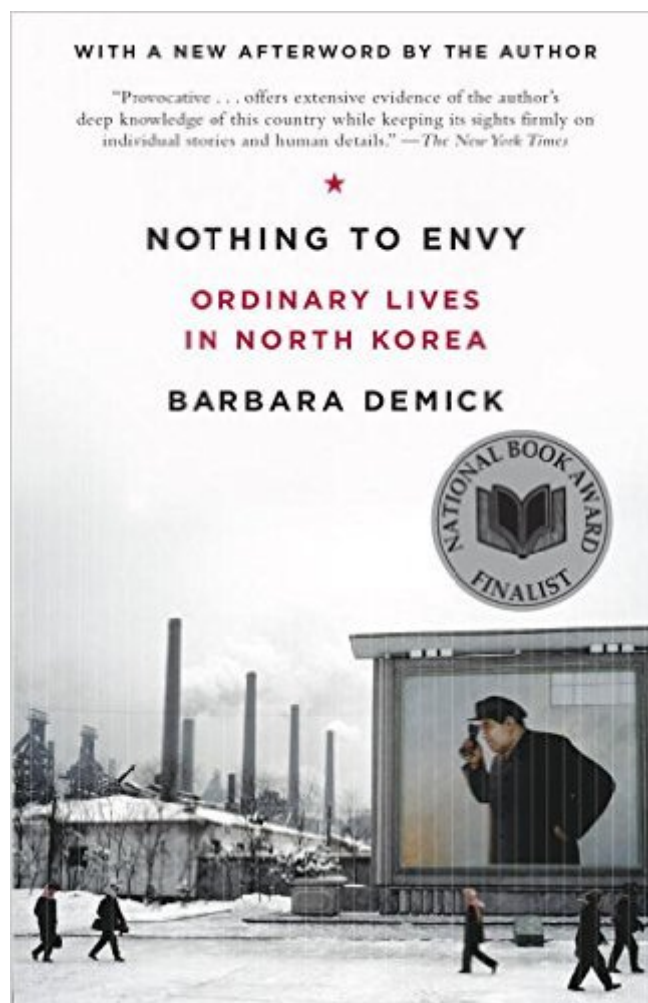


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# Nothing To Envy: Ordinary Lives In North Korea



## Synopsis

A National Book Award finalist and National Book Critics Circle finalist, Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* is a remarkable view into North Korea, as seen through the lives of six ordinary citizens. Award-winning journalist Barbara Demick follows the lives of six North Korean citizens over fifteen years—a chaotic period that saw the death of Kim Il-sung, the rise to power of his son Kim Jong-il, and a devastating famine that killed one-fifth of the population. Demick brings to life what it means to be living under the most repressive totalitarian regime today—an Orwellian world that is by choice not connected to the Internet, where displays of affection are punished, informants are rewarded, and an offhand remark can send a person to the gulag for life. Demick takes us deep inside the country, beyond the reach of government censors, and through meticulous and sensitive reporting we see her subjects fall in love, raise families, nurture ambitions, and struggle for survival. One by one, we witness their profound, life-altering disillusionment with the government and their realization that, rather than providing them with lives of abundance, their country has betrayed them.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As Barbara Demick says in her epilogue, North Korea is something of a mystery. How has it avoided the collapse that experts have been predicting for 15 or more years? How has it been so successful at keeping citizens ignorant of the outside world and the outside world ignorant of its machinations? And, because of these successes at insulation, is it even possible to understand what life is like in North Korea? Fortunately, *Nothing to Envy* gives us a "yes" answer to this last question; here is a book where we hear the stories of six North Korean defectors. In interweaving

chapters, Demick reconstructs these tales of struggle with the skill of a novelist (and anyone not told that this is a work of journalism may be forgiven for thinking it a dystopian novel à la 1984 (Signet Classics) or 1984 (Modern Library Classics)). Dr. Kim is a medical doctor, devoted to the Workers party; Mrs. Song is a wife forced to find any way she can to feed her family, including daughter Oak-Hee in increasingly dismal times; Kim Hyuck is a boy whose father gave him to a state orphanage rather than have a son he couldn't support; Jun-Sang and Mi-Ran are secretly boyfriend and girlfriend, each with private reservations about, and struggles with, North Korea that remain private for fear of governmental repercussions. Through these tales, we are able to glimpse life in a nation gone horribly wrong, where selling anything privately or insulting the Workers Party can land you years of time in prison or a labor camp, where emaciated children sing songs extolling North Korea, and one's station in life is dictated by how loyal one's family has been to "the Party." The stories are wonderfully told and, at times, I found myself putting the book down out of disbelief, outrage, and thankfulness for my own circumstances. I don't think anyone could read these stories and not feel very strongly. Of course, Demick is also telling stories of defectors - by definition, stories about the strength of human spirit and tenacity. Nothing to Envy not only tells of economic collapse, but people's initiative in bringing about (illegal) markets to buy and sell goods. She not only tells of spirits being broken, but spirits persevering. And just as readers will certainly feel heartbreaks in these pages, so will they also feel joy in reading about some really brave people who broke the rules and thought for themselves. I cannot recommend this book strongly enough! Readers of fiction (and biography) will get lost in the stories; readers of foreign affairs and political science will relish the descriptions of life under a most secret regime. Nothing to Envy is as captivating as a human story as it is informative as a political description.

I find myself fascinated by the lives of North Koreans: So completely different from ours in the first world. What is most fascinating is that they don't even know what they're missing, indoctrinated virtually from birth that the U.S. is evil and their Dear Leader is a god. This book is for people like me, that want to know more about what it's really like to live there, day by day. The book is full of little details like the very modest housing, the lack of heat in the wintertime everywhere, and how rations worked before they were cut off; to say nothing of the many ways to avoid starvation or watching what you say all the time for fear of being reported to the authorities for the North Korean equivalent of blasphemy. The book follows six people through their lives in the DPRK in the 1990's, including the huge famine which occurred at that time; and, ultimately, their decisions to defect (a foregone conclusion since otherwise their stories would not be told). I found myself fascinated by

them, especially how each figures out that their country's leadership has let them down. The author even managed to fit in a love story which, far from being hokey, is especially riveting due to the circumstances. The book is well-written and easy to read, the only mar being occasional repeated information which is easy to overlook. I feel like I'm barely scratching the surface with this review. If reading this makes you want to know more, you won't be disappointed by the book.

This is a gripping book. The six defectors interviewed by Demick describe North Korea as a totalitarian state in a post-apocalypse condition. That's why the visions of Orwell and McCarthy come to mind. North Korea suffered two tragedies. The first one was the split of the Korean peninsula at the end of WWII and Stalin installing a like-minded dictator at its helm, Kim Il-sung. The latter eradicates religion and replaces it by his own cult of personality. In achieving a God status in his country, he bests Stalin, Hitler and Fidel Castro. Upon his death in the early nineties, many North Koreans will commit suicides. And, North Koreans will believe (through intense political propaganda) that if they cry enough Kim Il-sung will come back from the dead. The son of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il will succeed him as a son of God. North Korea's second tragedy was the collapse of the Soviet Union. When the latter collapsed it interrupted its assistance in food and oil. North Korea did not have enough fuel on its own to maintain its electrical grid. On the first page of the first chapter you see a picture of the Korean peninsula at night. South Korea is full of bright spots (urban areas lit by electricity). But, North Korea is pitch dark! In the post Soviet Union era, North Korea suffers shortages of electricity, running water, and food. Millions have already died of starvation. People are not paid. They are compensated by food rations. But, if you don't work you don't eat. The ones who don't receive food attempt to survive by milling bark, grasses, shrubs, leaves. The majority of the country still suffers from malnutrition. Millions more would die if not for foreign assistance. But, the government misallocates food assistance by giving it to the ones who need it the least such as the army and the Pyongyang residents. Meanwhile, rural areas are starving. Within the book, a defecting doctor describes it best as she crossed the border in China and finds a full bowl of rice served to a dog and stated "dogs in China eat better than doctors in North Korea." While Koreans physical attributes were reasonably homogeneous a while back, they have since diverged dramatically. The North Koreans are half a foot shorter and tens of pounds lighter because of malnutrition. North Koreans born in the late eighties to early nineties are recognizable as they are shorter with heads disproportionately large relative to their bodies with overly thin and frail limbs. In the early nineties before foreign aid rallied after the collapse of Soviet Union subsidies, society took a McCarthy's turn with many crimes, suicides, and even cannibalism

(homeless orphans overtaken by starving adults in remote areas). Only a totalitarian State could prevent such a society to fall into chaos. Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il have created a cult of personality supported by an obsessive self-surveillance society. North Koreans main activity is reporting on each other. The surveillance starts from the bottom up with "people's group" where everyone reports on everyone else. At dinner if you expressed a mild criticism of the current regime, you could be reported by a neighbor. Soon, after you could be abducted by the police and disappear in a camp forever. Many surveilling police forces are very specialized. If you sleep with your lover, a specialized police force can barge in the middle of the night and ask your lover for its travel permit. If the adequate documents are not produced the person can end up in prison. Another specialized police force watches that people wear the correct garments with the buttons showing support for the regime. Another one checks in that your TV or radio (a few people have electricity for a few moments a day) is set on the proper North Korean program. If you tweaked this equipment to listen to South Korean programs, you can incur severe punishment including death. Another police force makes sure that the portraits of the dictators are clean. If not you are in trouble. Society is categorized in three classes: 1) the core class representing the professionals and government leaders; 2) the wavering class representing some sort of middle class; and 3) the hostile class representing entertainers, artists, nonproductive elements, and everyone of foreign origins. The hostile class is the one most intensely spied upon by others. Thus, it is most vulnerable to be imprisoned in camps and gulags for no obvious reason. Propaganda is relentless. The dictator is the benevolent father of the nation. Without his hard work and superior intelligence you would be dying of starvation twice as fast as you are. Everybody else is the enemy. This includes Americans, Chinese, South Koreans, and even Russians and East-Europeans who failed at communism because of their genetic weakness. Capitalism is rotten. In other words, you have "Nothing to Envy." Meanwhile, reality is stunningly bad. Chapter 7 describes the decrepit health care system. Hospitals lack all basic supplies and remedies. Many operations are conducted without anesthetic by tying the patient to boards. Children come in the hospitals and die because their weakening bodies from starvation can't fend off mild colds or flues that escalate into pneumonia. Chapter 8 describes the conditions in school that are equally horrible. Given that schools are broke, children are required to bring a ration of wood for heating and their own lunch. A teacher/defector observed a tragic pattern. At first, the children stop bringing their ration of wood. Next, the children don't bring their own lunch (and therefore don't eat during the day). And, soon after children do not even attend school.

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