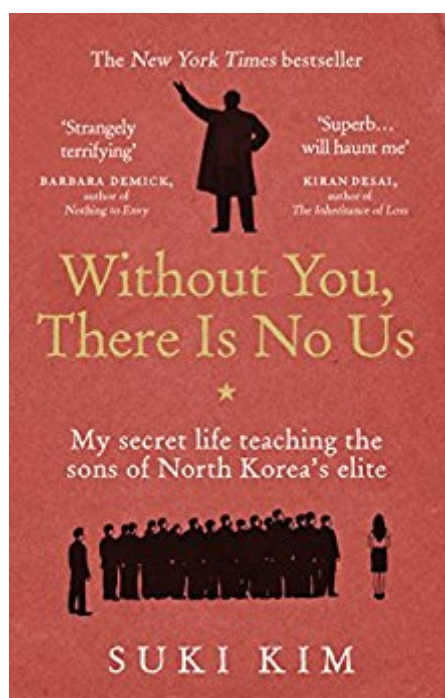


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# Without You, There Is No Us: My Secret Life Teaching The Sons Of North Korea's Elite



## Synopsis

It is 2011, and all universities in North Korea have been shut down for an entire year, except for the all-male Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. This is where Suki Kim has accepted a job teaching English. Over the next six months she will eat three meals a day with her young charges and struggle to teach them to write, all under the watchful eye of the regime. Life at the university is lonely and claustrophobic. Her letters are read by censors and she must hide her notes and photographs not only from her minders but also from her colleagues, evangelical Christian missionaries, whose faith she does not share. As the weeks pass she discovers how easily her students lie, and how total is their obedience to Kim Jong-il. She also, bravely, hints at the existence of a world beyond their own: the internet, free travel, democracy, and other ideas forbidden in a country where torture and execution are commonplace. Yet her pupils are also full of boyish enthusiasm, with flashes of curiosity not yet extinguished. *Without You, There Is No Us* offers a moving and incalculably rare glimpse of life inside the world's most inscrutable country.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

After reading these two books, back to back, I have decided to review them both together and encourage other interested readers to do the same! There is not much I can say after reading the two books, "Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea" by Jang Jin-sung and "Without You, There Is No Us" by Suki Kim. They both tell a similar story of a particularly inhumane country, North Korea, but from different perspectives. It is difficult to sit here, in the United States, and read these two books while trying to understand or comprehend what we are reading. While I have traveled world wide and have taught, as a professor, in different countries, I have never in my travels come across someplace described, I think honestly and truthfully, as primitive, as imprisoning or as controlled as is North Korea. Jang was part of North Korea's elite with access to Kim Jung-il. He was a poet and highly placed in North Korea's department of internal propaganda. In other words, he was the ultimate insider. It was his position to read foreign, mainly Southern Korean, literature. Then Jang was to write articles and poetry, in which the North Korean readers would assume he was South Korean, extolling the virtues of Kim Jung-il. As such he became jaded with what he saw in North Korea, particularly after a trip to his childhood city and finding what has become of childhood friends. He witnesses poverty and famine first hand and begins writing a secret poetry regarding his thoughts. He begins sharing items with a college friend who he recognizes as also disillusioned about North Korea. One of these is a South Korean book which is lost by his friend. Knowing that the outcome would be death of both of them, they escape using their elite credentials to a border town and then, to China. A good part of this book is their travails in China as fugitives and then his escape to South Korea. The second book, by Kim, is the story of a South Korean-American who is selected by a religious group to teach English to the elite sons of the leaders in North Korea. She writes of her essential imprisonment in a university, the lack of the barest essentials of common life elsewhere and of the inability to freely convey ideas while teaching. Everything is guarded in what is said and what is acted on. The students, she realizes are competent liars in what they will say and do. She must communicate with the students in English and she is forbidden from using Korean, her mother language. So many subjects are taboo that normal conversation is almost not possible. And yet, she is there to teach everything to students while being allowed to say almost nothing! Everything is vetted by the Koreans, whether it is her minders, Korean counterpart censors or even her fellow teachers. The students, despite being of the sciences, know nothing about the internet and are not allowed access to it. The students are kept in military order, not even allowed to talk to their parents who are just in some cases across the wall of the university. So both the teachers and the students are, in effect, prisoners. These two books, one by an insider and one by an outsider, will leave you depressed about North Korea. What can be said of a nation that willfully starves its

peoples? What can be said of a nation where everyone must think and do the same thing? What can be said of a nation where death is the only exception to worshipping its leader? What can be said of a nation where critical thinking is a death sentence, in fact, even reading of unauthorized critical thinking is a death sentence?

This is a beautiful and wrenching account of a journalist posing as a Christian missionary in one of North Korea's only universities. Suki Kim spends two semesters teaching the sons of North Korea's elite families and experiences the oppression and brainwashing that pervade every aspect of life in North Korea. Reading this book is like reading a dystopian society novel like George Orwell's 1984--except that the totalitarian society actually exists and is oppressing real people. This book will transport you to a sad, otherworldly place but it's worth the difficult journey because only by folks like us understanding the isolated Other can we ever hope to influence our government's leaders to exercise their foreign policy with regard to North Korea with a mixture of firmness AND compassion.

If you are interested in what is going on in North Korea, this book is a must read. It gives you great insight into the youthful, college-attending upper class leaders of the regime. The book is content current...Pyongyang University of Science and Technology is in the news as we speak due to arrests of its teachers. This fact alone gives witness to the bravery of author Suki Kim to put herself in harms way to be able to gather the facts so the world can know what this country is doing to control its citizens. The book is so well written that, in spite of the horrific nature of its underlying theme, it is truly an enjoyable read from an entertainment perspective.

When Suki Kim was thirteen living in South Korea, her father's business went bankrupt. Because bankruptcy was an offense punishable by law, Suki and her family fled to America. In her heart, however, Suki has always felt her home to be Korea. She feels displaced, melancholy, and haunted by stories of Korea and the tragedies of those family members who disappeared into Kim Jong-il's Hermit Kingdom. In this context, Suki, a successful novelist, writer, journalist, and professor, infiltrates North Korea posing as a Christian missionary and as an ESL teacher where she teaches college-age boys English. There is a tension between what she knows and what she can tell the boys; what mythology the North Korean presents of itself and the hell that is the true reality. Kim must navigate these disparities while aching with melancholy as she contemplates her family members who disappeared there. This is a book about torment, deception, and myth-making. The hell of Pyongyang is not just its appearance, but its symbolism. As

we read, “But it was not Pyongyang’s physical attributes that made it so ugly in my eyes. It was what it stood for. It was the most horrible city in the world to me, and every time I saw it in the distance, on the horizon, outside the van window, I felt disheartened. Pyongyang was the Xanadu of North Korea—the city the rest of the country slaved to feed. It was a greedy, bloodsucking monster, and sometimes I wished it would just go up in smoke.”

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