

The Orphan Master's Son

A Novel

By ADAM JOHNSON

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Reviewed by Constance Vidor



What is it like to live in North Korea? Satellite images and the testimony of escapees from this isolated, brutal dictatorship have opened up knothole glimpses of the oppression and extreme privation in which North Koreans exist. Through these sources, we know that beatings, torture, starvation, and hard labor are the fates of the thousands of citizens imprisoned in brutal prison camps. Vital as accounts such as *Escape from Camp 14* in documenting these human rights

abuses are, they make no large literary claims. In expressing North Korea's suffering on an ambitious literary scale, American author Adam Johnson has achieved something unique.¹

The central figure in the story is Pak Jun Do, a director of an orphanage where children provide slave labor in mines and factories. The journey of this hero is grotesquely picaresque, as Jun Do is tossed from adventure to adventure by inscrutable orders from above. Over the course of the story, he is a tunnel soldier, a kidnapper, a prisoner in a labor camp, a diplomatic dignitary, and a high-ranking military impostor. Scenes of terror are interlaced with blackly humorous asides, as when a torturer casually remarks, "The electricity sometimes gives male subjects tremendous erections, so I'm not convinced the experience is all bad."

Three contrasting narrative voices paint a bizarre canvas of conflicting realities: a third-person narrator speaking mostly from Jun Do's point of view, an official interrogator, and a radio broadcast. This third voice references the persistent radio broadcasts that are required listening for North Koreans. In the novel, it retells the plot in the style of propaganda theater. This bloviating, grandiloquent voice is the official truth of life in North Korea, a story of almost orgasmic cultic devotion to the dictator. As the required tone of expression in both public and private life, it creates lives devoid of authenticity, sometimes even within the most private spaces of the heart: "Real stories like this, human ones, could get you sent to prison, and it didn't matter what they were about. It didn't matter if the story was about an old woman or a squid attack—if it diverted emotion from the Dear Leader, it was dangerous."

Jun Do's tragedy is that he has somehow kept that private space with his own "real story" intact. His love for the opera

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singer Sun-Moon stays with him as he descends into the hell of a prison camp, which seems to give him an almost magical resilience and ingenuity as he eventually escapes and unites with her. The tenderness of Jun Do's devotion to Sun-Moon is the miraculously unbreakable thread of humanity that weaves throughout this novel of unforgiving brutality.

Readers unfamiliar with North Korea may wonder if the author has exaggerated what is factually known about the country in order to create a colorful and fantastical novel. For example, in the opening chapters, sailors on a North Korean boat accidentally make contact with a US military vessel. In the tense early moments of this contact, some Americans rip out the portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, which are legally required to be kept in place on board the North Korean boat. Although the encounter concludes peacefully, the North Koreans must frantically concoct an absurd story involving a shark attack in order to overlay the loss of the portraits with a narrative of patriotic heroism. A reader who doubts the likelihood of such a necessity has only to refer to *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, which describes how the pictures of the dictators were kept in rooms that were wellheated throughout the subzero winters at the camp while prisoners died in droves from lack of warmth.²

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NOTES

1. Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey From North Korea to Freedom in the West* (New York: Viking, 2012).

2. Ch'ör-hwan Kang and Pierre Rigoulot, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in a North Korean Gulag* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

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