

Culture Notes

Every Falling Star:

The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea

by Sungju Lee

translated by Susan McClelland

Amulet Books, 2016

Non-fiction, set in North Korea

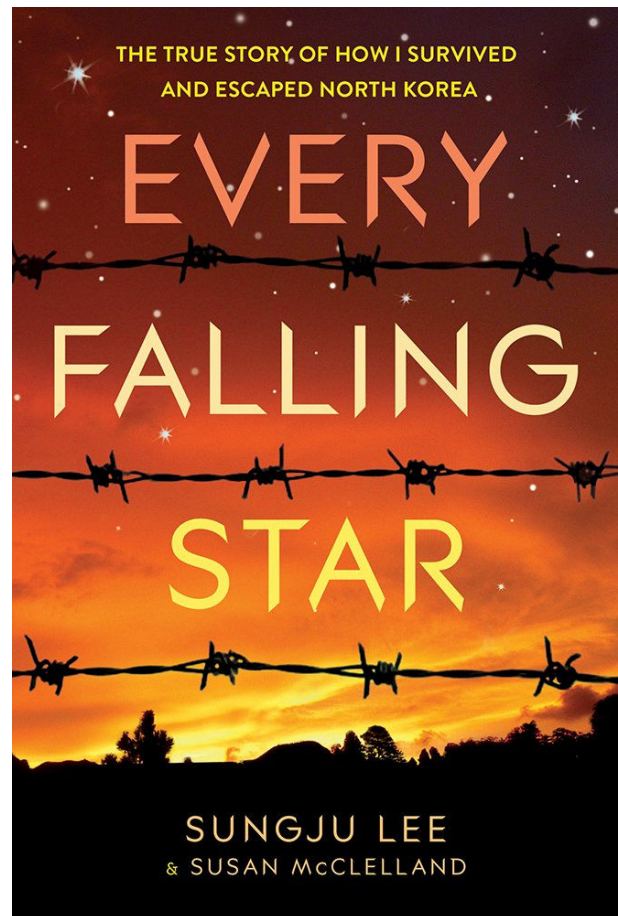
2016 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Theme: Migration

The United States is a nation of immigrants. Indigenous communities also have stories of migration, displacement, or first meetings. Migration stories are often about hardship, injustice, and intense suffering, and this is certainly true for North Koreans who have fled the regime and settled elsewhere. As author Sungju Lee (pronounced: SUHNG-joo LEE) explains in this memoir, he hopes to change the conditions that created the injustice and suffering by telling his story. Here is some background information to help you and your students better understand the story.



Author Sungju Lee gives an interview on the BBC News, November 8, 2016



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Genre: Refugee Memoir

Sungju Lee's family is one of many who fled North Korea to escape persecution and famine. They are part of a massive flow of people around the world who are displaced by circumstances and must go on dangerous journeys across borders to survive. Sungju Lee's story is a refugee memoir, told by people who witnessed or experienced refugee migration firsthand, or who were part of refugee communities.



View of downtown Pyongyang

(Source: "North Korea, an 'open-air prison.'" <https://br.financas.yahoo.com/noticias/coreia-norte-pris%C3%A3o-c%C3%A9u-aberto-143519570.html>).



A scene from the South Korean movie Crossing, which is based on a true story about the life of a North Korean defector and his family.

(Source: Asia Society, "'Crossing': A North Korean Refugee Film." <https://asiasociety.org/crossing-north-korean-refugee-film>).

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Dogs in Korea

In his early years, Sungju and his family lived a comfortable life in Pyongyang (pronounced: PYUHNG-yahng) North Korea. Their dog, Bo Cho, was a Pungsan (or Poongsan; pronounced: POONG-sahn), one of three dog breeds native to Korea. Originally from North Korea, Pungsan were raised as hunting dogs.



Pungsan dog, North Korea Stamp Collection

(Source: The University of Chicago Online Library. "North Korean Stamp Collection." <https://luna.lib.uchicago.edu/north-korean-stamp-collection>).



Sapsali dog

(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_sapsali.jpg).

The Sapsali (romanized as *Sapsaree*; pronounced: sahp-SAH-lee) dog breed is also native to Korea. It was believed that that Sapsali could hunt ghosts and chase away spirits.

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The Jindo (Jindo gae; pronounced: chin-DOH geh) is said to originate from Jindo Island. The famous Jindo dog statue was inspired by the story of a Jindo that, after being adopted by a family living 180 miles away from her previous home, escaped and made her way back to her family on Jindo Island. Jindo dogs are thought to be very loyal, brave, and protective of their humans.



Jindo dog

(Source: Wikimedia Commons. "Korean Jindo."
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Korean_Jindo).

Jindo dog statue

(Source: Trippose. "Korean Jindo."
<https://en.trippose.com/tour/jindo-dog>).



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Korean Folktales: The Legend of the Brothers Hungbu and Nolbu

The folktale of brothers Hungbu (pronounced: HUUNG-boo) and Nolbu (pronounced: DOHL-boo) is known throughout the Korean peninsula. It was even retold in a 1970s South Korean stamp series (see images below). As the story goes, Hungbu and his wife are kind and generous people. Though they are poor, they maintain their good natures. One day they find a sparrow with an injured leg, and they nurse the injured sparrow back to health. The sparrow then returns the next spring with a gourd seed, which the couple plants. They harvest the ripened gourds to find wealth beyond their dreams. It is a reward from the Sparrow King for their good deed.



“Heungbu and Nolbu” stamp series, printed on Children’s Day, May 5, 1970

(Source: Korea.net. “Childhood reminiscence via old stamps—Part 5. Heungbu and Nolbu.”

<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=122507>).



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Though Nolbu is already rich after hoarding the family wealth and chasing Hungbu's family from their land, Nolbu is envious of his brother's newfound wealth and demands to know the source. Hungbu tells him the entire story. Not satisfied until they have more wealth than Hungbu, Nolbu and his wife find a sparrow. They injure its leg on purpose in order to nurse it back to health. The next spring, the sparrow brings them an enchanted gourd seed. But instead of more wealth, they receive *tokkebi* (goblins; pronounced: TOH-KEH-bee), who punish them for their bad deeds and take away all they have.

Hungbu, who is still generous and humble, takes in Nolbu's family. Nolbu eventually becomes a kinder person, thanks to the example of his younger brother, Hungbu. Folktales endure through time and generations in part because they can be adapted to new lessons. The story of Hungbu and Nolbu teaches that what goes around comes around. It also teaches that everyone matters in a community, and people with more wealth are responsible for the welfare of people who have less. Yet another lesson is that people should be kind to one another and to their companions in nature, such as the bird who is injured in the story. In Sungju's grandfather's version, the story teaches about the relationship between North and South Korea. The countries are like estranged brothers.

The Korean People's Army of North Korea

Sungju Lee's father was a high-ranking military officer in the North Korean Army (officially known as the Korean People's Army), and his mother was a schoolteacher. Like many North Korean children, Sungju dreamed of becoming a soldier in the army. Military service is universal and mandatory in North Korea—for both men and women. Service for men typically lasts ten years; for women, until they are twenty-three.

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A bronze sculpture in Pyongyang of KWP flags and over 200 bronze figures celebrate the socialist revolution and the struggle against North Korea's imperialist enemies.

(Source: Atlas Obscura. "Mansu Hill Grand Monument." <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/mansu-hill-grand-monument>).

Youth Leagues

In North Korea, the Youth League and the Young Pioneers are similar to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in the United States, but participation is universal and compulsory. All North Korean children are required to join the Korean Children's Union from ages seven to thirteen, and they must join the Youth League from ages fourteen to thirty. Children in the KCU are required to perform labor and produce certain quotas in areas such as farming, construction, and collecting materials for their school. Failure to do so results in a cash penalty.

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The image below is a Victory Day Parade with members of the Youth League (Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League) being cheered on by Korean Children's Union members (Young Pioneers) along the sidewalk.



Military parade of Youth League on Victory Day

(Source: Wikimedia Commons. "North Korea Victory Day 210.")

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:North_Korea_Victory_Day_210_\(9492051431\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:North_Korea_Victory_Day_210_(9492051431).jpg)

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attends "We Are the Happiest in the World," a performance of schoolchildren to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the Korean Children's Union (KCU)

(Source: Human Rights Watch. "UN: North Korea Exploiting Children." <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/08/un-north-korea-exploiting-children>).



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The Legacy of Kim Il-Sung

On July 8, 1994, Kim Il-Sung (pronounced: KEEM ILL-suhng), founder of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, died and the nation went into mourning. People feared they would be punished if they didn't weep loudly enough. It was also a year of disasters in North Korea, including flooding, drought, widespread famine, and economic collapse. During this period, Lee's family, who had been in good standing with the Party and the military, were ruthlessly persecuted. Many other families also fell victim to political changes and social turbulence.



The statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il on Mansu Hill in Pyongyang

(Source: Wikimedia Commons.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_statues_of_Kim_Il_Sung_and_Kim_Jong_Il_on_Mansu_Hill_in_Pyongyang_\(april_2012\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_statues_of_Kim_Il_Sung_and_Kim_Jong_Il_on_Mansu_Hill_in_Pyongyang_(april_2012).jpg)).

Soldiers paraded through the streets of the North Korean capital to mark the seventieth anniversary of the country's founding.

(Source: CNN. "N. Korea holds military parade for anniversary."
<https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2018/09/09/north-korea-military-parade-anniversary-ripley-lok-vpx.cnn>).





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Famine

Before the 1990s, many North Koreans enjoyed a decent standard of living, with universal employment, furnished housing with utilities, free education, and ample time for leisure activities (arts, sports, culture). Beginning in the mid-1990s, anyone who was not a Korean Workers' Party member in good standing was in danger of losing everything in the economic crisis. At present, it is estimated that one in four North Korean children suffers from malnutrition (Source: Liberty in North Korea, libertyinnorthkorea.org).

Sungju witnesses increasingly dire famine conditions in the town of Gyeongseong (pronounced: KYUHNG-suhng). As rations become scarce, the Lees forage for anything edible, but Sungju knows that they are starving, along with everyone else in Gyeongseong. The search for resources drives Sungju's father to leave the family and cross into China. Sungju's mother also leaves in search of food, never to return. Sungju survives by eating a ration of salt and water each day until he finally leaves the house to go to the home of his friend Young-Bum (pronounced: YUHNG-buhm) for help. Without this help, he believes he would have died, like so many people in Gyeongseong.

Social Control

In North Korea, family punishment is a common practice. If one person is in trouble with the authorities for even a slight infraction such as expressing dissent, the entire family can be sanctioned, with punishment including jail or executions. For Sungju's father's infraction, the entire family was punished. North Koreans who have left the country take precautions not to provide any information that might endanger family members who may still be in North Korea.

People who are caught trying to escape are punished with jail time or execution. As a child in Gyeongseong, Sungju and his classmates are marched to the public execution of a man and woman who were accused of stealing equipment and crossing into China. They were branded as "traitors."



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Dreams and Omens

For Sungju, omens and dreams are crucial sources of information in his chaotic life on the streets. After seeing a falling star or a bird on an unusual flight path, Sungju finds that his life takes unexpected turns. Some of these images are prescient: he sees a person in his dream and later learns of their death.

Myths and legends also figure into young Sungju's understanding of the events in North Korea. Living with his *kkotjebi* group (see below; pronounced: GOH-CHEH-bee), the slightest mistake or bad luck can make the difference between life and death, and Sungju is careful of the *shan-shin-ryong-nim* (benevolent cave-dwelling spirits; pronounced: SAHN-SHILL-YUHNG-neem) and *ru-ryeong* (vengeful ghosts; pronounced: YOO-lyuhng).

Omens and dreams have a special significance in Korean culture. Symbolism can involve things like animals, colors, times of day, or seasons. Dreams can be portents when they include family or ancestors.

The seven brightest stars of the Big Dipper constellation are called the *Chilseong* (Seven Stars; pronounced: CHILL-suhng). In Korean mythology, the stars were the home of the mythical Jade Emperor.

Orphan Gangs: The *Kkotjebi*

Sungju, Young-Bum, Chul-Ho (pronounced: CHUH-loh), and the other orphaned boys become a second family by joining a *kkotjebi*. Joining a *kkotjebi* gang is how most children survive after losing their families to famine or displacement. The gang members work together to steal from the markets, but some also work with merchants to provide protection. They might also fight with rival *kkotjebi* gangs over territory or access. They could work with another gang and steal for them in exchange for food, security, fighting skills, and so on, as Sungju's *kkotjebi* worked with Big Brother's gang in the Pohang (pronounced: POH-ahng) market. Sungju and his group of *kkotjebi* get into a fight and lose one of their brothers.

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Though its members are all children, the *kkotjebi* functions like a family with its own traditions. They care for the sick among their ranks and hold funeral rites when a member dies.



***Kkotjebi*, literally translated as “flower swallow,” refers to Korean children who have lost their caregivers or been abandoned by their loved ones.**

(Source: Hippocrates Med Review. “Trials of the Kkotjebi: Lessons from North Korea’s Lost Generation.”

<https://hippocratesmedreview.org/trials-of-the-kkotjebi-lessons-from-north-koreas-lost-generation/>).

North Korean schoolchildren line up in formation.

(Source: New York Post. “North Korean kids forced into slave work.” <https://nypost.com/2016/12/15/north-korean-kids-forced-into-slave-work/>).



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Currency: Won

Among the many adjustments for North Korean refugees in South Korea is a currency system with the same name, won, but with a very different scale. Five North Korean won is equivalent to 0.006 USD, or about half of one cent (in 2020, 1 USD = 900 North Korean won or 1,191 South Korean won). The five-won note is the smallest denomination of paper currency in circulation in North Korea.



Five-won note

(Source: URI Tours. "Banknotes of North Korea—The North Korean Won."
<https://www.uritours.com/blog/banknotes-of-north-korea-north-korean-won/>).



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