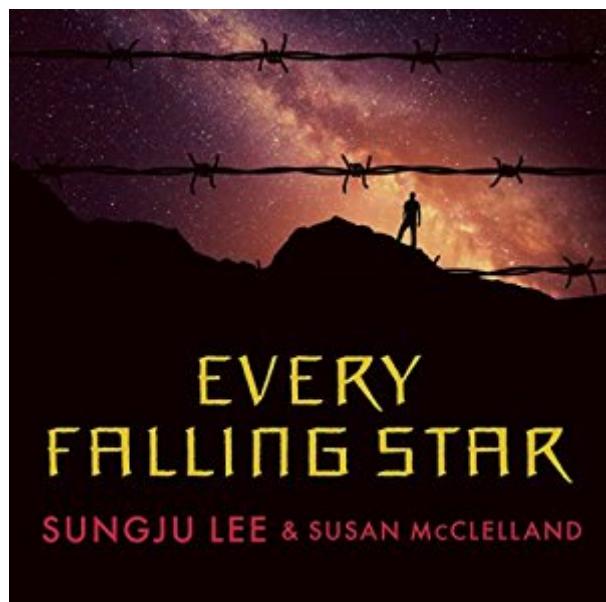


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Every Falling Star: The True Story Of How I Survived And Escaped North Korea



Synopsis

Every Falling Star, the first book to portray contemporary North Korea to a young audience, is the intense memoir of a North Korean boy named Sungju, who is forced at age 12 to live on the streets and fend for himself. To survive, Sungju creates a gang and lives by thieving, fighting, begging, and stealing rides on cargo trains. Sungju richly recreates his scabrous story, depicting what it was like for a boy alone to create a new family with his gang, his "brothers"; to be hungry and to fear arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. This riveting memoir allows young listeners to learn about other cultures where freedoms they take for granted do not exist.

Book Information

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Heritage

Customer Reviews

I lived in South Korea for two years. I taught English at a private academy and spent my weekends traveling around the country visiting Buddhist temples, museums and the many festivals that take place throughout the year. I learned so much about the country's history but the subject I heard the most about was the desire for the unity of the north and south. The DMZ or Demilitarized Zone runs like a scar between the two Koreas. It separates the land into two radically different areas. The south is a mixture of high tech, non-stop, bright light cities and more traditional villages and farms. The north, which I only glimpsed through a set of binoculars, is secretive, isolated and restrictive. Yes, I've watched many documentaries about North Korea and have been fascinated by it, but this book offered a very human and emotional perspective on life within the Hermit Kingdom. The story is essentially an exploration of survival and human resilience. It forces the reader to question

what they would do if left with nothing and how far they would go to overcome such horrible obstacles. It is told through first person narrative by Sungju, a North Korean boy who belonged to a very well off family in Pyongyang. Everything in his life was perfect. He attended the best school, always had enough food and lived in a modern apartment. The country and its politics began to change in the late 1990s and as a result, Sungju and his parents are forcibly exiled to a small village in the north of the country. It's such a radical difference from what he had been used to. There wasn't any food or basic necessities and those who act against the state were publicly executed to frighten others into submission.

This review is based on an ARC I received from NetGalley. It is an honest review and the advanced receipt of it in no way affected my review or rating. This story paints a riveting and tragic story of a young man whose family was ripped apart by the political/socioeconomic environment of his country. North Korea had recently lost their trading partner and primary source of aid and this coupled with a series of weather anomalies manifested into the collapse of the central ration system. After the death of political leader Kim Il-Sung, the country plummeted into a famine that the new leader, Kim Jong-il was ill equipped to deal with. Sungju's family moved from the capital of Pyongyang to the forsaken northern city Gyong-seong. This is where everything just fell apart and the story that is spun is just heart breaking. After the money ran out and the family was unable to forage anymore from the nearby forest Sungju's dad left to search for work in China. When he did not return and the food literally ran out, his mom left to go to her sister's for help and she never returned. Which left a malnourished pre-teen to fend for himself. So, so, so sad! Honestly as a parent this scenario just brought tears to my eyes. What made the situation worse in my eyes is that his parents had never really told him what was happening, what was really going on, so it left him ill prepared to deal with his reality. What helped him while he was on his own was his childhood training with his mother and father on military strategies and hierarchies.

An author's note along with a brief history of North Korea opens up the story. I appreciated this short section. As a younger audience, myself included, might not know all the history surrounding this country. All of the information allows for a better understanding from the readers. As a child, Sungju's privileged lifestyle shapes his thoughts, beliefs, and dreams. Kim Il-sung, North Korea's supreme leader at the time, paints himself as a sort of God-like creature. He is present in Sungju's everyday thoughts, and everything that makes him an individual reflect off of who the supreme leader wishes everyone to be. The perfect citizen. When Kim Il-sung passes away,

the tone of the story takes a complete turn. You immediately feel the weight of North Korea's pain on your shoulders. Sungju's life flips upside down as his family is forced to leave the capital and move up north where life is very different. With the help of Elizabeth McClelland, Sungju's voice is perfectly written to capture his life during these tough times. The pain he feels, you feel along with him. I felt abandoned, scared, and hopeless. I felt all of his tears spilling down my own cheeks. After his parents leave and never return, Sungju is forced to survive alone. He quickly pulls himself together though and forms a gang who quickly become his new family. These boys are all so special. You'll easily fall in love with them and root for their survival. The way they continue to hope and dream while living under such harsh circumstances is so inspiring. Every Falling Star is all of their story just as much as Sungju's, and that is what I love most about this book. This story represents more than just one boy's survival.

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