A Reader's Guide for *Without You, There Is No Us*

INTRODUCTION

Without You, There Is No Us is award-winning novelist Suki Kim's memoir of teaching English to the sons of North Korea's elite during the last six months of Kim Jong-il's reign—a rare account of life in the world's most unknowable country, and of the privileged young men she calls "soldiers and slaves."

At the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, Suki ate three meals a day with her students and struggled to teach them to write, all under the watchful eye of the regime. As the weeks passed, Suki began to hint at the existence of a world beyond their own, and in return, the students offered tantalizing glimpses into their own lives, from their trouble with girls to their curiosity about the forbidden West. Then Kim Jong-il dies, leaving the students devastated, and leading Suki to question whether the gulf between her world and theirs can ever be bridged.

Haunting and unforgettable, *Without You, There Is No Us* is sure to spark dialogue in your book club. We hope that this guide will enhance your discussion.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Before reading Suki Kim's memoir, what were your impressions about life in North Korea? By the end of the book, had your understanding changed? How does Suki's account differ from others you may have read?
2. In Chapter 1, Suki writes that the "unrequited heartbreak" of her family's separation during the Korean War prompted her to undertake repeated trips to North Korea. How does this background inform the narrative? Have you ever returned to your family's country (or countries) of origin? How connected do you feel to the cultures of your ancestors?
3. In the prologue, Suki refers to PUST as a "prison disguised as a campus." How does PUST's isolation affect its culture? How do Suki and the other teachers deal with the monotony of life at PUST?
4. Suki carefully plans her lessons in order to expose her students to tidbits of information about life outside North Korea, especially technology and the Internet, without running afoul of the "counterparts." If you were in Suki's situation, what subjects or ideas would you want to teach?
5. On the trip to the apple farm, Suki is initially charmed by the idyllic rural landscape, but she is horrified to discover that the workers are stunted and emaciated. How do Suki's encounters with North Koreans outside PUST affect the way she views her students? Were there any moments you found particularly striking?
6. In Chapter 20, Suki describes PUST's "remarkably tight" buddy system. Though impressed by the boys' devotion to each other, she is disturbed by how quickly these alliances can shift: "I noticed that with the shuffling of classes from summer to fall, most of the pairings changed as well, and students were never seen with their former buddies again." What does this suggest about the nature of relationships in North Korea? Is true friendship possible under these circumstances?
7. Though Suki's students are smart and hard-working, they struggle to write simple essays. Why do they find this task so difficult?
8. The curriculum at PUST was restricted not only by the government but by the religious values of the missionaries. How did these restrictions affect the quality of education? What did Suki achieve for the students by letting them watch *Harry Potter*?
9. Were you surprised that the North Korean government condones a school run by Christian evangelicals on its soil? What purpose does PUST serve for the North Korean government? For the Christian evangelicals?

10. Although Suki's students were in their early twenties, and many had attended coed schools, they seemed to have had limited experience with dating. What do their beliefs about love reveal about gender and family in North Korea? What role does Suki's relationship with "the man in Brooklyn" play in the narrative?
11. In Chapter 1, Suki writes: "Historians often refer to [the Korean War] as the 'forgotten war,' but no Korean considers it forgotten." How does the war affect Suki's life today? The lives of her students? Did it surprise you that North Korea considers the United States its "number one enemy"?
12. Discuss the book's title, taken from a song Suki frequently heard the students chanting: "Without you, there is no us, without you, there is no motherland." How do daily rituals help tie the students to the Kim regime? What other aspects of everyday life serve this purpose?
13. Suki's students learn to condemn the United States and South Korea in their Juche training, yet they are eager to hear Suki discuss her life in New York. How do they reconcile Suki's background with her role as an authority figure? Are there any points when their relationship frays?
14. In Chapter 13, Suki is deeply moved when her students crowd around her to take their class picture. She writes, "The teacher who took the photos told me that all the students wanted to stand close to their teachers. Being physically near them was the most they could do to show their love." Were there other times in the book when strong feelings remained unspoken? Have you experienced something similar in your own life?
15. Suki's students believe that the Korean language is superior and universal. Yet their government allows, even encourages, English-language instruction for its top students. How was Suki able to use language as a bridge? What did it mean to her students when she dared to speak Korean in their final days together?
16. Though Suki is unnerved by the ease with which her students lie to her, she eventually grows to love them. Why do you think this was the case? After reading the book, do you find the boys to be sympathetic?
17. Some in the West speculated that the death of Kim Jong-il would destabilize the North Korean dictatorship and might open the door to reunification. After reading this book, are you hopeful about North Korea's future? Why or why not? What responsibility, if any, does the international community have to alleviate the suffering of the North Korean people?

ing nuclear war. The truth is so much more dire and frightening. I wanted to help outsiders see North Koreans as real people, as people we can relate to, so that we can begin to care about what happens to them. That was my goal and it seemed worth the risk.

Q. Can you paint a picture for us of what life is like there?

A. I can only paint a picture of life at PUST since teachers and students were hardly ever allowed out. The campus had a guardhouse and a gate, and the only times we were allowed to leave were during group outings, either to go sightseeing or grocery shopping. We were always accompanied by minders, whose job was to watch us and make sure we did nothing unauthorized. Sometimes they even followed us to the bathroom. The places we saw on our outings were the standard attractions that the regime allowed foreigners to see, so they were inevitably immaculate and unrevealing. Whether it was a mountain or a museum or a fruit farm or a subway, everything ran according to a script, and the script was always focused on the splendid achievements of the Great Leader, either Kim Jong-il or Kim Il-sung.

Q. PUST was established and funded by evangelical Christian missionaries, so to get a job there you had to pose as both a missionary and a teacher. Did that pose an ethical dilemma for you?

A. Deliberately lying, especially when you know it might hurt other people, doesn't feel good, but I'm comfortable with the choices I made. I did feel guilty letting my evangelical colleagues believe I was one of them, but my priority was telling the story of my students' lives. And in truth my colleagues also lied, since their greater goal was not to educate the students but to convert North Koreans to Christianity in the future. The other dilemma was knowing that publishing my book might negatively affect either my former students or the university. Although none of the students did anything more than express curiosity, I changed all names and identifying details in order to protect them. I don't know whether there will be any negative consequences for PUST, but my allegiance is not to them.

Q. What surprised you most about the young men you taught?

A. The duality of their personalities. They were the crème de la crème of North Korea, mostly from wealthy families in Pyongyang, and yet they were respectful, earnest, almost provincial. They could be sweet and boyish, yet they were fervent followers of the Great Leader, and when they were in that mode, they seemed one-dimensional and almost robotic. Three times a day, they marched to the cafeteria, in formation, chanting patriotic songs, like soldiers. They spoke in a way that was very scripted. There were phrases all my students repeated all the time, such as "powerful and prosperous nation," an expression I had heard from other North Koreans on previous visits. Their songs were extremely violent and aggressive towards America—for example, the

lyrics of one song were about hunting the heads of Americans—but at the same time they were incredibly excited for the chance to watch *Harry Potter*.

Q. You say that you came to love your students. What did you love about them?

A. We were more or less trapped together in a walled compound, and in those circumstances love or understanding or camaraderie often develops. It was not possible not to love them. My students were very innocent, almost childlike, because they had been so sheltered from the world. They still had that old-world ethic of respecting their teachers and obeying their parents, and they were shy. Shyness is something I haven't seen much in young people of the same age in the United States. In this odd way, they seemed pure.

Q. In the book you talk about how much the students lied. What did they lie about, and why?

A. They would lie about almost anything with an ease that I found unnerving. They would tell me they had slept very late on days when I had seen them doing their morning exercises at 6 a.m. They would tell me they called their parents all the time, when in fact they were not allowed to at all. They told me they had partied with their friends during the summer break, when I knew that most of their friends at other universities had been assigned to work in construction fields that summer. Their lies seemed to be about their system and the restrictions that they were not allowed to reveal. For example, they all had guard duty. From evening until the following morning, no matter how severe the weather, six students took turns standing outside the empty building on campus known as Kimilsungism Study Hall, guarding the spirit of their dead Great Leader. But they wouldn't admit to doing it, and even when they did, they wouldn't talk about it.

Of course, lying and secrecy were all they had ever known. From the time they were born, my students had been told that the Korean War was started by South Korea and the United States, that their Great Leader Kim Jong-il was admired around the world, and that their nation was the most powerful and prosperous on the planet. In a country where the government invents its own truth, how could they be expected to do otherwise?

Q. What were your students' knowledge of and attitudes toward the West?

A. They could be very naïve. One student asked me if people spoke Korean in the outside world and another asked whether it was true that *naengmyun* (their national dish) was hailed as the best in the world. Their lack of general knowledge astounded me. Many of them did not know what the Eiffel Tower or the Taj Mahal was. They thought their intranet, a censored network of pre-downloaded information, was the same as the Internet. And although their majors were in science and technology, they didn't know when the first man walked on the moon. But all of them could recite exactly when and for how much Alaska was sold to America—a lesson on imperialism. And

they all knew the book *Gone with the Wind,* although they called it *Disappeared with the Wind*. I always wondered whether they were allowed to read it because the book is about a war between North and South, and the North wins!

Q. What were you most afraid of while you were at PUST?

A. I was afraid that my notes would be found and I'd be accused of spying. The punishment for that could easily have been hard labor in a gulag. What also scared me, every single day, was that I would get my students in trouble. We developed a real bond over time, and I was afraid I would instill doubts in their minds about the regime. Even teaching them to write an essay turned out to be dangerous, since the idea of coming up with your own thesis and making an argument based on evidence doesn't exist in North Korea. It was completely foreign to them. They are told what to think, and it requires no proof. Critical thinking is very dangerous.

Q. Life in Pyongyang was vastly different from life in the United States. In your time there, what was the most difficult thing to get used to?

A. To never be left alone is extremely exhausting. The minders were always watching, the students were reporting on us; every meal, every conversation, every class was under scrutiny. Our rooms and offices were bugged. Each building on campus was connected by an enclosed walkway with windows on either side, so everything everywhere was visible. We had to get permission for everything as though we were children. Thinking was dangerous, but there was also no time for thinking. It sometimes felt as though "I" did not exist. This was a very foreign feeling—deeply claustrophobic and sometimes almost unbearable.

Q. What was it like to be in North Korea on the day that Kim Jong-il's death was announced? How did the students react?

A. It was my next-to-last day in North Korea, December 19, 2011, and I was packing for the flight home when I found out. That was the one day when the teachers were invited inside the building where our students had daily propaganda classes with their North Korean professors. It was their holy building, honoring the spirit of Kim Il-sung, the one they literally guarded day and night. Inside, there was a wake of sorts, with a few students greeting mourners in front of a large portrait of Kim Jong-il in the center of the lobby. I didn't see any of them crying, but their faces were ghostly, as though the sky had fallen. For the rest of the day, the campus remained eerily empty. Dinner was canceled, and the few students I passed did not meet my eyes. I saw my students for the last time at breakfast the next morning. They looked as though they'd been crying all night, as though their souls had been sucked out of them, as though they'd just lost a parent. Their sorrow seemed so absolute and irrevocable that I thought about the song lyric that ended up being the title of my book: Without you, there is no us.

Q. Do you think North Korea will ever become a more open society?

A. I don't really see how that's possible as long as the current regime is in power. For their survival, North Korea must maintain the myth of the Great Leader, which is possible only if the people remain ignorant and powerless, so becoming a more open society would be suicide for the Kim Jong-un regime. Already we are seeing the ruthless side of this young leader. Most of the seven key figures who walked alongside Kim Jong-il's hearse at his state funeral in December 2011 have since been stripped of their titles, sent to labor camps, or executed. The two superpowers—China and the United States—that could put pressure on North Korea have done virtually nothing to bring about a change. Meanwhile, the inhuman suffering of the people of North Korea continues.