



Across the Tumen

A North Korean *Kkotjebi* Boy's Quest

Author: Moon Young-sook

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North Korean boy Yeong-dae becomes a beggar to survive

He crosses the Tumen River in search of his missing sister

- ✓ *A true-to-life novel about the horrific famine that swept North Korea in the 1990s*
- ✓ *Yeong-dae: an ordinary boy who becomes a *kkotjebi*, prisoner, and finally a defector*
- ✓ *Learn about the heartbreaking human rights abuses against North Korean children today*

These children must not be ignored

The human rights situation in North Korea is getting worse by the day. In May 2013, nine young North Korean defectors in Laos were forcefully repatriated. Despite repeated objections from the international community, these helpless children were sent back to North Korea. Today, media reports indicate that they are being used in state propaganda. Of course, there is no telling how exactly they are being treated, considering North Korea is a place where children are not guaranteed decent lives.

Fortunately, efforts to address problems in North Korea are gradually increasing. On March 21st, 2013, the United Nations Human Rights Council established a commission of inquiry into North Korean human rights. While more countries are showing interest in North Korea and demanding that the regime take action, more still needs to be done. ACROSS THE TUMEN depicts the suffering of the young North Korean children—children who need our help today.

The arduous march: how an ordinary boy became a *kkotjebi*

In North Korea, the mid-to-late 1990s was euphemistically deemed the “arduous march”—a time of terrible famine. A chronic shortage of food and material ravaged the entire country, making it hard for families to stay fed and clothed. This famine serves as the backdrop for the story of Yeong-dae and his family, whose simple but happy lives are interrupted by catastrophe. Left an orphan and branded as an anti-government reactionary, Yeong-dae has just one way to survive: leaving home behind and becoming a *kkotjebi*, or young beggar, in the market.

For this young boy and his little sister, life as a *kkotjebi* is a series of hardships. The *kkotjebi* call themselves “human trash”: in order to stay alive, they have to pick up food from the ground and steal clothing from corpses. When a boy chokes to death after scarfing down a rice cake he has stolen, the other *kkotjebi* don’t see this as such a tragedy. At least he got to die with a belly full of food, they reason.

When Yeong-dae’s little sister dies, he crosses the Tumen River into China trying to find his lost older sister, the last surviving member of his family. In this gripping description of an ordinary boy who loses everything, becomes a *kkotjebi*, and crosses the border, *ACROSS THE TUMEN* may well represent the first time that the defector experience has been documented in a work of fiction.

Yeong-dae’s friends are still suffering in North Korea today

The writer of *ACROSS THE TUMEN* is Moon Young-sook, a woman whose body of work largely deals with the trials and tribulations of contemporary Korean history, including the division of the Korean peninsula. Her previous books—*The Children of Henequen* (2009), *The Dark Sea* (2010), and *The Karieski’s Endless Wandering* (2012)—demonstrated her knack for converting historical material into captivating fiction.

On a trip to the Yalu River in 2011, Ms. Moon had a chance to get a closer look at North Korea. She was saddened and angered to hear from her Korean-Chinese guide about how North Koreans suffered during the famine in the 1990s. After this, she read numerous accounts that defectors wrote about their experiences and talked with North Korean writers who fled to the South. These became the basis for her characterization of Yeong-dae, and thanks to her extensive research, the scenes that appear in the book reflect the reality of North Korea.

Twenty years have passed since the famine of the 1990s, but reports tell us that many North Koreans still lack an adequate supply of food. At this very moment, hunger

is forcing children to leave their homes and beg on the streets. The book was written with the hope that it could help North Korean children avoid Yeong-dae's fate. Originally written in Korean, the book has now been translated into English. Using Amazon, Ingram, and other sales outlets, Seoul Selection is making the book available to readers around the world.

Plot summary

During the mid-1990s—at the peak of the food shortage in North Korea—disaster befalls Yeong-dae's unsuspecting family. Yeong-dae's father loses his job when his factory shuts down because of a lack of raw material, and his mother and older sister Yeong-ran have to sell their household possessions to keep food on the table. Meanwhile, Yeong-dae and his little sister Yeong-ok get into trouble when they can't find enough scrap paper and metal to satisfy their teachers at school. Yeong-ran runs away, going to China with someone who promises to get her a decent job.

Hoping to make some money and buy food for Yeong-ok, who is badly malnourished, Yeong-dae's father goes out looking for mushrooms, but he is mortally injured when he falls off a cliff. Yeong-dae gets through these hard times by writing letters in the notebook that his older sister gave him before she left home. Making matters even worse, Yeong-dae's mother is caught stealing food from the community storehouse and put in prison.

With both their parents gone, Yeong-dae and Yeong-ok have to beg in the market as *kkotjebi* just to survive. With the help of his old friend Nam-sik, Yeong-dae is able to adjust to life as a *kkotjebi*, but his little sister soon succumbs to the hunger and cold. In the end, Yeong-dae crosses the Tumen River in a desperate gamble to find his older sister, his only surviving family member.

After getting a tip about the whereabouts of his sister from a kindly old Korean-Chinese man, Yeong-dae goes to Wangqing to look for her, but his sister isn't there. Instead, Yeong-dae is reported by a Chinese man and nabbed by the Chinese police. He spends the next year incarcerated in various prisons, where he suffers all kinds of torture. When he is finally released, he returns home only to learn that his older sister is in the city of Shenyang in China. Intent on finding his sister, Yeong-dae stakes everything on another river crossing.

About the author

Moon Young-sook's literary career took off when she won the 2nd Blue Literature Prize in 2004 and the 6th Literature Neighborhood Prize for Children's Literature in 2005. In 2012, she received a creative grant from the Seoul Foundation for Arts and Culture. Moon's main reason for writing stories is to teach young people about parts of Korean history that Koreans should never forget. Some of her best-known works are the young adult historical novels *The Karieski's Endless Wandering* and *The Children of Henequen*. She has also written a number of children's novels, including *Picture in the Tomb*, *The Dark Sea*, *Hagi: Lady of the Court*, *The Coat of Many Colors*, *The Old Man Who Became a Little Child*, and *The Bread of Kaesong*.

About the publisher

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