



***Across the Tumen: A North Korean Kkotjebi Boy's Quest***

Written by Young Sook Moon  
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This contemporary realistic fiction novel is about the survival journey of a North Korean boy, Yeong-dae. The Tumen is a 324 miles long river that forms roughly a third of North Korea's border with China. The name Kkotjebi (fluttering swallows) is a term for "teenagers who temporarily fled to China in search of food and went back to North Korea when they had fed themselves" (Song, 2013, p. 162)

so the Kkotjebi and the Tumen are two symbolic icons for North Koreans' last chance for survival.

As the story begins Yeon-dae is a fourth grader, but as he gets older, his life turns upside-down. His life is considered "normal," which is almost the same as privileged during the time he lives with his parents and siblings in North Korea. Soon, however, he loses his supposedly normal privileged life after he experiences a series of family tragedies. His father, after he cannot get food in exchange for the food stamps he received from his work, is hurt during his first attempt to pick wild mushrooms. His mother is sent to prison for stealing goods at her work to pay Yeong-dae's school fees and buy food for her children, and she is killed in the prison. Eventually Yeong-dae has no other option but to become a Kkotjebi in order to survive and remain emotionally and physically independent. When Yeong-dae learns that his grandmother also has passed away from starvation, he realizes that there is nobody who can shelter him. Even his baby sister, Young-ok, who always cheers him up and is his purpose to live, dies from starvation. After he loses his baby sister, it becomes clear that he needs to find his older sister. Yeong-dae decides to cross the river on the border to go to China to find his sister, Young-rahn, who ran away to seek work in China and support her starving family.

Yeong-dae takes tremendous risks crossing the river to search for his sister. He is repeatedly told that Young-rahn might be a victim of human trafficking and forced marriage in China. With the help of another Kkotjebi member, Yeong-dae successfully arrives in China, but North Korean agents arrest him. Accused of being a South Korean spy, he is put in jail and tortured in extremely painful ways despite being a child. The ending remains hopeful, yet leaves mixed feelings of hope and concern for Yeong-dae and other people in North Korea since this is a realistic contemporary issue. Kkotjebi's story and survival journey mirrors layers of human rights issues in North Korea. The harsh living conditions in North Korea, officially called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), reveals how this government fails to protect its people. The idealism of the government cannot save or rescue people from harsh reality—daily suffering from poor quality and irregularly distributed small amounts of food, insufficient essential necessities, and basic human rights.

Kkotjebi is a symbol of a failing government. In International Migration studies, groups like Kkotjebi that leave a country because of food shortages are called “environmental refugees” (Song, 2013, p. 162). Interestingly, few North Korean migrants are recognized as political refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) argues that North Koreans in China are refugees since no matter what their reason for leaving their country (food or economic opportunities), when they return, they face the fear of persecution (Song, 2013). The story does indicate what is like to live as a North Korean refugee in China, living in ways that are secretive and dangerous due to the risk that they might be caught by North Korean agents or Chinese police. Such secretiveness makes it more difficult for Yeong-dae and Young-ok to find each other since North Korean refugees cannot openly reveal their real names and identities.

Although this book may seem too harsh and depressing for teen readers in the U.S. due to the difficult realities, the book also shows humanity’s good side through concerned people who care, support, and cry together despite the challenging situations. For example, a neighbor shares corn powder when Yeong-dae and his baby sister lose their parents. She checks on them and serves an adult’s role in society even though her life is difficult as well. His aunt also shares her food although she and her family suffer from a shortage of food and essential necessities. When Yeong-dae and his friend cross the river, an elderly Korean-Chinese couple provides food and shelter. Yeong-dae is able to meet a Korean pastor who helps North Koreans for their successful journey of “Seoul Train in Underground Railway,” which is North Korean defectors’ migration routes that include North Korea, China and five South-East Asian countries before they reach South Korea.

The author, Young-sook Moon, has published a wide range of children’s fiction and biography books in Korea. Most of them have powerful social justice themes in terms of rights for teenagers and children during the WW II Japanese compulsory occupation era in Korea. Moon invites children and adult readers to think about themes of enforced labor against children and their forced relocation to Siberia, Russia, Mexico, and Japan. In the author’s note in *Across the Tumen*, Moon notes that she wrote this book after she traveled the border area between North Korea and China. In her note, she recalls her memory of looking at the North Korea side near the Amnok River. During her trip, she was told that factories in the North Korea side have stopped working and most of the trees were cut and consumed as last resources. Most of land now is used for cornfields, which is a main food resource. Characters in this story reveal a great sense of romanticism for simply eating white rice since people in Young-dae’s community must eat things that are not considered edible in order to give small comfort to their empty bellies. Most importantly, the author learned that many people were killed when they attempted crossing the Amnok River. Seeing dead bodies under the frozen river surface is not a rare experience.

Moon highlights the need to raise awareness of the issues of the harsh living environment and human rights in North Korea. Many teenagers choose to be Kkotjebi for a living and many of them also die from starvation or are victims of persecution if they are caught. Female refugees are often the targets of human trafficking for forced marriage or sexual

exploitation in addition to forced labor. Moon talked to a number of writers who are Korean defectors and studied essays written by Korean defectors for this book. Unfortunately, Yeong-dae's story is quite contemporary and realistic. *Across the Tumen* is Moon's first chapter book translated into English and republished in the U.S.

*Across the Tumen* could be read alongside books about environmental refugees and political refugees. *Like Water on Stone* by Dana Walrath (2014) depicts the journey of twins fleeing from the Armenian Genocide that orphaned them in 1914. *Walking Home* by Eric Walters (2014), set in the slums of Kenya, tells of two children, Muchoki and Jeta, who lose their home and parents due to political violence and begin a journey to look for their last remaining family. *La Linea* by Ann Jaramillo (2008) is about environmental refugees, Miguel and his sister Elena, who live in extreme poverty and attempt to journey across the desert into California.

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## References

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