

Undercover Journalism in North Korea

SUKI KIM

An Interview with Laila Rodenbeck

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Suki Kim is author of the New York Times bestseller Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korean Elite. She is the only writer ever to have lived undercover in North Korea for immersive journalism. Her novel The Interpreter was the winner of the PEN Open Book Award and a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and her nonfiction has appeared in Harper's Magazine, the New York Times, the New York Review of Books, and the New Republic, where she is a contributing editor. She has been awarded Guggenheim, Fulbright, Open Society, and New America fellowships, the American Academy in Berlin Prize, and was a Ferris Professor of journalism at Princeton University. Her TED Talk has drawn millions of viewers, and her essay on fear appears in The Best American Essays 2018.

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: For those who have not read your book, could you describe how you found yourself in Pyongyang in 2011, and for what purpose?

Suki Kim: I had been pursuing North Korea as a writer and as a topic for about a decade. I had gone there multiple times previously, but it was impossible to get any kind of real access because you could only see the place according to the prescribed agenda of the regime and under the regime's permission. What that meant was that I had to find a way to be immersed undercover within the system, which was a nearly impossible thing to do because that had never before been done by a writer for an extensive time. I found that chance in 2008. I heard about a university that was being set up in Pyongyang for the sons of the elite. The university was going to be taught by entirely foreign faculty, which I thought was unlikely. I was already under contract for a book, so I then pursued

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this situation, which turned out to be a university run by evangelicals from around the world. I joined the faculty, unpaid, although I am not an evangelical or even Christian, as that was the only way I knew that I could get in there for a picture of what North Korea really is. In 2011, I went in as a part of this group and ended up living inside for six months with the young men—270 Korean young men aged 19 and 20—and working as their teacher while writing my book in secret.

Journal: I read that you had also been to North Korea before—the first time in 2002. Did you feel that the nature of the state had changed between your first visit and when you returned in 2011 and, if so, why?

Kim: I first went in in 2002. I did a cover feature for the *New York Review of Books* following that visit, which was about eight days long. That, politically and historically, followed the Great Famine of North Korea, which occurred at the end of the '90s, and where about a tenth of the population died. North Korea was in a really dire condition economically because it had absolutely nothing. And the world was not paying any attention. Then I kept researching. I interviewed over 100 defectors, all in surrounding regions along the routes that the defectors take, which range from the Chinese border to Mongolia, Laos, and Thailand. Their goal would typically be to get to South Korea. I followed this route and interviewed many of them in different circumstances, and also different time-spans from the date of their defection, because obviously their circumstances and their own reflections changed depending on the time. I think that's something that journalism doesn't usually have room for—that kind of perspective that departs from the prescriptive script, which is that refugees are the victims, and they tell one version of the story. But it's far more complicated than that.

I ended up doing a feature for *Harper's Magazine*, an investigative feature, on this whole system of defection. I also interviewed separated families and investigated the world of smuggling that happens by the Chinese border. By 2011, when I went to live there, I understood as much as I could about North Korea from all different angles. Defectors generally come from the bottom rung of society and from the region along the Chinese border, which is the northern border of North Korea. We don't know much about what really happens within the country because North Korea has a restriction on travel. Its citizens, 25 million of them, cannot really travel within the country without permission. They can't leave the country, but within the country there are checkpoints between each town. What that means is people are not moving. So, if you're only inter-

viewing people from the northern border at the edge of the country, who crossed the river over to China, then you're really getting a limited version of what happens in North Korea. That would be like interviewing a refugee from Tijuana expecting to get the story from Mexico City, and that is not a restrictive culture on any similar level. You

can't really glimpse the truth in a way, or the larger picture. You need knowledge and information from different perspectives. When I went to live inside the

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country, those young men at the university ended up being the upper class of the society. It gave me another view of what's really going on there, which I learned was far more abusive and restrictive than I possibly could have imagined having followed the country for a decade.

Another level here is the idea of immersion. North Korea is a very, very, very difficult subject. Everything there is scripted by the regime. It is not a place where you can walk in and interview anybody you want and get a truthful answer. Your visit would have to be approved by the regime, and the person you interview would be hand-picked by the regime and that person would tell you what he or she is told to say. Thus, traditional journalism could only serve as a PR machine for the Great Leader, which then only leaves one option for covering the topic: undercover immersion. Except that it is a gulag, and undertaking such a mission could be deadly.

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Journal: Do you think you saw another layer because you were embedded among them?

Kim: Well, I think it has to be pointed out that 2011—when I went to live there undercover—was the most important year for North Korea in recent history. That was actually the year leading to their hundredth year. They count their calendars differently from the rest of the world. Their calendar year begins with the birth of the Great Leader, which is the first original Great leader Kim Il-sung, who was the grandfather of the current Great Leader, Kim Jong-un.

In order to celebrate the year 100, the North Korean government closed down every university, pulled all of the students in the entire country out of the colleges, and put them into construction fields for a year. When they did this,

they then pulled 270 young men out of all the university students aside. Basically, these were the sons of elites, and the elites did not want their sons in the construction fields. So, while the rest of the country's university students were in construction fields, 270 young men were actually taken to this secret, brand new university that had been formed in a suburb of Pyongyang.

It turns out that the group of young men that I was living with in this campus, which was also bodyguarded by the military, was the absolute *crème de la crème* of society. That year, of course, Kim Jong-il, who was the previous Great Leader, died, and Kim Jong-un, the current great leader, rose to power. What this signified was that obviously the regime had done this on purpose. This was also the year of the Arab Spring, 2011. This was the year el-Qaddafi died. This was the year that the regime had scattered all the youth into construction fields so the youth could not congregate and then pulled the future leadership into a very safe location and sheltered them while the political regime change was happening. It was a fascinating time to be there, learning the psychology of the young leaders, which is what I ended up doing in those six months.

Journal: You also remark how, in teaching them, you realized that there were extremely large gaps in their knowledge of not only the world, but also concepts we take for granted. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

Kim: I think the extent of the lack of knowledge and information surprised me, because we get such random information about North Korea. That year, the young men that I was living with 24/7 were generally science students. Their ma-

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jors were predominantly computer science. But none of them knew what the internet was. If you were to ask them whether they knew about the internet, they would all say they knew what it

was, even though they didn't. They had no idea what it means to be searching, what it means to be Googling anything. But it went beyond that. It's mind boggling because, of course, we know North Korea the nation has nuclear weapons, so how can a student who majors in science not know about the internet? That might not seem logical. However, the team of nuclear weapons developers are very different from the common citizens, including my students, who didn't

have to be educated on anything. When you realize that they don't even know what the internet is and they're computer science majors, then it touches so many other things. What's happening with the education in this country? My students had come from the best universities in North Korea. Slowly, what I began to understand was that they actually had no idea about anything except the Great Leader. They didn't know that there was a tunnel between France and England, for example, or that that's even possible, nor had they ever seen a photo of the Taj Mahal. They didn't know anything about the history of World War I or World War II that didn't involve their own country. There were these gaps in knowledge and also completely wrong information. They had been taught that South Korea invaded North Korea, while the opposite is actually true.

If you educate your country's best youth only on the concept of the Great Leader and nothing else, then it suggests a lot about the whole nation and what's happening with education there. It also makes you question their psychology and how it functions. I made them all write essays in order to try to understand how they use logical thinking when they write. It was nearly impossible to teach it to them because they never learned to write anything in particularly rigorous ways, which is what essay writing is—it is about critical thinking. And that was nearly impossible for them to grasp because, there, the idea of proof doesn't exist. The only thinking is about the Great Leader, who doesn't need proof. I think what this actually suggests is, when you're talking about things like building a bridge with North Korea or having a dialogue with North Korea, then I think it is important to understand how the minds of the people who will run that nation work. The more I realized how little they know and how differently they think, it became incredibly depressing and worrying what will happen to this country.

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Journal: In your book, you write that when you would ask one of them a question, you would get an immediate response that you would realize could not possibly be true. How do you think that functions in the society, and how do you think that affects the way people go about their lives?

Kim: That is one of my findings that I found incredibly disturbing, and that was not something I ever heard about North Korea, which is this concept of lies. I had this experience when I was doing research in the past: many of them lied to me. I could tell because I am fluent in the language, Korean, and the culture, though I could not prove it. You just pick up on when things are not right. It was very disturbing when I was doing research on defection. I think living inside North Korea made me realize what those lies might reveal be-

cause my students lied all the time for no reason whatsoever. I began looking at why they might lie and what their lies were. It was more complicated than I thought it would be. They lied to cover up for each other because it's a system of surveillance. Somebody's always watching. There was a minder nearby. There was a minder 24/7 living downstairs from my room, whose job was to watch over me. My classroom was recorded. All the students reported on each other, and all my lessons had to get approved by their staff, their Korean staff. Also, all North Koreans have to attend a meeting each Saturday where they report on each other. This system of surveillance means they live in fear at all times; so anytime something happens that goes against the script, there is a sense of immediately protecting one another. Although they might betray one another, they might also protect one another.

Sometimes, they lie because they've only been told lies, so they will just repeat them. They'll say things like how they cloned a rabbit in fifth grade, which could not possibly be true, but they'll all repeat it again and again because somewhere somebody had told them they had done this when they hadn't done it. But then, sometimes, they didn't know that lies are bad and truth is good. So, sometimes they would very proudly say that, "hacking is really good because you get rewarded for hacking." It made me think lies came in all sorts of levels, and lies were a way of survival. But the more disturbing thing is that if you've been told

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lies all your life, then you really wouldn't know the difference between truth and lies. If you cannot tell the difference between truth and lies, the value of what is truth and what is a lie changes

all the time or kind of doesn't matter. Then these boundaries between what we consider right and wrong, what is moral and not moral—all those things break. In a society where those boundaries don't exist or you're incapable of making that kind of decision because you've been dehumanized and infantilized all your life, it suggests a far bigger, in a way, existential chaos that we don't really know. In some sense, I think we are seeing some of that happening in the United States where, within just the past couple of years, the concept of "fake news" has spread everywhere. People are not even sure which is the true image versus what has been fabricated. And that confusion you might feel about your own understanding of events is what I faced in North Korea.

It was deeply disturbing because I didn't know if that could be undone or healed. It's been going on like that for three generations. That's over 70 years of this way of controlling people's minds; so long that I don't really see how the psychological damage that's been done could be undone in this country, where a group of incredibly smart young men, my students, were also incredibly lacking in information and lacking in a way to judge anything or use their own agency. The fact that they're incredibly smart, because they really were, and also in some sense had been made totally dumb, was heartbreaking.

Journal: I also wanted to ask you about the concept of fear and about how fear played a role in your initial interactions with students—for example, in office hours how students were reluctant to come and talk to you one-on-one. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Kim: Fear is at the base of human emotions. It's also what really bad dictatorships use in order to control people. I felt that fear was at the bottom of everything in the country. North Korea is scary—that's why people don't go there undercover. There are always threats, the way they threaten the rest of the world. These things that may seem like erratic actions—that's also what they do to their own citizens. In order to really scare people, you first have to take away all their agency and their safety net. So, it's not an accident that most North Korean young men have to serve mandatory military duty for 10 years, from the ages of 17 to 27. Because then they are away from family. It's an age where you really form strong bonds with either friends or your significant others. During those years, these young men are isolated, serving their nation and Great Leader.

Taking people's power away through isolation—the fact that they cannot go anywhere on their own without the permission of their government because of checkpoints—is one way of controlling them. Also, they don't have any free time. My students literally had no free time. When I used to interview defectors, they would say similar things, though they usually came from the bottom rung of the society. They would say they just worked all the time, with no free time to think about anything. It was exactly the same way with these upper-class students. They had so many Great Leader duties and meetings where they all had to gather all the time, either to watch clips about the Great Leader, or study the Great Leader, or recite the Great Leader's and related speeches. Because they're always busy, there's no time for them to think about anything. You're just not allowed to be a human being or an individual. That's how that the nation takes over in your mind. When you're so isolated in abusive situations, such as in an

abusive household, that's how your power gets diminished more and more, and whoever controls you gains more and more power. By the end, you have no idea how to get out of that situation, right? I think it works in a very similar way in North Korea, because they restrict the education, they restrict the means of communication, they restrict even the belief system, because the whole ideology of the Great Leader really functions like a religion. They restrict any physical way of connecting with each other, or even family support, because they've not been together with their family in any real sense for a really long time. A North Korean citizen has nothing that they can rely on, so then the Great Leader is so great and so big and the power he wields over them becomes that much greater. I think that the people there generally live in constant fear. And that constant fear controlling the entire nation is how North Korea has existed thus far, which really is a scary thought.

Journal: In terms of how your students generally did not have any free time, you also mentioned how some boys guarded the study hall, and that some of them had been afraid to tell you. Why do you think they had been afraid to tell you about their jobs guarding the study hall?

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Kim: I think another way that the regime controls people is that everything they say—and obviously, in this case, I'm a foreigner that doesn't belong with them—is so secretive. There is no real communication. Everything is a secret. You don't know what you're allowed to say, what you're not allowed to say. It's just better to not say anything at all. Anything you say can really get you and your family in trouble. North Korea is notorious for punishing people, not only the people who have committed a crime, but their relatives. They punish the relatives based on what you say, but knowing the extent of what punishment can be, you basically don't say anything. The sphere of self-censorship is completely created and driven by fear. So that's why the boys never said anything, because they were just in the habit of self-censorship. Knowing your voice is dangerous. Speaking out is dangerous. It's also, I think, how you destroy a civilization, because nobody can speak out. Then only one voice is allowed—that of the Great Leader. When you really study North Korea up close, it's quite frightening the extent of what it does to destroy humanity.

Journal: In the book, you went on an excursion, and your bus moved slightly closer to the edge of the road. You saw people who looked like they were starving, and you likened them to slaves. How do you think that concept of slavery

applies in the North Korean context? Is there a class that is enslaved? Or is it an informal method of slavery?

Kim: In the United States, slavery was based on race, and when you think about the concept of slavery, you tend to think about doing labor without any pay, and that you're born into it and cannot escape it. In some ways, in North Korea, they have a different class system. The class that is at the bottom has to do far more labor than the class at the top in obvious ways, but basically the whole country is beholden to the leader. You're not allowed to choose anything or go anywhere on your own, you can't do anything without permission, and you can't apply for a job because the government decides your job. That's why it really is slavery—you're just not allowed any freedom. It's a prison state.

Journal: What trajectory do you see North Korea taking in the coming years?

Kim: I don't see anything really fundamental changing there, despite the current situation, where there is at least some semblance of dialogue among the top levels of the United States, South Korea, and North Korea. I don't know the details of what any of that really means. I just covered the same issue for a feature in the *New Republic*, and much of that is politics and what each country needs to do in order to appear to be reaching for peace—South Korea's president appealing to his own constituents in South Korea, the agenda of Trump and his own constituents in the United States, and how Trump uses North Korea in order to make it seem that he's reaching some success at the foreign policy level. It's the same thing with Kim Jong-un and his own people and how this issue is being used. But, in reality, we don't really know any details of this supposed peace. So, I don't know if what we're seeing right now is really related to anything for the people in North Korea. I think, for them, nothing has changed. 