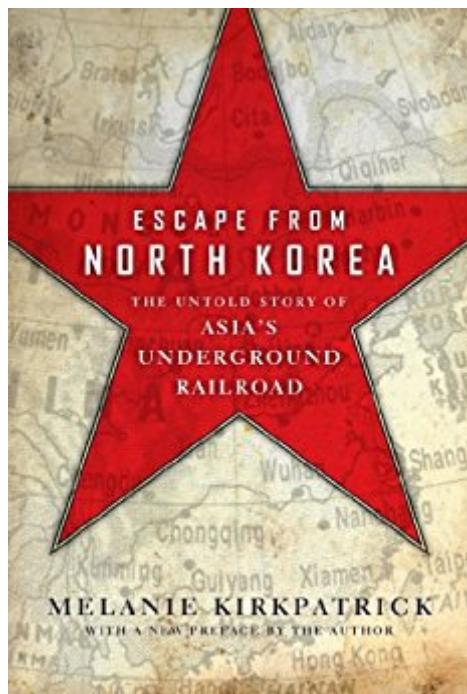


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Escape From North Korea: The Untold Story Of Asia's Underground Railroad



Synopsis

From the world's most repressive state comes rare good news: the escape to freedom of a small number of its people. It is a crime to leave North Korea. Yet increasing numbers of North Koreans dare to flee. They go first to neighboring China, which rejects them as criminals, then on to Southeast Asia or Mongolia, and finally to South Korea, the United States, and other free countries. They travel along a secret route known as the new underground railroad. With a journalist's grasp of events and a novelist's ear for narrative, Melanie Kirkpatrick tells the story of the North Koreans' quest for liberty. Travelers on the new underground railroad include women bound to Chinese men who purchased them as brides, defectors carrying state secrets, and POWs from the Korean War held captive in the North for more than half a century. Their conductors are brokers who are in it for the money as well as Christians who are in it to serve God. The Christians see their mission as the liberation of North Korea one person at a time. Just as escaped slaves from the American South educated Americans about the evils of slavery, the North Korean fugitives are informing the world about the secretive country they fled. Escape from North Korea describes how they also are sowing the seeds for change within North Korea itself. Once they reach sanctuary, the escapees channel news back to those they left behind. In doing so, they are helping to open their information-starved homeland, exposing their countrymen to liberal ideas, and laying the intellectual groundwork for the transformation of the totalitarian regime that keeps their fellow citizens in chains.

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Customer Reviews

This is an excellent non-fiction book that concentrates on the Underground Railroad that shelters and helps North Koreans escape from their hard lives in North Korea and assists them in getting into China so that they can eventually make their way to South Korea. Some choose other countries, such as the U.S., but most want to go to South Korea. The Asian Underground Railroad is based on the one that helped American slaves escape to the north in the 19th century. This is a very sad book to read. The plight of North Koreans is one of no freedom, not enough food, often starvation, no electricity at night and everything, including radio and television, is controlled by the state. Television programs might be about the grandiose history of the Dear Leader's family, and of course, North Korea is the best country in the world to live in. People trying to escape into China are often caught and sent back and for that offense they can be sent to a work camp or worse. For women crossing the border into China, it is especially hard. They are there illegally and have no means of support so they wind up as sex slaves or they are sold off as wives to farmers. Many have to escape that life in order to ever make it to freedom. Christian missionaries and volunteers make up a good portion of those helping on the underground railroad. Many of the North Koreans convert to Christianity but as long as they are in North Korea or China they cannot talk about or show any interest in religion since it is banned in those countries. Stories of people who have made it to freedom are told in this book and what surprised me was how long it takes from the time they escape until the day they are free. Those helping the ones to escape face the same dangers as the escapees. I learned a lot by reading this book and I hope that someday North Korea will open its doors and boundaries to freedom instead of being the most closed-off country that it is.

This book is written with the skill and heart of a story-teller and equally so with the scholar's unshakable regard for facts. A former Wall Street Journal deputy editor who has spent years living in Asia, Kirkpatrick develops solid arguments for ways to change a country that is frozen in time. Because of her credentials and the story she tells so well, her ideas are certain to command the attention of policy makers. But beyond Washington and New York, many readers may be moved to

act once they've read the harrowing narratives, the descriptions of ordinary souls bravely helping others, once they've read Kirkpatrick's careful portrait of a grotesque and unimaginably cruel regime.

The 20th Century birthed many mad and cruel regimes, mixing and matching a familiar litany of horrors -- barbed wire, torture, war-mongering, official hatreds and paranoias, stale economic and political creeds in lieu of transcendent faith, hungry bellies, ugly buildings, concrete grey statues of monomaniacs, weapons of mass destruction -- in varying patterns and degrees of ferocity. For my money, the worst of the worst were the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, both of which lasted a few years, and the Kim Family House of Horrors, which has lasted half as long as hell, from whence it springs. That is the background to this book. Escape from North Korea tells the story of those who try to escape from many different angles: the escape itself, hiding (mostly in China), the role Christians play in helping North Koreans get away, political escapees, South Korea's changing attitudes about its brothers and sisters, the difficulties of adjusting to freedom, the impact individual liberation may have on what is to be hoped with be a freer North Korea in the future. Kirkpatrick is not naive about any of this, recognizing the difficulty, for instance, of ill-educated slaves adjusting to a modern, free, technological society. She has done a thorough job of investigation, and while she chimes certain bells repeatedly -- such as the Christian connection, and her dislike of the South Korean "Sunshine Policy" -- all in all this is a richly informative and thoughtful account. Among other interesting scraps, one escapee noted that something she (he?) missed after leaving North Korea, was the dark sky at night. As someone who has spent quite a bit of time in China, I am particularly happy to learn more about the role churches in China are playing in helping these lost souls. I can't imagine that even the most hard-boiled western atheist would deny that if anyone needs a little hope in their lives, its the people of North Korea. One wonders about the wisdom of writing books like this, though. (Like David Aikman's equally skillful journalism in *Jesus in Beijing*, which I reviewed some years ago for *Christianity Today*.) Will the North Koreans get ahold of the information here, and use it to go after the good guys? Most likely Kirkpatrick wrote this book on the calculation that the good it may do, in encouraging China to treat its neighbors more humanely, and in encouraging westerners to support the efforts of those who help the North Koreans, will outweigh the dangers. I hope she's right.

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