

Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea

Sungju Lee

Reviewed by: Paufa Phanachet, 14

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Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea, is, like the title suggests, about the true story of how Sungju Lee survived and escaped North Korea. This novel takes us from the grand opulence of Pyongyang to the desolate villages of rural North Korea. It follows a boy, the author, who has to grow up far too quickly. He was raised in the capital city, truly believing that “Joseon,” the North Korean name for the nation, is the greatest country in the world. Then unnamed actions led to him and his family being kicked out of the capital. He witnessed his first execution, learned to pickpocket and dropped out of school. His father left to find work in China and never returned. His mother disappeared in search of his aunt. He was left to fend for himself on the streets. And the streets are not a very forgiving place for a child.

This is a book with some very heavy material, but I suppose it is hard to write a book about North Korea without a lot of heavy material. I would advise more mature readers to consider this book, at least 14-year-old and up, maybe even older than that. There is a very sad death, as well as lots of death in general. There are descriptions of very desolate situations and gory illnesses. The main character drinks alcohol, smokes and uses drugs. There is also mention of sex, prostitution and rape. All in all, this book is not for the faint of heart. It is very depressing, but we know it ends well. Especially considering this is an autobiographical book and the author is not a ghost.

The storyline in itself was very typical of a biography. There was no real climax, it just moved along, but the resolution was definitely there. The book paints a picture of desperation very well. It reminds me of those war novels that just seemed so bleak and hopeless. His descriptions were heartbreaking, but not entirely exciting. It is a story I would recommend borrowing from the library, but I would not recommend buying it. It is not a pageturner. It is somewhere between an entertaining YA novel and a school-assigned reading. It makes you think and it makes you cry, but it does not make you desperately want to turn the page.

Recommendations

- Empire Of The Sun by J. G. Ballard
- All The Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr
- Long Road Home by Kim Yong
- The Orphan Master’s Son by Adam Johnson