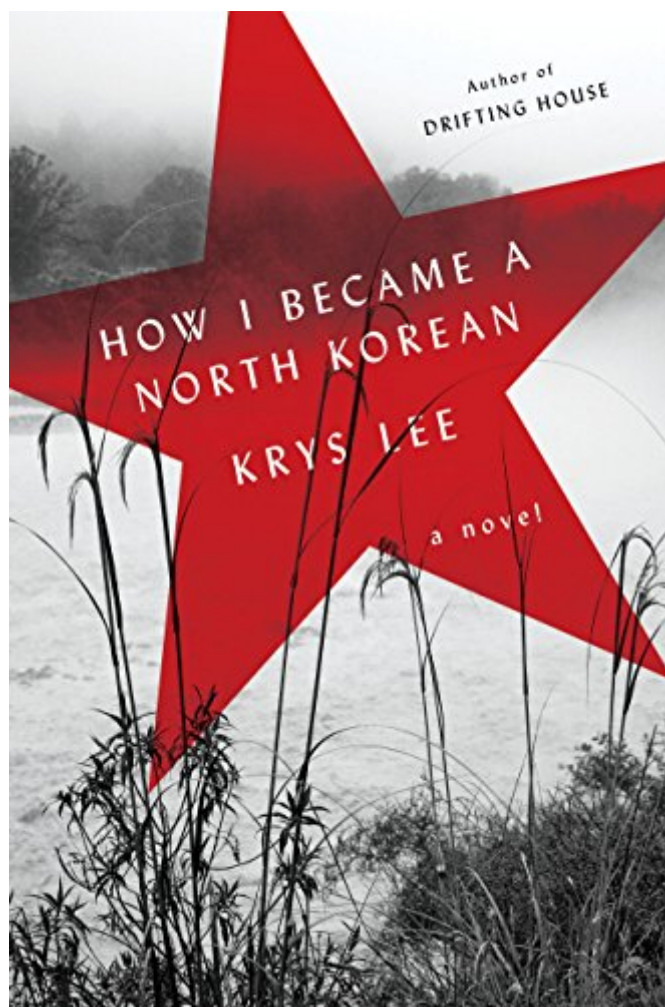


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# How I Became A North Korean: A Novel



## Synopsis

"Lee takes us into urgent and emotional novelistic terrain: the desperate and tenuous realms defectors are forced to inhabit after escaping North Korea." —Adam Johnson, author of *The Orphan Master's Son* "The more confusing and horrible our world becomes, the more critical the role of fiction in communicating both the facts and the meaning of other people's lives. Krys Lee joins writers like Anthony Marra, Khaled Hosseini and Elnathan John in this urgent work." —*San Francisco Chronicle* Yongju is an accomplished student from one of North Korea's most prominent families. Jangmi, on the other hand, has had to fend for herself since childhood, most recently by smuggling goods across the border. Then there is Danny, a Chinese-American teenager whose quirks and precocious intelligence have long made him an outcast in his California high school. These three disparate lives converge when they flee their homes, finding themselves in a small Chinese town just across the river from North Korea. As they fight to survive in a place where danger seems to close in on all sides, in the form of government informants, husbands, thieves, abductors, and even missionaries, they come to form a kind of adoptive family. But will Yongju, Jangmi and Danny find their way to the better lives they risked everything for? Transporting the reader to one of the least-known and most threatening environments in the world, and exploring how humanity persists even in the most desperate circumstances, *How I Became a North Korean* is a brilliant and essential first novel by one of our most promising writers. A FINALIST FOR THE 2016 CENTER FOR FICTION FIRST NOVEL PRIZE One of *The Millions'* most anticipated books of the second half of 2016 One of *Elle.com's* "11 Best Books to Read in August" One of *Bookpage's* "Six Stellar Summer Debuts" From the Hardcover edition.

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## Customer Reviews

This is not a happy book but it is full of hope. It deals with the hardships and desperate situations of North Koreans and the perilous journeys some take to escape the dictatorship and to run away from persecution or extreme hardship. In the novel three young people from different backgrounds see themselves thrown together in a situation of struggle and danger to flee North Korea in order to survive. The main characters are Danny (Daehan) who is American by nationality but whose ancestors are North Korean and whose mother works with missionaries in China near the North Korean border. Jangmi, who flees North Korea and sells herself to a broker across the border to give her unborn baby a chance in life and Yongju whose father, a high rank official, is shot by the "Dear Leader" and has to flee with his mother and sister in order to escape persecution. The three youngsters meet by chance in their struggle to escape and are rescued by two missionaries who will use them to receive funds from sponsors. Their struggle for freedom is Lee's way to convey the sorry situation of ordinary North Koreans to escape the dictatorship in order to survive. I am very interested in the stories of ordinary North Koreans who have managed to escape and relate what life is like in the dictatorship. Krys Lee tells a story so realistic it feels authentic and very moving. After reading the novel I found out that Lee has listened herself to many first person accounts of flight and even helped a refugee escape from a Chinese Christian missionary who was keeping him hostage to receive donations and funding. The missionary got furious with her and she received death threats, so she decided to create Missionary Kwon in the novel as a form of revenge.

This is a story, told in alternating autobiographical chapters, by three young Koreans who in 2009 found themselves in China: Yong Ju is the son of a father who was part of the North Korean establishment until Kim Jong-il took against him and shot him dead during a dinner. Yong Ju, then 21, his mother and sister were then able, with the help of a friend, were then able to escape across

the Tumen River into China, only to find gangsters on the Chinese side abducting the mother and the sister, leaving Yong Ju to find shelter in a cave in the mountains. Jangmi has become pregnant and, in desperation, had arranged via broker to marry an old crippled Chinese man and had bribed the border guards to let her cross the river. When the husband and his mother find out that she is pregnant, she is driven out of the house and eventually also finds shelter in the cave. Daehan (Danny) and his parents had emigrated from a Korean area in China to the United States. They are a Christian family, and his mother had gone back to China to become a missionary. Danny, aged sixteen, is such an unhappy misfit at school that his father arranged for him to rejoin the mother in China. When he gets there, he finds that his mother is having an affair with a Chinese deacon, and he is so horrified that he runs away, and, after horrific adventures, also ends up in the cave. Danny thinks the Church will look after them, and he and Yong Ju, together with several other young North Korean refugees, do find accommodation in a safe house run by a Chinese missionary, Mr Kwon. Jangmi had run away from the cave and had some terrible experiences before she, too, is rescued by Mr Kwong, so the three are reunited.

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