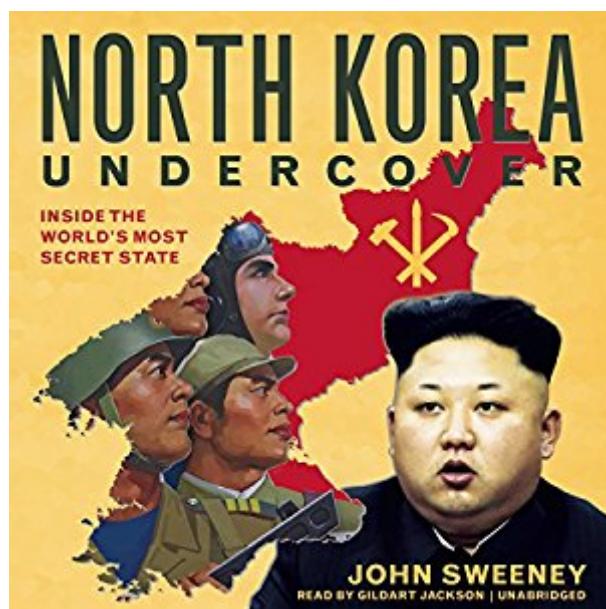


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North Korea Undercover: Inside The World's Most Secret State



Synopsis

An authoritative and frightening investigation into the dark side of North Korean society North Korea is like no other tyranny on Earth. Its citizens are told their home is the greatest nation in the world, and Big Brother is always watching. It is Orwell's 1984 made reality. Award-winning BBC journalist John Sweeney is one of the few foreign journalists to have witnessed the devastating reality of life in the controversial and isolated nation of North Korea. Having entered the country undercover, Sweeney posed as a university professor with a group of students from the London School of Economics. Huge factories with no staff or electricity, hospitals with no patients, uniformed child soldiers, and the world-famous and eerily empty DMZ - the Demilitarized Zone, where North Korea ends and South Korea begins - are all framed by a relentless flow of regime propaganda from omnipresent loudspeakers. Free speech is an illusion: One word out of line, and the gulag awaits. State spies are everywhere, ready to punish disloyalty at the slightest sign of discontent. Drawing on his own experiences and his extensive interviews with defectors and other key witnesses, Sweeney's North Korea Undercover pulls back the curtain, providing a rare insight into life there today while examining the country's troubled history and addressing important questions about its uncertain future.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is perhaps one of my favorite books that I have read on the North Korea phenomenon and history over the last sixty years. The book is insightful, clear, and hold a great deal of facts and information that I am actually surprised that a great deal of other books on the topic do not contain.

What is perhaps most interesting and engaging about this particular text is that Sweeney's tone throughout the book is very personal, lighthearted, at times subjective, but entirely entertaining throughout the book and seemed Bill Bryson wrote it if Bill Bryson was a bit of a sarcastic pub crawler with a deathwish for visiting the world's most notoriously dangerous places. While this does lend itself to needing some elements of critical thinking at times in terms of discerning facts from opinions, Sweeney separated his editorializing from his factual reporting in a recognizable manner. Sweeney's analysis of the various facts that he presented was extremely helpful. After reading other books about the regime and life in North Korea, some avoided some major elements that were central to this narrative. This includes the racial purity aspect, which I had no idea about but was convincingly presented and supported with anecdotes and evidence. I also was unaware of the plight of artists in the country, as well as American defectors who have lived relatively comfortably in the country since they defected during the Korean war. I felt that Sweeney presented an excellent and engaging book on the topic, as if we were sitting down to a conversation about his work over a beer. I also loved the anecdotal elements he would present from his various trips, including when he would give the tour guides a hard time and bend the rules to hilarious effect.

I found this an interesting though depressing read. We don't know exactly what goes on inside North Korea nor how many people starve to death or are jailed for life in cold gulags; but thanks to various journalists and escapees we have a fair idea. John Sweeney of BBC clearly despises the personality cult and brainwashing, having exposed Scientology. He found a similar, profitable but deadlier cult in NK on his undercover visit. Now, Sweeney did not do anything but pose as a history professor to accompany a group from the London School of Economics, all of whom were told that there would be an undercover journalist and a camera man and filming. However, it has to be said that he would not have got into the country any other way, and he could not put his group in danger. He adds his own interviews with other travellers from diplomats to terrorists. Sweeney uses his profile to bring the visit and its surreal quality to our attention, liberally spiced with history explaining the three generations of rulers and the ruling class, who know that if the regime falls, they will be first against the wall. As internal travel or communication is banned for most, the people in the capital do not often know how bad life is for those outside, and are probably afraid to ask. With a university and children's camp and hospital all devoid of people, a farm devoid of animals, a giant square empty of visitors, a barren, impoverished landscape and bleak concrete homes, no wildlife or pets or domestic animals to be seen, almost no road vehicles and incongruous luxury for the leader, I'm not alone in likening the scene to Hunger Games. Sweeney notes that more people now have

Chinese mobile phones and can get signals near borders.

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