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**Books of The Times**

**North Korea Keeps Hiding, and Fascinating**

**By** [**DWIGHT GARNER**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/g/dwight_garner/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

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**NOTHING TO ENVY**

**Ordinary Lives in North Korea**

By Barbara Demick

Illustrated. 314 pages. Spiegel & Grau. $26.

**THE HIDDEN PEOPLE OF NORTH KOREA**

**Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom**

By Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh

Illustrated. 300 pages. Rowman & Littlefield. $39.95.

**THE CLEANEST RACE**

**How North Koreans See Themselves — and Why It Matters**

By B. R. Myers

Illustrated. 200 pages. Melville House. $24.95.

Computers are rare in [North Korea](http://www.nytimes.com/info/north-korea/?inline=nyt-geo), and the Internet, for most of its citizens, is little more than a whispered rumor. It’s probable, in fact, that only one person surfs the Web in North Korea without someone monitoring every click: [Kim Jong-il](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/k/_kim_jong_il/index.html?inline=nyt-per), that authoritarian regime’s supreme leader.

When he’s online, and not lurking on sites devoted to his obsessions (movies, fancy food, young women, [nuclear weapons](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/science/topics/atomic_weapons/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier)), Mr. Kim must sometimes see what his country looks like, to the rest of the world, in those haunting satellite photographs of the Far East at night.

You’ve probably seen them. The countries near North Korea — Japan, South Korea, China — are ablaze with splotches and pinpricks of light, with beaming civilization. But North Korea, a country nearly the size of England, home to some 23 million people, is a black hole, an ocean of dark. Barbara Demick, a foreign correspondent for The Los Angeles Times, begins her excellent new book, “Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea,” by poring over these satellite images. She’s shocked by them, and moved. “North Korea is not an undeveloped country,” she observes. “It is a country that has fallen out of the developed world.”

“Nothing to Envy” is one of three provocative new books about North Korea, from writers who are committed to parsing the slivers of light that escape this enigmatic and often baffling place. The others are “The Hidden People of North Korea,” by Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh, and “The Cleanest Race,” by B. R. Myers.

North Korea is not an easy country to observe. Few foreign journalists are allowed in, and then only with official minders and strictly limited itineraries. To get a sense of how ordinary citizens live, writers must rely primarily on the accounts of defectors.

If we have trouble seeing North Koreans plainly, they cannot see us at all. Telephone use is severely restricted. (Even the telephone book is a classified document marked “secret.”) Postal service is spotty. There is essentially no e-mail. Television and radios receive only approved channels. The country’s citizens are force-fed a steady, numbing diet of state propaganda devoted to sustaining the personality cult of Kim Jong-il and savaging all things American.

How are North Koreans taught to think about us? Well, here’s one indication. Children learn a ditty called “Shoot the Yankee Bastards” in music class. One verse goes:

Our enemies are the American bastards
Who are trying to take over our beautiful fatherland.
With guns that I make with my own hands
I will shoot them. BANG, BANG, BANG.

(The truly poignant words here are “with my own hands.”)

Ms. Demick’s book is a lovely work of narrative nonfiction, one that follows the lives of six ordinary North Koreans, including a female doctor, a pair of star-crossed lovers, a factory worker and an orphan. It’s a book that offers extensive evidence of the author’s deep knowledge of this country while keeping its sights firmly on individual stories and human details.

The people Ms. Demick observes lived, before their defections, in northeastern North Korea, far from the country’s tidy, Potemkin village-like capital, Pyongyang. The existences she describes sound brutal: there is often not enough food; citizens work long days that can be followed by hours of ideological training at night; spying on one’s neighbors is a national pastime; a nonpatriotic comment, especially an anti-Kim Jong-il wisecrack, can have you sent to a gulag for life, if not executed.

Ms. Demick writes especially well about the difficult lives of those who do manage to defect. Not only are they bewildered by life outside of North Korea, and have to be taught to do things like use an A.T.M., but they also live with deep shame and guilt, knowing that relatives left behind have probably been sent to prison as punishment for their escape.

Mr. Hassig and Ms. Oh’s book, “The Hidden People of North Korea: Everyday Life in the Hermit Kingdom,” is wonkier than Ms. Demick’s and less reader-friendly, but it covers more ground. The authors are married (Ms. Oh’s parents were North Koreans who fled to South Korea); he is an independent consultant specializing in North Korean affairs, and she is on the research staff of the Institute for Defense Analysis in Alexandria, Va.

Their book is based on more than 200 interviews with defectors, and it paints a picture of a restless populace, increasingly dubious about the official propaganda. “It would be a gross exaggeration to say that the people support Kim Jong-il,” they write. “Rather, it does not occur to them to oppose him.” North Koreans are too busy trying to survive, and too preoccupied by the tensions of the supposed mighty conflict with America, to be able to think about much else.

Mr. Hassig and Ms. Oh’s portrait of Mr. Kim’s hyper-sybaritic lifestyle is detailed and devastating. He may look like a man of the people, they write, with his tan slacks, zippered jackets and stout build that make him resemble [Jackie Gleason](http://movies.nytimes.com/person/27204/Jackie-Gleason?inline=nyt-per) as Ralph Kramden in “The Honeymooners.” But they chronicle his obsession with the latest electronics, the “pleasure teams” of girls he keeps handy, the Bordeaux wine he has flown in. While many of his people starve, they write, Mr. Kim “is such a connoisseur that, according to his former chef, every grain of rice destined for his dinner table is inspected for quality and shape.”

The authors are aware that Mr. Kim’s anti-American paranoia isn’t baseless. The leader of a different country in [George W. Bush](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/george_w_bush/index.html?inline=nyt-per)’s “axis of evil,” they note, was captured and later hanged.

Mr. Hassig and Ms. Oh’s book concludes with pointed policy recommendations. They think it is nearly hopeless to negotiate with Mr. Kim and suspect that “nonproliferation agreements with the regime will simply encourage it to brandish new threats in the future.” Instead of fixating on Korea’s weapons, the authors suggest bypassing the regime and reaching out to North Korea’s people, who sorely need humanitarian aid and “a new way of thinking about their government and their society.”

Mr. Myers, the author of “The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves — and Why It Matters,” is a contributing editor to The Atlantic and famously the author of [“A Reader’s Manifesto,”](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200107/myers) a controversial and humorless broadside against the literary writers (Annie Proulx and [Cormac McCarthy](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/cormac_mccarthy/index.html?inline=nyt-per) among them) whom he finds pretentious or obscure. Mr. Myers directs the international studies department at Dongseo University in South Korea.

He is a crisp, pushy writer who is at his best when on the attack, and his often counterintuitive new book attempts a psychological profile of Kim Jong-il and his regime. Mr. Myers has pored through mountains of North Korean propaganda — from nightly news reports and newspapers to war movies, comics, wall posters and dictionaries — and he argues that the West is misreading the country’s core beliefs.

He explains that North Korea’s dominant worldview is “far removed” from the Communism, Confucianism and official “show-window” ideologies that Westerners analyze. Instead, he argues, this worldview “can be summarized in a single sentence: The Korean people are too pure-blooded, and therefore too virtuous, to survive in this evil world without a great parental leader.” His North Korea is guided by a “paranoid, race-based nationalism.”

Mr. Myers’s arguments are too wily and complex to be neatly summarized here, but he includes a fascinating analysis of Mr. Kim’s depiction as an essentially — and crucially — feminine military leader. His regime presents North Korea more as a motherland than a fatherland, Mr. Myers writes, and he cites official slogans about Mr. Kim like “We Cannot Live Away From His Breast.” The lack of a patriarchal authority figure, he says, “may also have helped the regime preserve stability by depriving people of a target to rebel against.”

Mr. Myers also cautions against the idea that the West can persuade North Korea to shed its nuclear weapons. Mr. Kim “cannot disarm and hope to stay in power,” he writes. At the same time, he notes, “blue jeans will not bring down this dictatorship.” Any signs of serious unrest, he observes, will encourage Mr. Kim to raise the level of the tension with the West, and possibly do something rash with his nuclear arsenal.

Kim Jong-il reportedly suffered a stroke in 2008 and has looked frail during his recent, and increasingly rare, public appearances. While the world speculates about his successor, almost certainly to be one of his sons, one of the lessons of these books is not to remove our eyes from the blinkered lives of the average North Korean.

“The Kim regime essentially holds its people hostage,” Mr. Hassig and Ms. Oh write, and they are dismayed to note that “the United States is much more interested in the hostage taker’s weapons of mass destruction than in the fate of his hostages.”

North Koreans sometimes joke, Ms. Demick writes in “Nothing to Envy,” that they live like “frogs in the well.” It’s a line that sends you back to study those satellite images, and to contemplate those who dwell under Mr. Kim’s inky moral darkness.