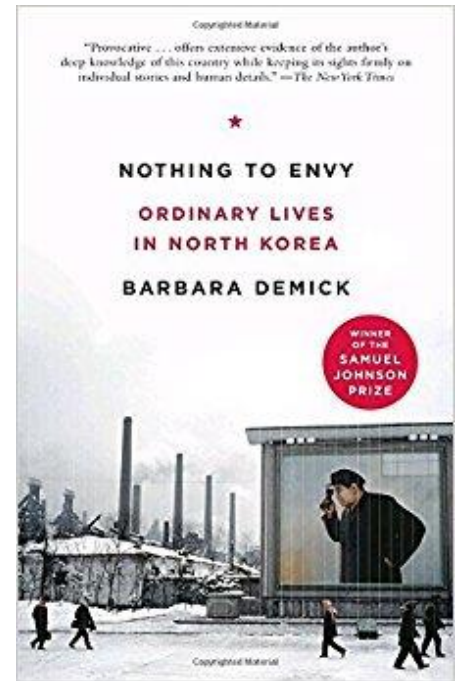


Skaneateles Library  
Books by the Stack  
Discussion Questions

**Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea**  
by **Barbara Demick**

1. Demick follows the lives of six North Koreans. Whose story do you find most compelling, disturbing, horrific—or inspiring?
2. Talk about what happens to those who manage to defect. How do they manage life outside North Korea? What are the difficulties—both practical and psychological—they confront in their new lives?
3. Demick describes North Korea, not as an undeveloped country, but as "a country that has fallen out of the developed world." What does she mean? What would it be like for any of us to live under the conditions in North Korea? What would be most difficult for you? What shocked or angered you most about the book's descriptions of life in North Korea?
4. Discuss the history of North Korea and its descent into deprivation. How did a formerly wealthy, industrialized country—which attracted Chinese from across the border—deteriorate into its present state?
5. What does it take to survive in North Korea? How do some get around the restrictive laws?
6. Do Koreans love their "dear leader" as much as they claim?
7. How does one explain the disparity between North and South Korea?
8. Talk about your experience reading this book? Was it hard to get through...or did you find yourself unable to put the book down? Were you depressed, angered, outraged, thankful for your own life...or all of the above?



*Discussion questions adapted from those on LitLovers.com*

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## Character List

The six main characters/interviewees of the book (using names different than their real ones to avoid any retribution to relatives left in North Korea) are:

**Mrs. Song** – a pro-regime housewife with good songbun<sup>1</sup> and past head of the block's inminban<sup>2</sup> citizen's organization reporting directly to secret police (State Security Department).

**Oak-hee** – Mrs. Song's rebellious, yet eventually enterprising, daughter, who is critical of the regime and only performs good "socialist" activities to avoid suspicion and/or getting in trouble.

**Mi-ran** – daughter of a kaolin<sup>3</sup> miner, a South Korean POW, with bad songbun. As a child she enjoys going to the cinema. She is accepted at a teacher's college and begins teaching kindergarten classes right at the start of the country's devastating economic collapse.

**Jun-sang** – a student with Zainichi Korean<sup>4</sup> ancestry and Mi-ran's secret boyfriend in North Korea. He becomes a privileged university student in Pyongyang but still develops a critical outlook on the regime and begins listening to "subversive" South Korean radio and television.

**Kim Hyuck** – a kotchebi<sup>5</sup> street-boy whose father commits him to an orphanage and must struggle to survive and fend for himself.

**Dr. Kim** – a doctor with relatives in China; goes from privilege and prestige to starvation and helplessness in treating her starving fellow citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> The status system used in North Korea. Based on the political, social, and economic background of one's direct ancestors as well as the behavior of their relatives, songbun is used to determine whether an individual is trusted with responsibilities, is given opportunities within North Korea, or even receives adequate food. Songbun affects access to educational and employment opportunities and it particularly determines whether a person is eligible to join North Korea's ruling party, the Workers' Party of Korea.

<sup>2</sup> Meaning "neighborhood units" or "people's units" it is a neighborhood watch-like organization in North Korea. No North Korean person exists outside the inminban system; everyone is a member.

<sup>3</sup> A clay mineral.

<sup>4</sup> Zainichi Korean is used to describe settled permanent residents of Japan, both those who have retained either their South Korean/North Korean nationalities, and even sometimes, but not always, includes Japanese citizens of Korean descent who acquired Japanese nationality by naturalization or by birth from one or both parents who have Japanese citizenship.

<sup>5</sup> A Korean term denoting North Korean homeless children. The term literally means "flowering swallows," given because of the kotjebi's constant search for food and shelter. The kotjebi are not officially recognized in North Korea, with any mention of the term being prohibited in state publications and documents.