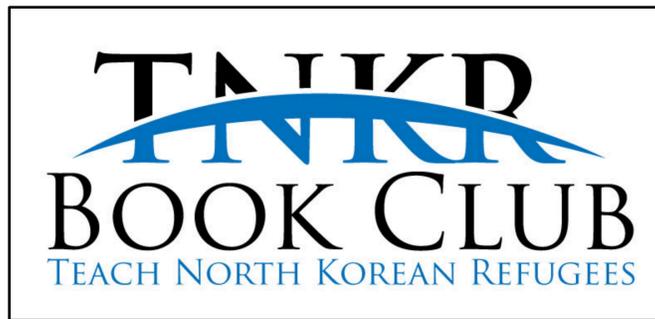


TNKR's mission is to empower North Korean refugees to find their own voice and path through education, advocacy, and support.

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Purpose: We will discuss ideas, meaning, and information in Sungju Lee's "Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea." We'll center our discussion on *interpretive questions* that have more than one plausible answer and can lead to engaging and insightful conversations about the text.

Rules: Have fun, share your views, listen, agree or respectfully disagree, ask questions to stimulate discussion.

Flexible Game Plan: Small groups will

- Create and/or select _____ questions to discuss; discuss together for _____ minutes
- Share core ideas of the discussion with the larger group
- Pose at least one additional question for the larger group to discuss briefly

A. How the Book Affected You

1. What did you learn that was new? How might it have broadened your perspective about a personal, societal, historical, or current issue?
2. What was your initial reaction to the book? Did it hook you immediately, or take some time to get into?
3. Can you point to specific passages that struck you personally—as interesting, profound, silly or shallow, incomprehensible, illuminating?
4. Do the issues affect your life? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now, or sometime in the future?
5. Did the book change your opinion or perspective about anything? How has this book changed the way you think about NK, SK, refugee issues, or anything else?
6. What surprised you the most when you were reading this book?
7. What feelings did this book evoke for you?

B. Plot & Characters

1. What was your favorite quote or passage? Why?
2. What are some of the themes you noticed throughout the book?
3. What was your favorite moment in the book? Your least favorite?
4. Which character did you relate to the most, and what was it about them that you connected with?
5. In your opinion, what were the most important moments of the plot and why?
6. In what ways is *Every Falling Star* similar to and/or different from other books on NK and/or other memoirs you have read?
7. If you had to choose one lesson that the author was trying to teach us with this story, what would it be?

C. Implications & Moving Forward

1. If there was one more chapter after the ending, what do you wish it would address?
2. Does the author—or can you—draw implications for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? If so, are they positive or negative? Affirming or frightening?
3. Does the author—or can you—offer solutions to the issues raised in the book? Who would implement those solutions? How probable is success?
4. How is any content from the book relevant to or pertain to the work of NGOs that support NK refugees?
5. If you got the chance to ask the author of this book one question, what would it be and why?
6. What else have you read on this topic, and would you recommend these books to others?
7. As a result of the book and/or discussion, what do you want to learn more about? How might you pursue finding answers?

Summary of Sungju Lee's "Every Falling Star: The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea"

Written by Tony Docan-Morgan, Ph.D.
To appear in *North Korean Review*, 2018

After providing a brief history of 20th century Korea, Lee begins his memoir by describing his life as a child—dreaming of following in his father's footsteps as a military officer in the Korean People's Army, living in a well furnished three-bedroom home, attending school, idolizing Kim Il-sung, participating in tae kwon do, and playing with friends. Early on, he recalls the death of Kim Il-sung on July 8, 1994, as well as a major turning point for his family in January 1997. Lee paints a picture of his family's "so-called northern holiday" (p. 22), where they board a train and enter unforeseen part of the country, both literally and figuratively. Once they reach Gyeong-seong, their new place of residence, Lee comes face-to-face with many firsts and provides noteworthy detail about each—lack of electricity, vanishing government food rations, pervasive starvation, and the disappearance of children from school. He also presents a thorough account of a public execution of a man whose main crime was that "he has stolen copper and electrical wire from a local factory and was caught trying to cross the Duman River into China with the goods" (p. 47). A few of Lee's classmates introduce him to the world outside of Pyongyang, such as how to scavenge for and catch food, the frequency of theft as a means of survival, and the loss of family members due to "starvation disease."

For Lee and his family, survival in Gyeong-seong becomes grueling. He quits school and his parents stop showing up to their assigned work duties, as they have no other options but to scavenge for food. Lee recounts details about pervasive malnutrition in those around him, as well as his own famishment. Out of desperation, Lee's father shares his plan to bribe his way across the Chinese border to trade goods, and departs the family. Soon after, Lee's mother also leaves as she has "nothing left to sell" (p. 77), stating that she'll visit her sister in Wonsan to find food. Without family, Lee's nightmares, loneliness, and starvation worsen. With no other options, he turns to a group of his classmates and friends, all of whom become *kotjebi*—homeless street children or "flowering swallows" constantly searching for food and shelter. Young-bum, one of Lee's primary friends, introduces him to the bustling market scene, full of vendors "selling goods from dried fish to electronics" (p. 96). As a newcomer to the markets, Lee begs for food and learns of his town's social order. One man states, "Here is the hierarchy out here...Army is on the top. You'll only see them if you try to steal from certain government farms. Then the police, followed by the *Shangmoo*. Then there are the workers, followed by merchants, followed by you, *kotjebi*. There is only one group of people lower than you...The nightflowers" (p. 100).

Lee's narrative harnesses largely around the theme of brotherhood. Lee and Young-bum team up to steal food and won from buyers and vendors at the market. After some success, they form a larger group with Sangchul, Min-gook, Chulho, Myeongchul, and Unsik in hopes of working together to persist against rival *kotjebi* gangs. They end up performing skits at the train station to earn won, working collectively to find food, and helping each other through family death. Lee remarks to his friends, "we're brothers and family now" (p. 139), and they agree to protect, trust, and care for one another. Lee weaves plentiful detail into his story, including the gang's chain smoking, *sool* (alcohol) drinking, occasional infighting, and conversations about death, family, and dreams.

Lee and his gang eventually leave Gyeong-seong as it becomes overrun with *kotjebi* gangs, resulting in even fewer resources. They sneak onto a coal train that takes them to the outskirts of Cheongjin, where they fight mercilessly with other gangs. Lee emerges as the leader, and they bounce from train to train and fight to fight, surviving by stealing market food. Lee remarks, "Death was all around us. We'd enter the market in the mornings to find women wailing and rocking in their arms children who had died during the night. As we plunged deep into the merchants' stalls, we found the corpses of old men and women..." (p. 175). Later, they reach a market in Rajin-Seonbong, where they were awestruck by cars driven by Russian and Chinese businessmen and seeing white people for the first time. Soon after arriving, they are challenged to yet another battle; this time, however, the consequences are brutal, as Myeongchul, plastered in blood, dies from the fight. After burying their fallen brother, the gang heads back to familiar towns and markets. Finding some triumph, Lee remarks, "By winter solstice 1999, my brothers and I were strong...stronger than any of us had ever been in our lives..." (p. 207).

Lee's doubts about North Korea's leadership are sprinkled throughout the memoir. He hears fictionalized stories from others about his gang, and mentions, "I'd laugh when I'd hear these stories but then wonder after: Was this how Kim-Il-sung's childhood snowballed into such an epic? Myeongchul's words came back to me: *Folklore has a funny way of becoming truth*" (p. 211).

Later, Lee and his gang make their way for Hwaseong where they are caught stealing from a pear farm and taken to the *guhoso* (detention center for *kotjebi*). Lee details the dismal living conditions, witnessing various forms of abuse, and the sight of dead children. They end up escaping, and continue their trek. Lee states, "I came to realize that everyone had a story. Everyone was affected by the famine—everyone outside of Pyongyang, that is" (p. 238). Soon after, while stealing potatoes on a government farm, the gang faces its second loss—Young-bum is caught and beaten horribly. Lee carries him away, but he dies shortly after.

After being gone for more than a year and a half, Lee and his remaining brothers return to Gyeong-seong. There, they struggle to settle in. However, at the end of February 2002, a man in the train station approaches Lee, and after some conversation, claims to be his grandfather. Lee is baffled when the man says, "You're Sungju from Pyongyang, and your mother is Jeong-wha. Your father is Seong-Il" (p. 258). The man brought Lee and his gang through the countryside and trekked with them to his house in the mountains. There, Lee sees pictures of his parents, and it becomes clear that he indeed has found his grandparents. Lee's friends, knowing they have work and food to worry about, say their goodbyes and head back to nearby Gyeong-seong. Lee settles in, helping his grandparents with various chores and he begins to study. Not long after, a man delivers a note from Lee's father, asking Lee to meet him in China. After some thought, Lee decides to accompany the broker. They cross the Duman River on the outskirts of Hweryeong, Lee meets with another guide in China, and he spends nearly a week in waiting for the next move. Lee and his guide board a train in Yanji, and equipped with a passport, he is led to board an airplane. Amid his confusion, Lee's plane lands in South Korea, where he is investigated and finally able to meet his father. In the epilogue, Lee tells of his struggles to integrate in South Korea, as well as his educational pursuits and ongoing interest in and work with refugees' human rights.