

The Orphan Master's Son: A Novel

Adam Johnson, (New York: Random House, 2012), 443 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Let's ask the obvious question first: Is *The Orphan Master's Son*, published in early 2012 to enthusiastic reviews in almost every major newspaper and journal, as good as the critics say? My answer is a resounding "yes." Adam Johnson has constructed a fascinating plot, set it in a carefully detailed world, and written in a style that captures the reader from the first page.

Johnson's novel follows the adventures of a North Korean, Jun Do, who grows up in an orphanage run by his father. From there, he goes into the army, where he serves in a unit trained to fight in the total darkness of the tunnels under the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. Next, Jun Do is assigned to an intelligence unit that kidnaps Japanese. Success in this assignment leads to English language training, a stint as a radio intercept operator on a fishing boat, and then a trip to Texas as a translator for a Korean delegation.

Upon Jun Do's return from Texas, Johnson sends the story in unexpected directions. Jun Do is imprisoned in a labor camp where prisoners work in mines until they die. When the minister of prison mines, the brutal and thugish Commander Ga, visits the mine, Jun Do kills him, dons his uniform, and assumes Ga's persona.

Johnson uses the substitution to drive home a critical point, that in North Korea the truth is whatever people are told it is. With no one daring to question his new identity, Jun Do thus becomes Commander Ga and moves in

with Ga's wife—an acclaimed film star named Sun Moon—and Ga's young children. Sun Moon, of course, is not fooled but reluctantly accepts him and lives with Jun Do as if he were Ga. As Commander Ga, Jun Do also meets with Kim Jong-il—who, bizarrely, accepts the impostor even though he knew Ga—while simultaneously plotting the escape of Sun Moon and her children from North Korea. Johnson uses multiple narrators for this part of the story, a device that enables him to maintain suspense as the plot twists to its conclusion.

Johnson, however, is not content just to tell an interesting story. He has a larger goal, which is to bring home to his readers the awful realities of life in totalitarian North Korea. Toward this end, Johnson has done his homework—not only did he travel to Pyongyang, but his detailed references to Korean customs and descriptions of daily life and North Korea itself demonstrate careful research. The resulting portrait is unrelentingly grim; Johnson's North Korea is a place of starvation, casual brutality and extraordinary hardships in almost every aspect of life, and it is a place where everyone fatalistically assumes that at some point they will be arrested and sent to a labor camp. All of this takes place amidst a constant din of Orwellian propaganda, with the regime telling the people how good their lives are, and the people, in turn, carefully repeating slogans to stay out of trouble. The point is not just that North Korea is a place of material hardship and physical suffering, but also that it is a place where the state seeks total control of each person's soul. For anyone who has read about Mao's China or Stalin's Russia, even if

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they know little about North Korea, Johnson's descriptions ring true.

In trying to bring North Korea to life, Johnson seeks to follow other writers who have used fiction to tell the truth about totalitarianism. He is working in the tradition of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, among many others. What these books have in common, it is important to note, is that their authors had not only researched and visited the communist states of the 20th century, but actually had lived in them or been involved in communist politics. Their fiction was grounded in long personal experience.

This is where *The Orphan Master's Son* stumbles. Johnson's mistake is to insert a genuine leader into the story, something that neither Koestler nor Orwell did. Indeed, Number One and Big Brother were all the more menacing because they were unseen. Thus, in the

imaginings of their subjects, victims, and readers, these rulers came to be seen as omnipresent and invincible. Johnson portrays Kim Jong-il, however, as being just as caught up in the regime's propaganda fantasies as much as anyone else is; in his acceptance of Jun Do as Ga, he seems unable to tell where his own fictions end and reality begins. Moreover, Johnson's Kim at times seems less evil than befuddled. It may be unintentional, but Johnson has humanized Kim and thereby demoted him from monster to curiosity.

Nonetheless, I highly recommend *The Orphan Master's Son* for anyone who wants to gain insight into North Korea. We probably will not have a full understanding of North Korea until the Kim dynasty has been gone for many years—Stalin has been dead for almost 60 years, and scholars are still making fresh discoveries—but until then, Johnson's descriptions and insights provide a fascinating portrait of life in this tragic land.

