

## ***Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West***

By Blaine Harden

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*Escape from Camp 14*, Blaine Harden's telling account of Shin Dong-hyuk's birth, beleaguered upbringing, and miraculous escape from a North Korean labor camp is unsettling and emotionally provoking. The extreme paucity of both physical and emotional sustenance in the only home Shin has ever known, Camp 14, forces him to endure the brutality of prison guards, the depravity of torture, and a never-ending need to scavenge as a means of life. His motivation to live is not tempered by the desire for wealth, or power, but for food.

The book begins with Shin's first, bleak memory of a public execution at the age of four. His mother, prison guards, and 10 laws that govern Camp 14 become rigid socialization models for Shin. The first nine rules, which range from obeying authorities unconditionally to forbidding any intermingling of the sexes without permission, precede Rule 10, which dictates that any person caught breaking laws one through nine will be publicly executed.

When Shin's mother and brother devise a plot to escape, they are in clear violation of Rule #1, which expressly forbids any attempted escape. On the night Shin discovers their plans, he is infuriated by his mother's preferential treatment of his brother. He awakens to hear muted whispers in the kitchen over a bowl of rice they share, without him. The jealousy is overwhelming for 13-year-old Shin, and after meager rations of corn porridge and pickled cabbage for over a decade, his longing for a steaming bowl of rice becomes the motivation to snitch on a family he never learned how to love. In his eyes, he is simply adhering to Rule #9 that requires all detainees to report suspicious behavior. Shin mistakenly believes this act will place him in favor of the guards and allow him to have more food rations. Instead, after several days of torture and questioning, he is placed at the very front row, along with his father, to witness the execution of his mother and brother. Shin will not admit that he was responsible for their deaths or feel any remorse until many years later.

Routine beatings, non-existent familial relationships, and insane hunger mark Shin's teenage and adult years, and the reader eventually travels with him on his journey from North Korea into China, South Korea, and the United States. Harden does not explicitly denounce a nation in turmoil, but rather conveys his story with an objectivity that leaves the reader continually inquiring how someone like Shin was able to survive. Harden does not advocate for the protagonist or embellish decades of abuse to assuage the sensibilities of a complacent, western audience. His tone can sometimes be pejorative toward the reader, who sits apathetically on the sidelines while satellite images of several labor camps across a North Korean landscape offer tangible evidence of an unimaginable reality.

For new readers, *Escape from Camp 14* will be a sobering account of experiences outside of their own perceived realities. American socialization models are outfitted with technology, media, and practices of excess, with cultural underpinnings that shape (and sometimes narrow) ideological perceptions. An age-by-age comparison of Shin's life and a student's own can potentially help students identify similarities and disparities within cultural norms. Also, Harden sheds light on the political trajectory of North Korea from a historical framework that is easy to comprehend. The

political turbulence pre-dating 1974, the rise and fall of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un, and the immediate succession of his son, Kim Jong-Sun, are subtle backdrops of the narrative that directly link inequities across multiple social strata.

However, as a part of a first-year or common reader program, this book may be too dense. *Escape from Camp 14* would be ideal in an environment where there is room to process and discuss. The language is not offensive or overly scathing, but the realities within must be internalized by the reader first and then provided a platform for in-depth discussion. There are multiple layers to be analyzed; this story is not to be re-shelved and forgotten. With guided reading, students may or may not be able to fully identify with Shin in certain ways, but they could understand the human component of social justice more clearly. Furthermore, higher education fosters self-empowerment, and there are multiple avenues introduced in the story that can serve as catalysts for action and international involvement. Students can champion causes and macro-sociological issues but sometimes need to be guided to the appropriate environments to voice these concerns. So much of what higher education practitioners are charged to do is to connect students to constructive engagement avenues; this book can truly link like-minded students to faculty or staff members who take a genuine interest in social issues and are poised to help students spread awareness of this pressing social reality among the rest of the student population.

The most interesting perspective is that of Shin himself. This story is exacted entirely from his memory, through the lens of Harden, a former investigative reporter for *The Washington Post*. The camp details, from the rooms to work stations and even prison cells, are rich with elements that can be used for classroom discussion for a Freshman Interest Group (FIG), social justice living/learning community, or an internationally themed program. On a sociological level, the human relationships—Shin to Harden, Shin to his family, Shin to the prison guards—can be deconstructed to provide further insight into life inside prison camps.

Another poignant aspect of the novel that can provide supplemental classroom discussion is the potential unification of North and South Korea. South Korea's burgeoning financial economy has developed at a consistent pace in the recent decades, and it is at the forefront of technological and educational innovation, yet North Korea releases daily propaganda inside its prison camps criticizing the South for its financial and political woes. A comparative view of pre-unification Germany and North and South Korea can potentially bridge the past to present for students, who have only experienced the fall of the Berlin Wall through pictures, if at all.

Additionally, *Escape from Camp 14* offers insight into the perversion of labor camps, where human rights are disavowed completely. From a historic perspective, society has witnessed variations of labor/prison camps across centuries and civilizations. These extreme human injustices are equally comparable to the South African Apartheid. New students today are only one generation removed from the history of Apartheid, and yet, how does one convey these harsh realities to a new generation of thinkers? Bringing light to conditions of human injustice by imposing a historical lens may imbue a different perspective, and in fact, provide meaningful connections to post-Apartheid South Africa and Nelson Mandela, a living symbol of hope and courage. Educators are constantly challenged to adjust teaching modalities to modern student learning, but truly learning from our past mistakes is the single most effective method for not repeating them.

*Escape from Camp 14* would also be ideal for new student readers interested in educational psychology or psychotherapy. Shin travels across multiple environments throughout the novel, and the psychological damage instilled by prison life is not easily reversed. Shin suffers severe post-traumatic stress disorder, and mainstreaming him into what is considered "normal" life seems im-

possible. He is unable to maintain a job, pay his bills, or field any interest in education or life-skills acquisition. There are not readily available solutions or absolutes in Shin's case because so much of what he internalized cannot be easily undone or reversed completely. The damage is far greater than many can comprehend. Realizing that Shin is not alone in this reality is numbing; that there are currently hundreds of thousands of prisoners relegated to the same fate should not be condoned.

Overall, *Escape from Camp 14* would be an excellent addition to a classroom that is outfitted with resources for rich discussion and pragmatic critical thinking approaches, but not part of an isolationist summer pre-college reading list. For some, the information may be too much to process, and critical analyses can compartmentalize thematic undertones to make them more digestible for new student readers. Facilitators must figure out ways to help students empathize with the situation without leaving them feeling completely helpless with this new knowledge. At the end of the novel, even Shin's story flickers with hope when he realizes that his message can enable people to care. The fact of the matter is that many people (not only students) are unaware of the realities of prison camps, and their own inaction is mitigated by limited access to truth. The motivation at large for Harden is to deliver a powerful message and hopefully inspire the readers to act according to their own abilities.