

Barbara Demick: Nothing to Envy (Chapters 11 – 15)

'Dr Kim couldn't deny what was staring her plainly in the face: dogs in China ate better than doctors in North Korea.'

In this section of the novel, despite famine still wracking the country, the regime decides to crack down on society through a series of ever-stricter measures including sending people to forced-labour camps, re-education camps, and even expanding the death penalty. In one distressing scene, the reader accompanies Jun-sang as he witnesses a public execution, an event that pushes him even further towards thoughts of escaping the country. We also meet Kim-hyuck, a boy who was orphaned during the famine, and survives by selling goods illegally across the border in China. After he turns sixteen and his crimes become more serious, he is arrested and spends time inside one of North Korea's most notorious labour camps: Kyohwaso No. 12.

This fourth section of *Nothing to Envy* further explores the effect of famine on the lives of those interviewed by Barbara Demick. As well as starvation, malnutrition and other attendant physical effects, the reader sees how people retreat into secret inner lives as well. Due to mistrust and repression, individuals become more and more isolated from society – and from friends and family members too. Mi-ran and Jun-sang are prime examples of individuals whose inner lives become so precious and dangerous that they isolate themselves even from each other. They have to deal with the experience of defecting alone, even though their sense of discontentment is shared by many in society.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. Which word does NOT describe Kim-Hyuck?

- (a) Tiny.
- (b) Wily.
- (c) Obedient.
- (d) Headstrong.

2. What was Kim-hyuck's brother's name?

- (a) Yalu.
- (b) Cheol.
- (c) Song.
- (d) Yuan.

3. How much time did Kim-hyuck spend in a labour camp?

- (a) Twenty days.
- (b) Twenty weeks.
- (c) Twenty months.
- (d) Twenty years.

4. Which euphemistically-named agency plays an increasing role in controlling people in this section of the book, even carrying out public executions?

- (a) People's Safety Agency.
- (b) Workers Bureau of Operations.
- (c) The Ministry of Justice.
- (d) Department of Health.

5. What is the name of the river separating China from North Korea?

- (a) Longjing.
- (b) Yangtze.
- (c) Paekto.
- (d) Tumen.

6. What is the Korean word for 'older sister'?

- (a) Jiejie.
- (b) Nuna.
- (c) Baba.
- (d) Yayi.

7. Mi-ran was one of the first North Korean defectors. How many people are estimated to have successfully fled before her?

- (a) None.
- (b) Less than one hundred.
- (c) Less than one thousand.
- (d) Less than a million.

8. Which of these films, smuggled from China on DVD, became a big seller?

- (a) Die Hard.
- (b) The Last Emperor.
- (c) Titanic.
- (d) Jurassic Park.

9. Which everyday item convinced a North Korean soldier that they could never defeat America?

- (a) Nail clipper.
- (b) Handgun.
- (c) Hair dryer.
- (d) Paper clip.

10. Where does the title of the book, *Nothing to Envy*, come from?

- (a) A popular film.
- (b) A children's song.
- (c) A propaganda poster.
- (d) The author invented it herself.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Parts of Chapter 11 take place at Chongjin train station during the height of the famine. Describe one or two scenes of Chongjin station:
2. In 1996, as the food shortage problem begins to stabilize, Kim Jong-il begins to reassert his control over the country. How is this achieved over the course of chapters 11, 12 and 13?
3. In chapter 13, Demick writes that *'for the first time in his life [Jun-sang] was exposed to new ideas.'* How has Jun-sang been broadening his horizons?
4. How does Mi-ran's story develop in this section of the book?
5. Given Dr Kim was such a loyal worker, her defection at the end of Chapter 15 may come as something of a surprise. What factors finally pushed Dr Kim over the edge?

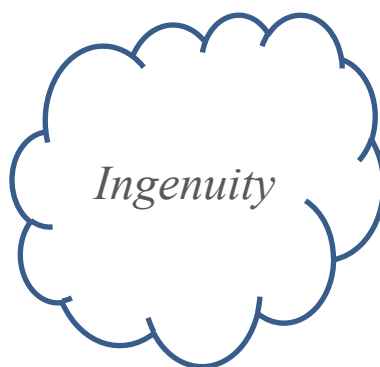
Important Theme: *ingenuity*

The title of chapter 10, *Mothers of Invention*, highlights how ingenuity is emerging as a key theme in Barbara Demick's work. It is a trait that the writer admires in many of her subjects. She writes on page 133: *'It has been said that people reared in Communist countries cannot fend for themselves because they expect the government to take care of them. This was not true of many of the victims of the North Korean famine.'* Importantly, ingenuity is what kept food on the table. However meagre meals became (and Demick describes soups made of grasses thickened by powders made of tree bark) people were able to survive unimaginable hardships thanks to their creativity and ingenuity. Alongside the gathering of food, Demick shows how the earning of money and the creation of improvised medical supplies was also a result of people's individual ingenuity.

Through the character of Kim-hyuck, Demick explores ingenuity on the margins of society. In the past, North Korea was *'an orderly, austere and predictable place...'* (page 184). The widespread famine led to people inventing new scams, thieving and cheating in a desperate game of survival. Ingenuity for Kim-hyuck was not only a survival mechanism, but a necessity from a very young age; even in the orphanage, the *'children were fending for themselves'* (page 163). Sadly, despite their admirable ingenuity, the famine was so severe that the death toll remained high for North Korean people. It is estimated that anywhere between 600,000 and 2 million people died in the period up until 1996, when the food shortage began to stabilise somewhat.

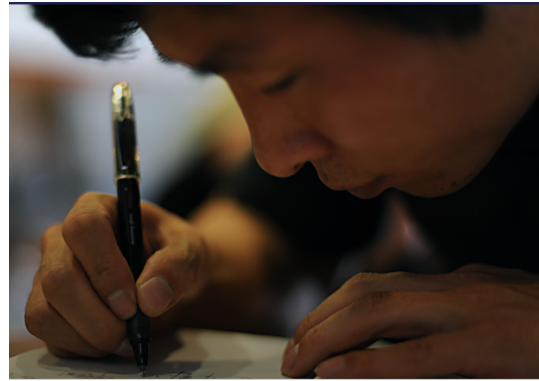
Activity

What other examples of **ingenuity** can you think of from the work as a whole? Create a mind-map about this theme here or in your work-book. Include examples of ingenuity demonstrated by different people, and key quotations on this topic:



Important Character: *Kim-hyuck*

'How Hyuck ended up homeless at the train station is a case study in the decline of North Korea...'



*Pictures of children ('wandering swallows') outside Chongjin Train station and Kim-hyuck signing a copy of *Nothing to Envy* in South Korea.*

Barbara Demick was a journalist for the Los Angeles Times and bureau chief in South Korea. Part of her work was reporting on human rights in North Korea, so she interviewed over 100 refugees who were making new lives for themselves in China and South Korea. Her research culminated in 2009, when she published six stories in the work *Nothing to Envy*. Demick's reportage is a blend of historical fact and fiction, as she reimagines the inner lives and journeys of Mi-ran, Jun-sang, Oak-hee, Mrs Song, Dr. Kim and Kim Hyuck, a former *kochebi* or 'wandering swallow.'

Kim-hyuck is unique among Demick's interviewees as he was just a child when the famine struck in the mid-1990s. Therefore, his perspective gives the reader a slightly different insight into the experiences of people during this time of hardship. Abandoned by his father and separated from his family, Kim-hyuck was forced to fend for himself in an increasingly desperate and hostile environment. As he was so young, he was not as politically aware as the other members of the story, and Demick is able to concentrate more on his story of survival. As he wanders the countryside in search of food, he endures miserable days and nights simply trying to stay alive. He eventually decides that no life is possible in his home country, and begins his long journey towards South Korea.

That's not to say that Kim-hyuck's life was free from politics. In order to survive he made money by selling goods across the border in China. His crossings of the Tumen river eventually landed him in a labour camp, and it was a particularly long stay in prison that convinced him to try to defect for good. One theme that Kim-hyuck illuminates very strongly is that of the generation gap that opened up between older North Koreans and their children. On page 162, his father, shamed by Kim being caught stealing rice cakes, tells his son: *'Better to starve than to steal.'* Instinctively, Kim-hyuck rejects his father's advice and Demick highlights the generation gap between father and son when she bluntly reveals, *'Hyuck didn't agree. He kept stealing.'* Only by committing such crimes does he have any chance of outrunning the famine of his youth.

Activity

Investigate the theme of the ‘generation gap’ in *Nothing to Envy*. Begin with Kim-hyuck and his father, then explore the characters of Mrs Song and Oak-hee. Does a pattern emerge between the attitudes and behaviours of the younger generation when compared to those of the older generation? Create a table like this in your notebook, adding your own findings:

<u>Attitudes and behaviours of characters in <i>Nothing to Envy</i>:</u>	
Older Generation	Younger Generation
Hyuck’s father: ‘solid communist’; ‘rewarded with membership to the Workers Party’ (p161)	Kim-hyuck: ‘continued to steal’; ‘you’re no hero if you’re dead.’ (p162)
‘It’s better to starve than to steal’. (p162)	...

Discussion Point: *relationship problems*

Chapter 14 details how Jun-sang and Mi-ran began to feel friction in their relationship. However, the growing tension between them is not visible on the surface. Rather it is a result of Mi-ran’s low status: she believes her low-ranking family would harm his chances of being assigned a good job in Pyongyang. Therefore, Mi-ran starts to make plans to defect without including Jun-sang. When he discovers she has gone on page 212, his first reaction is: ‘*she did it before me.*’ Unbeknownst to Mi-ran, Jun-sang had also been harbouring thoughts of escape!

Are you getting the impression, over the course of this part of the story, that attitudes towards defection are changing amongst people in North Korea? Are more and more people keeping secrets from each other? Are people becoming more distant – estranged even – from their own friends and family members? What are some of the consequences for people when they have secret thoughts and make concrete plans to escape North Korea? To what extent is everyone retreating into secret, hidden, thoughts and lives?

Culture Clash

Throughout the work *Nothing to Envy*, the reader is inducted into a strange world that may have cultures, traditions and concepts that are very different (or occasionally similar) to those in other countries. Sometimes, Demick gives her reader Korean words for concepts that are particularly important to understanding North Korea. What do these words from chapters 11 – 15 all mean or refer to?

- Kochebi
- Kwanliso
- Kyohwaso
- ‘Social Outfits’