

Barbara Demick: Nothing to Envy (Chapters 18 – Epilogue)

'Guilt and shame are common denominators among North Korean defectors; many hate themselves for what they had to do to survive.'

In the final chapters of the book, Demick reveals how all six of her interviewees succeeded in defecting to South Korea. All of them went through China first, some by more difficult means than others. Upon arrival in Seoul they have to overcome various challenges, including a month in Hanawon, a re-education center, where they are exposed to many new ideas about society for the first time. Upon graduating from this facility, they are given financial help to begin their new lives in a new home.

While the reader might think arrival in South Korea is the end of each person's journey, Demick reveals how it is simply the beginning of a new one. Integration into a new society is not easy and each of her interview subjects, to one degree or another, face challenges. Whether with clothing, appearance, age, attitude or education, most North Koreans entering South Korea discover faults with themselves, and find social integration hard. However, eventually, they find some measure of happiness: they are alive, working, and able to form meaningful relationships with others. On meeting Demick they reflect on their journey and growth.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. In what year did Mrs Song finally arrive in South Korea?

- (a) 1999
- (b) 2002
- (c) 2006
- (d) 2015

2. How much is the social endowment given to defectors to help set up a new life worth?

- (a) \$2000
- (b) \$5000
- (c) \$20,000
- (d) \$50,000

3. As of 2008, approximately how many defectors lived in South Korea?

- (a) 1500
- (b) 15,000
- (c) 25,000
- (d) 50,000

4. About what do Mrs Song and Oak-hee still argue?

- (a) Politics.
- (b) Money.
- (c) The past.
- (d) Clothes.

5. Through which country did Kim-hyuck have an arduous journey to get to China?

- (a) Pakistan.
- (b) Mongolia.
- (c) Kyrgyzstan.
- (d) Japan.

6. In what café does Demick meet Mi-ran and Jun-sang together?

- (a) Starbucks.
- (b) Costa.
- (c) Tim Hortons.
- (d) Paris Baguette.

7. In which city near Seoul does Mi-ran live with her husband?

- (a) Busan.
- (b) Daegu.
- (c) Incheon.
- (d) Suwon.

8. What is Jun-sang's favourite book?

- (a) 1984.
- (b) Catch-22.
- (c) Fahrenheit 451.
- (d) The Vegetarian.

9. How many children does Mi-ran have by the end of the book?

- (a) None.
- (b) One.
- (c) Two.
- (d) Three.

10. How many years did Demick spend in Seoul working for the LA Times and collecting her interviews?

- (a) One.
- (b) Five.
- (c) Seven.
- (d) Ten.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Briefly describe the details of Kim-hyuck's journey to South Korea. What hardships did he encounter along the way? Why does Demick describe his journey in so much detail?
2. Which character would you say transitions to life in South Korea most easily? Why?
3. Which of the characters do you think finds it hardest to transition to life in their new home? Why?
4. Describe the reconciliation between Mi-ran and Jun-sang. Are they able to reconnect like they did before? Why / why not?
5. Briefly summarise the situation in North Korea (from 2002 until 2010) according to the epilogue:

Important Theme: *social integration*

'The basics of etiquette in South Korea eluded him... Whenever Hyuck left the safety of his own apartment, he was startled by neighbours who would greet him casually.'

The last chapters of *Nothing To Envy* highlight the difficulties of social integration in a new country and uses North Koreans in South Korea as an example of this struggle. Even though the government of South Korea officially take responsibility for the citizens of the entire peninsula after so many decades of living separately, North and South Koreans have little in common beyond their native language. On page 257, Demick writes: *'for all the support given by the South Korean government, defectors can still sense the pity and embarrassment of people around them'* and she gives chapter 19 the title of *'Strangers in the Homeland.'* Oak-hee, Kim Hyuck, Mrs Song, and other characters all experience a range of difficulties in being accepted by their neighbours in South Korea. They realise that getting to the country was only the first step towards integration in a new place, and their journey had not finished when they crossed the border.

In Oak-hee's case, integration proved to be nearly impossible, as her lack of skills and her past traumas held her back from accepting kindness, taking advantage of opportunities, and crafting a legitimate career for herself. Instead, she works in a shady business, associating with smugglers and black marketeers who have no trust for each other. Similarly, Kim Hyuck struggled to adjust, flitting from job to job and finding his prior traumas affected the way he related to people. For a long time, neither he nor Oak-hee knew how to bridge the social gap between them and their new South Korean society.

By contrast, Mrs. Song found integration was more quickly achievable, although not without some difficulty. Unlike Oak-hee, Demick notes how happy Mrs. Song seems as she threw herself into her work and adapted to the attitudes of South Korea without resentment. For her, arrival into South Korea was a challenge she was ready to face, thus she took every necessary step to integrate. One day, Barbara Demick interviews Mrs Song in a café, and sees that she has even altered her eyes slightly by getting plastic surgery, a procedure common in South Korea. Demick praises how integrated she seems, although she notes that her journey is not one which every North Korean defector is equally capable of enduring.



Even after she defects to South Korea, Oak-hee cannot let go of the bitterness she feels inside. This image is from a project by Salvador Maldonado based on Nothing to Envy.

Activity

Skim through chapters 18 – 20. Compare the stories of social integration presented by Demick's interviewees. Choose three characters on whom to focus; make brief notes about the challenges they faced integrating, and note the successes they eventually achieve:

	Challenges Faced	Successes
Oak-hee	<p>Finding a suitable job; she had fallen in with a 'low-life crowd' doing jobs like forgery and loan sharking.</p> <p>She could not let go of her 'bitterness' about her past in North Korea.</p> <p>She had to pay \$8000 dollars to a smuggler, most of her government endowment. She gets more and more into debt.</p>	<p>Oak-hee becomes successful in business, opening a karaoke bar.</p> <p>She earns enough money to have her mother brought to South Korea.</p>

Important Theme: *Survivors' Guilt*

'Guilt and shame are common denominators among North Korean defectors; many hate themselves for what they had to do to survive.'

In the final chapters of her book, Demick invites her readers into the interview process alongside her, describing scenes in cafes around Seoul where she met up with her six subjects who reflected on their harrowing experiences and journeys to South Korea. A common thread every story has in common is the way their lives remain defined by memories of North Korea. Many of them are scarred by the things they saw and, in some cases, the awful things they had to do to survive and escape. The novel suggests that the traumas of famine, malnourishment, propaganda, government repression, and isolation continue to define life even after their escape from the regime.

The character of Mrs Song is a case study in how survivor's guilt can impact the ability to fully embrace one's newfound freedom. Demick explains how eagerly Mrs Song throws herself into her new life and how well she succeeded in the Hanawon re-education programme. She readily embraces her new life in South Korea, even getting minor plastic surgery like many other South Korean women. However, in one particularly poignant scene in a restaurant, Mrs Song is unable to hold back her tears when she sees waiters bringing out dishes of noodles. She thinks of Chang-bo's final words: *"Let's go to a good restaurant and order a nice bottle of wine."* By reporting this moment, Demick shows how Mrs Song cannot fully enjoy the comforts of her new, modern life because she harbours guilt over the death of her husband. Despite all she has learned, and despite how powerless she was at the time, she is unable to shake the guilt she feels at being unable to save her family alongside her.

In fact, the theme of survivor's guilt was foreshadowed all the way back in Chapter 8, which recounted Mi-ran's experiences as a schoolteacher during the famine, while one by one her students vanished from class. Demick writes on page 132: *'A decade later, when Mi-ran was a mother herself... this period of her life weighed like a stone on her conscience. She often felt sick over what she did or didn't do to help her young students.'*



For many years after escaping to South Korea, Dr. Kim is wracked by the memories of the patients she was unable to help in the past. While these memories do spur her to retrain as a doctor in South Korea, they also indicate how deep the wounds of survivor's guilt can

Activity

Choose a character such as Mi-ran, Dr. Kim, or Oak-hee, all of whom feel survivor's guilt. Scan this section of the novel and discover how they continued to feel the impact of their past trauma – and remorse over their own actions – throughout their new lives in South Korea.

Write up your discovery in one or two paragraphs in your notebook, under the heading of 'Survivor's Guilt'.

Discussion Point: *Learner Profile - Caring*

As a professional and experienced journalist, Barbara Demick brings her journalistic craft to her novel *Nothing to Envy*. In particular, she employs the journalistic technique of interviewing her subjects and presenting the story of the famine and defection from their points of view. She strives to remain objective, refusing to peddle stereotypes about North Korea's government, and also attempting to remain neutral about the strengths and shortcomings of the people she encounters. Throughout the novel her tone can be described as 'knowledgeable,' 'erudite,' 'well-informed' – and 'neutral.'

However, as the book goes on, it is perhaps inevitable that Demick will begin to draw closer to her subjects. After all, she met them many times and would have got to know some of them well. In particular, she seems to develop a genuine **caring** for one or two of her subjects, with whom she forms true friendships. As the book draws to a close, her tone becomes noticeably warmer and more sympathetic. She even enters the events of the narrative, meeting her interviewees in Seoul and beginning to use the personal pronoun 'I' with more frequency.

Which of her interviewees do you feel Barbara Demick has drawn closest to? Can you locate more precisely where her tone becomes warmer? Do you think there is anything wrong with losing a little objectivity towards the end of the novel? Although she strived to remain neutral about North Korea's government, is there any evidence that she does harbour opinions of her own? How do her feelings leak into the text, if at all?

Discuss some of these questions with a classmate and share your thoughts with the class. Along the way, collect four quotations from the last chapters of the novel (including the epilogue) that demonstrate how, despite her attempts to remain neutral, Demick becomes sympathetic to the lives and situations of her interviewees, and demonstrates what the IB Student Learner Profile calls: **caring**.

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 18 – the epilogue all mean or refer to?

- Potemkin Village
- *Noraebang*
- *Han nara*
- *Hanbok*

