

becomes more durable than the letter, when we no longer have to rummage through cellar shadows for our father's old notes because our hard drives have tucked them away in some brightly lit corner.

That's not the story Thomas Mallon set out to write, but with his wit and range of reference, his curiosity and gift for synthesis, he is as equipped as anyone to write it. Let us hope,

then, that he hasn't signed off on the subject completely, that he is even now composing some postscript that will, instead of making a fetish of loss, observe without prejudice as our missives leave the printed page and head in still-unguessed directions.

LOUIS BAYARD is the author of several novels, including *The Black Tower* (2008), *The Pale Blue Eye* (2006), and *Mr. Timothy* (2003). His reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Salon*.

## CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

### Quiet Desperation

Reviewed by Andrei Lankov

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF books on North Korea. Thanks to its nuclear ambitions, it attracts a surprising amount of attention for a country whose population and economy are roughly the same size as Ghana's. But little is said about average North Koreans. They come across as faceless people who obediently follow the orders of their Dear Leader, as Kim Jong Il is officially known, and his opaque inner circle. *Nothing to Envy*, by journalist Barbara Demick, rounds out the picture. Working in Seoul and Beijing as a *Los Angeles Times* correspondent, she interviewed numerous people who had fled North Korea, into which few foreigners are allowed. Defectors' accounts of the country they left are susceptible to distortion, so Demick focused her interviews on people who came from the city of Chongjin, which enabled her to check their stories and experiences against each other.

Through their interwoven personal stories, Demick shows us the lives of ordinary citizens as they navigated the ravages of the last two decades, a time of social disaster, famine, and economic collapse. These defectors were not

**NOTHING TO ENVY:**  
Ordinary Lives in  
North Korea.

By Barbara Demick.  
Spiegel & Grau.  
314 pp. \$24

motivated by political conviction. Generally, it was some combination of famine and personal circumstances that drove them—a teacher whose father was a former prisoner of war turned coal miner; a scientist; a street tough; a medical doctor; a couple of petty officials—to cross the border to China and then make their way to South Korea. For some of them it was a risky undertaking; one, helped by money from a relative in Seoul, had a “VIP” defection, during which border guards ensured her safety.

In North Korea, self-isolation and daily control have reached heights that would have seemed extreme in the Soviet Union under Stalin. People are completely insulated from sources of information other than what is provided by the government (owning a radio set with free tuning is a crime, and foreigners are virtually never seen), and as a result they sincerely believe that their impoverished country is an island of prosperity in an ocean of destitution and suffering. Those few who harbor doubts have to be careful not to share their thoughts even with their best friends.

As a student at a prestigious university, the North Korean analogue to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Jun-sang, a promising young scientist, had access to restricted material. It was seemingly innocuous books—such as *Gone With the Wind* (to read it required a security clearance)—that caused

him to reconsider the picture of Westerners as mindless machines driven by sex and money, and prompted his decision to leave. After years of intense (but chaste) romance with Mi-ran, a teacher, the two conceived of and planned their escapes separately, not sharing a word; they still could not trust each other. A few years later they met again in Seoul, but by that time they were living separate lives.

Demick's narrative is not always inspiring: One of the chapters is titled "The Good Die First." Those among Demick's subjects who witnessed the North Korean famine of 1996–99, in which anywhere from 600,000 to two million people died, observed that the honest and goodhearted were less likely to stay alive. Most who survived did so by rediscovering the market: The famine was a time when "reluctant" capitalism boomed in North Korea. Contrary to what is sometimes assumed, the country long ago ceased to be a centrally planned economy. The old Stalinist economy of iron and coal is largely dead, with only a handful of military factories still operating somehow.

About 17,000 North Korean defectors live in South Korea, and most do not fare particularly well. They arrive with an education that is both anachronistic and distorted; they must adjust to a society that is decades ahead of their native land and acquaint themselves with the basics of modern life. Demick's subjects do better than most, but their success is often equivocal. For example, a once rebellious teenager now runs a karaoke club where North Korean girls work as hostesses and part-time prostitutes.

Sooner or later the Kim dynasty will be consigned to the dustbin of history, but it will take many more decades for the country's 23 million people to heal the social and psychological wounds inflicted by the brutal social experiment that is North Korea.

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## World-Class Club

Reviewed by Rahul Chandran

IN THE SWELTERING SUMMER of 1944, two months after D-Day, British and Soviet diplomats joined the Americans in Washington to discuss how the three powers that were shaping the world could preserve the peace in the years to come. Their answer

was a grand body of member states—the United Nations—with responsibility for peace and security falling to a "Security Council." This elite club would have five permanent members—the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union, plus France and China—with the power to veto any proposed resolution, and 10 other members elected on a rotating basis from the galaxy of states. In the 65 years since its creation, the Security Council has frustrated those who thought it would mean an end to violent conflict, disappointed many who assumed that nations would actually unite, and alienated the American Right, which considers it a constraint on U.S. power. Yet the fact remains that the Security Council is a critical venue for international dialogue.

In *Five to Rule Them All*, David L. Bosco, a professor of international politics at American University, guides readers through the history of the Security Council, from its first peacekeeping endeavor in the Congo, through the Cold War, to the present. This fine book blends insight into great-power politics with saucy anecdotes, including an account of the American-led sally to a famous New York City nightclub, Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe, designed to ease tensions during those 1944 negotiations. The only wish a reader might have is for more discussion of the current challenges that face the Security Council.

Bosco highlights the Security Council's successes, such as the tireless work of then-secretary-general Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and his team to end the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. He is also frank about

### FIVE TO RULE THEM ALL:

The UN Security Council and the Making of the Modern World.

By David L. Bosco.  
Oxford Univ. Press.  
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