



Curriculum Connections

Every Falling Star:

The True Story of How I Survived and Escaped North Korea

by **Sungju Lee**

translated by **Susan McClelland**

Amulet Books, 2016

Non-fiction, set in North Korea

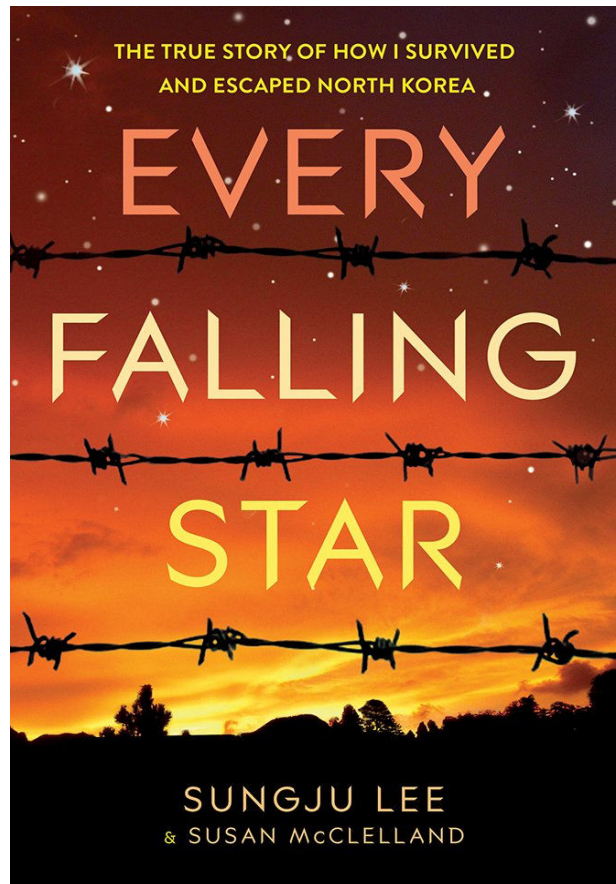
2016 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Appropriate Age/Grade Level

Every Falling Star is most appropriate for high school students, grades 9 and up.

Contextualizing Curricular Connections

Every Falling Star is a young teen memoir set in North Korea. Many books tell true stories of how adults escape from North Korea—such as the autobiography *Aquariums of Pyongyang* by Kang Chol-Hwan and *Nothing to Envy* by journalist Barbara Demick—but this is the first to offer the perspective of a young teen living on the streets of North Korea. While other books focus on the main character's survival as a refugee, *Every Falling Star* concentrates on the boy's survival within the Hermit Kingdom. It begins with twelve-year-old Sungju Lee (pronounced: SUHNG-joo LEE) living with his family in Pyongyang, then traces the next five years. When Sungju's father falls out of favor with the regime, the family is forced to flee the capital for more remote areas of North Korea, where a famine is raging. His parents leave in search of food, and when they do not return, Sungju forms a street gang to survive. Years later, he is reunited with his father in South Korea.



Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-READING LITERACY IN HISTORY.RH.9-10.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

To learn more about the Freeman Book Awards, please visit:

www.nctasia.org/freeman-book-awards/



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CCSS.ELA-READING LITERACY IN HISTORY.RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-READING LITERACY IN HISTORY.RH.9-10.3: Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-READING LITERACY IN HISTORY.RH.11-12.1: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-READING LITERACY IN HISTORY.RH.11-12.2: Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-READING LITERACY IN HISTORY.RH.11-12.3: Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-SPEAKING AND LISTENING.SL.9-12.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-WRITING STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY.R.9-12.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-WRITING STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY.WHST.9-12.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time



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frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Literary Themes

Survival, state control, family, street life, gangs, drugs, theft, violence, smuggling, connection, disconnection

Concepts and Entry Points: High School (9–12)

Each of the following concepts can reinforce understanding, open discussion, or serve as a jumping-off point into a portion of the book or research connected to the novel.

Korean War: war that was fought in 1950–1953 on the Korean peninsula. The north of Korea was supported by the Soviet Union, and the south was supported by the United Nations, including the United States. Ultimately, the war did not officially end but was paused on July 27, 1953, with an armistice agreement that remains in effect today.

DMZ: Demilitarized Zone. After World War II, the Soviet Union accepted Japanese surrender north of the 38th parallel and controlled this land, while the United States accepted Japanese surrender and control south of this line. Once the Cold War began, different leaders and ideologies took hold in each region, and these differences led to the Korean War. While the war moved the boundary between 1950 and 1953, the conflict ended where it started, and the DMZ continues to divide the Korean peninsula today. It is approximately 1.2 miles wide and 150 miles long.¹

Juche (pronounced: jew-shay): a North Korean term meaning “self-reliance,” used by the communist party to emphasize a sense of unique “North Korea-ness.” People, propaganda, and household items (for example, portraits of the

¹ “38th Parallel.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/38th-parallel>.



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leader) are imbued with *juche* to demonstrate true commitment and loyalty to the North Korean nation and its leaders.

Pyongyang (pronounced: PYUHNG-yahng): the capital of North Korea, where people who have the most commitment to the North Korean communist party live (for example, party and military leaders). The quality of life in Pyongyang is higher than elsewhere in the country in terms of housing, food, and education. By North Korean party standards, life here is presented as ideal and serves as the model for the rest of North Korea, though most North Koreans don't enjoy this standard and know that it is unachievable.

Kotjebi (pronounced: GOH-CHEH-bee): this term refers to homeless people, typically street children, who often live together in gangs. These gangs serve as surrogate families for children whose parents have died or left town to search for opportunities (either within North Korea or across the border in China).

Great Famine: a famine that occurred in 1995–1999, under Kim Jong Il. Approximately 3–5% of the North Korean population (600,000–1,000,000 people) died during this time.² As North Koreans were expected to demonstrate *juche*, or self-reliance and tenacity, this is also known as the Arduous March or the March of Suffering, which was portrayed as parallel to the experience of Kim Jong Il's hundred-day march in opposition to Japan's occupation in the 1930s.

Guiding Questions

Describe the differences between Sungju's life in Pyongyang and the life of Gyeong-seong (pronounced: KYUHNG-suhng).

² Michael J. Seth, "North Korea's 1990s Famine in Historical Perspective," Association for Asian Studies, August 18, 2020. <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/north-koreas-1990s-famine-in-historical-perspective/>.



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1. Sungju's father never tells him directly why they had to leave Pyongyang, but he discovers the truth in many ways. Provide at least three specific examples from the book (for example, conversations with other boys, observations he makes, things his parents say) that give him clues about why they had to leave the capital city.
2. Sungju loses his education when he is forced to move to the countryside. Though, arguably, his greatest education comes from this transition. Describe the process that Sungju undergoes as he shifts from life as a Pyongyang youth full of *juche* to a *kotjebi* orphan surviving on the street. What does he have to learn and unlearn?
3. Discuss the term *juche* and the role it plays in North Korean society vs. the role it plays in Sungju's story.
4. What global issues in Sungju's story transcend borders? What do the people of North Korea face that other people in the world also face, regardless of their government or geographic boundaries.

Suggested Learning Activities

Research

Students can extend their learning through one or more of the following research topics and present their findings as slides, a paper, or a poster:

- Causes of the Great Famine (for example, environmental, economic, and political circumstances that contributed to the famine)
- North Korean defectors (in China vs. in South Korea)
- North Korean borders, especially the Yalu River and DMZ
- Countries that provided aid to North Korea during the famine (including the U.S.)



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- Education in North Korea
- Leaders of North Korea since 1948 and how each developed a narrative and cult of personality around themselves.

Four Corners

Young-bum said, "Morality is a great song a person sings when he or she has never been hungry. You can walk the noble road, Sungju. But if you die because of it, nobody will remember you were a noble person. Just a fool. Our enemy is death now."

- a. Discuss this quote with a partner and share what you think it means. Do you agree or disagree?
- b. Join with another set of partners to form a small group; share your conclusions about the quote together.
- c. Teacher should label each corner of the room Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/Strongly Disagree. Then provide the first part of the sentence, "Morality is a great song a person sings when he or she has never been hungry," and have students move to the corner they feel best describes their opinion. Ask students to defend their position. Other students can move if a peer's argument is persuasive.

Timeline & Map

Have students develop a timeline and a map of events in *Every Falling Star*. Divide the class in two, half working on each aspect, then switch halfway through.

Possible Resources

- Chol-Kwan, Kang and Rigoulot, Pierre. *Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag*. Basic Books, 2005.



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- Richardson, Christopher. "North Korea's Kim Dynasty: The Making of a Personality Cult." *The Guardian*, February 16, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/north-korea-kim-jong-il-birthday>.
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- Youn, Soo. "Pictures of a Train Ride through North Korea." Travel, May 3, 2021. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/take-train-through-north-korea-unseen-countryside>.

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