



# Escape from Camp 14

*Blaine Harden*

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## Escape from Camp 14 Blaine Harden

North Korea is isolated, hungry, bankrupt, and belligerent. Its also armed with nuclear weapons. Between 150,000 and 200,000 people are being held in its political prison camps, which have existed twice as long as Stalins Soviet gulags and twelve times as long as the Nazi concentration camps. Very few born and raised in these camps have escapedbut Shin Dong-hyuk did.

## Escape from Camp 14 Details

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# From Reader Review *Escape from Camp 14* for online ebook

## Michael Gerald says

When North Korea ever pops up in the news, the items usually covered are about a buffoon-like dictator, the absurd show of brainwashing (real or staged) of many of its people, and the threat of it getting a nuclear bomb. But the truth is far more serious. Because the grim reality is North Korea is the world's biggest prison and the inmates are the majority of its people. It is a slave state. And the world bears a responsibility for not doing anything to liberate the oppressed North Koreans.

This book is one of the most powerful I have read in recent years, along with "Nothing to Envy". The force of this book is the chronicle of one man who was born and raised (if that can be called the right term) in one of North Korea's brutal concentration camps (yes, dear, concentration camps still exist in this world today), where life is cheap and the system eventually kills you. But not if you don't let it defeat you. His escape in 2005 is one of the most amazing feats in modern history and deserves to be told in every corner of the planet so as to continue to shed light on the most evil system in the world to this day.

Screw the so-called nuclear threat. North Korea is doing enough damage to the whole of humanity by its gross human rights violations. If not for the North Korean refugees who miraculously escaped from their prison country, the world might not have known about them. When will the world wake up and do something?

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## Diane says

When I hear the term "labor camps," I think of the Nazis. The Holocaust. Concentration camps -- something that happened decades ago and surely -- *surely* -- doesn't still exist. Right?

Wrong. Even though North Korea publicly insists that prison and work camps don't exist, evidence has been seen on satellite photos and on Google Earth. Additionally, numerous North Koreans who have witnessed the camps have defected and have testified to the hellish conditions there.

Shin was unlucky enough to be born in Camp 14. His father was a political prisoner because his brothers defected to South Korea in the 1950s. According to state law, if a family member tries to escape or defect, everyone else in that family will be punished, even if they knew nothing about it.

Because he was raised in the prison camp, Shin knew nothing of the outside world. He did not even know that China existed, because camp children were only taught basic reading and math -- nothing else of the world. Shin went through his childhood constantly hungry because there was never much food, and he was always prepared to snitch on another prisoner, usually in a ploy to get extra food or to spare a beating.

It wasn't until Shin was a teenager that he heard another prisoner talking about how good the food was out in the real world. After hearing the man's stories, Shin began to imagine what it would be like to escape the camp. After several weeks of planning, Shin was able to escape through the electrified prison fence and eventually found his way to China. After that, a journalist helped him get to South Korea, where he went through rehabilitation and counseling, and finally he moved to the United States.

Shin's story is an amazing one, but I also appreciated this book for its insights into North Korea and how the state uses propaganda, fear, beatings and a caste system to try and control its citizens. I would recommend this book to everyone.

My rating: 4.5 stars rounded up to 5

### **Update January 2015**

I read an article in The New York Times in which Shin has recanted parts of his story. It is not clear yet which parts are not true, but it sounds like he didn't spend all of his life in Camp 14, but at some point was transferred to a different labor camp that wasn't as restrictive as 14. I am of two minds on this issue. First, I am disappointed whenever I hear such a retraction. These losses of credibility hurt everyone. Second, I wonder how much it actually matters. So many people have complained about the labor camps in North Korea, and Shin was one of those voices. The fact that the timeline or certain details were manipulated doesn't change the horrible conditions for political prisoners there. It is unfortunate that the title of the book is *Escape from Camp 14*, but I hope this development doesn't damage human rights efforts in that country.

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### **Doug Bradshaw says**

I rate this book five stars not because it's beautiful literature or great story telling, but because it is a huge eye opener and important information. There are approximately 200,000 prisoners kept in camps or virtual prisons in North Korea. Many of the cellmates are the children and grandchildren of people who broke "the law" in Northern Korea. The theory is that it takes at least three generations of purging to get rid of the bad seed of law breakers. The description of the horrible control and treatment of these poor people rivals or even beats the Nazi exterminations and treatment and it has gone on for over 50 years. Women are regularly beaten, raped, humiliated, they live on watery cornmeal mush, rice a rare and incredible treat, they are rewarded for snitching, they don't live with their parents, they are forbidden to have sex, many die of malnutrition, and woman getting pregnant, even from guards, are put to death, etc. etc. etc.

The main character, Shin, having seen his mother and brother hang for planning an escape, spends many years suffering ridiculous torment and miserable conditions, is one of the only known escapees. He was lucky enough to find people there who opened his eyes to the outside world. He was always so hungry and miserable, that his whole goal in life, his main fantasy, was waling into a restaurant to eat some grilled meat. I guess he was tired of living on raw rat flesh.

In the meantime, Kim Jong-un and the elite crowd live in ridiculous wealth and virtually steal everything worthwhile and extort monies from countries, charitable organizations and others trying to be helpful.

It's a mess that no one seems to know how to handle, including their well off neighbors, the South Koreans. So, what should we do about it? No good answers. This book at least starts to open our eyes about the situation, not only in the camps, but in North Korea as a whole. I wish the Chinese, the South Koreans, the Japanese and the US would ban together and come up with a plan to liberate North Korea. But it's not going to happen, each government having different ideas about what life should be like. What a nightmare world. It's hard to believe and a cause I would love to somehow do something to help.

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## Ash Wednesday says

### 4 STARS

"Tibetans have the Dalai Lama and Richard Gere, (the) Burmese have Aung San Suu Kyi, (the) Darfurians have Mia Farrow and George Clooney. North Koreans have no one like that.

Actually North Koreans have imgur, Dennis Rodman and Ken Jeong in Stevie Wonder glasses.

A couple of months back, Petra recommended this book to me after posting this link in Booklikes. I'm the least literate person I know when it comes to world politics but human depravity is always fascinating even within the harrowing context of non-fiction. And should you bother to check that link, I'm pretty certain you'd be just as compelled to make time for this book. To actually sit down and take a pause from complaining about the Starbucks barista never getting your name right or needing to charge your smartphone when it's not even lunch time yet.

Shin Dong-hyuk is a political prisoner born and raised in Camp 14, serving a sentence on behalf of the forefathers he's never met. Within the concentration camp he is raised not as a person but as a cog in the Juche ideology; with a moral code comprising of ten laws, each involving someone getting shot if not observed. His story is a succession of snitching, scavenging and stealing in order to escape his perpetual state of starvation. Often these would lead into violence, incarceration and more violence that were simultaneously compelling, horrifying and astonishing that a part of me had to doubt the veracity of his story. But at the same time, the explicitness feels beyond the grasp of any stretch of imagination.

Excellent source material for aspiring dystopian writers out there, by the way. I couldn't have dreamed this scenario if I tried.

I liked that Harden strove to link Shin's story with the bigger events happening in the country as a whole, though these aspects could've been integrated better. How events in the global scale trickles from history to government to the very basic unit of this oppressed society: the man, the machine.

However, there were redundant lapses and some pacing issues with regards to Shin's backstory that often sent me into a numb lull from the unrelenting violence and portrayals of hunger. In some ways this helped me in finishing the other book I was reading because for a stretch, I could only read a chapter of this at a time. The first half a bit of a struggle to read through in one sitting but I was thoroughly engrossed with the second, after Shin has escaped from camp as he tries to assimilate in normal society. I can almost see the tearjerking historical fiction book this could inspire but I quite liked the ragged edges and halted progression this took in terms of Shin's evolution. Because that's what I had to constantly remind myself: he's a real person and not a character.

I appreciate that Harden managed to cram as much world politics as he could (I particularly liked that this addressed South Korea's perspective from where it stands) in this one. Enough to make this casual reader curious about the rest of the story, about the Kim dynasty and what sparked this collective, for lack of a better term, insanity.

I wish I could end with something clever, something to encourage people to stop liking those Facebook posts to end world hunger, an inspiring passage or a quote. Unfortunately I'm left with none.

Because as much as this was a book about hope, survival and the strength of the human spirit, it was also about the monsters that we all could be under much different circumstances.

Also on Booklikes.

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### **??? says**

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### **Cecily says**

Picture from documentary Camp 14

### **Imagine the Unimaginable**

Imagine growing up with no comprehension, let alone experience of love or friendship, where every day you struggle for scraps of food, rest, and warmth, striving to avoiding abuse, imprisonment, and maybe execution.

**Where you view your own mother as “competition for survival”**, rather than a source of love, security, and comfort.

Where “redemption through snitching” and hard work is essential for survival, and you are inured to the punishment and murder of others, because it’s commonplace and always deserved.

**Where you are too broken, ignorant, and worthless for the authorities to bother brainwashing you with political propaganda.**

I hope that is almost unimaginable for you, but that was the life of Shin Dong-hyuk, born and raised in a North Korean “complete control district” labour camp. Extreme deprivation and brutality were all he knew.

### **The Sins of the Forefathers**

Shin's “crime”, in this godless place (not even The Dear Leader was known to him) was a version of original sin: that his blood was tainted by the alleged sins of an uncle. The camp had to cleanse three generations.

### **Escape? Why? To What?**

For prisoners with no knowledge of anything beyond the camp walls, the desire, let alone the possibility of escape, rarely arises. It is literally unimaginable.

Those who do escape are likely to find themselves in either China or South Korea. And then what?

In China, they have to hide from the authorities, lest they're sent back to NK. So much for hard-won freedom.

In SK, only the language is familiar, and even that has diverged significantly in recent decades.

How can North Koreans comprehend, let alone make a life in the fast-paced, neon-lit world of what is arguably the most competitive, consumerist, stressful society on the planet, when they've lived without electricity, furniture, and running water, never sat an exam, have no friends - and don't even know how to make any?

### **Truth, and the Telling of it**

This is a true story. Probably. Mostly.

There are many defectors from NK, some of whom escaped from prisons or labour camps, but Shin is thought to be the only person born in a camp to escape from that camp, which makes his experience more extreme.

This should be a really exciting, but agonising story. Unfortunately, I didn't find it so. The writing was flat, with long chunks of geo-political history breaking up Shin's story: ten (yes, ten) pages about NK's global insurance fraud, three pages about the history of dams and so on. And because Shin was raised amoral and psychologically damaged, and his lack of trust make him reluctant to accept advice, he wasn't always as sympathetic a character as his suffering should merit.

More fundamentally, the book's power was diluted by extraordinary luck at crucial moments, made less credible by inconsistencies in the story. Furthermore, Shin changed other aspects of his story during the writing of the book, and again after it was published. Some of the reasons are understandable (if you'd betrayed your mother, leading to her death, you would discover that was shocking to people outside, and ultimately find it a guilty burden). But as a reader, I was left unsure of the truth.

The book ends with half a dozen "Sketches from Shin's life in Camp 14", though whether they're drawn by Shin or from his descriptions is unclear.

### **The Big Picture**

Harry Harlow's rhesus macaque experiments on maternal deprivation are rightly considered unethical today. (See also John Bowlby on attachment theory.)

But far worse has been going on in NK, for twice as long as the Soviet Gulags, with hundreds of thousands of human victims. And it's not a secret. NK may not have a campaigning figurehead like the Dalai Lama or Aung San Suu Kyi, but the world has known something of the number, scale, and brutality of these camps for many years, from escapees' accounts and satellite imagery. International pressure is half-hearted at best.

SK provides money and practical support to defectors for a limited time, including three months in the Orwellian-sounding "House of Unity". But the culture shock is so extreme, and the rest of SK society so at odds with these newcomers (and often resentful), that it's woefully inadequate. Paranoia is the norm in defectors, and a real barrier to assimilation. Unemployment, depression, and suicide are shockingly high in

refugees from NK.

I don't know what the answer is. Nor do Shin or Harden. How do you force a nuclear power to do anything? Should aid to starving people be conditional on improved human rights? Perhaps that impasse is the greatest tragedy, the greatest failing.

As for Shin, he has struggled to adapt to life outside, but he is now a campaigner who has “harnessed his self-loathing and used it to indict the state that had poisoned his heart and killed his family”. That’s within sight of a happy ending.

## The Ten Laws of Camp 14

1. Do not try to escape.
2. No more than two prisoners can meet together.
3. Do not steal.
4. Guards must be obeyed unconditionally.
5. Anyone who see a fugitive or suspicious figure must promptly report him.
6. Prisoners must watch each other and report any suspicious behaviour immediately.
7. Prisoners must more than fulfil the work assigned to them each day.
8. Beyond the workplace, there must be no intermingling between the sexes for personal reasons.
9. Prisoners must genuinely repent of their errors.
10. Prisoners who violate the laws and regulations of the camp will be shot immediately.

The devil really is in the chilling details, not included above.

Overall, 2\* writing, but 3\* for its importance.

It's real life contemporary dystopia: I think that's part of the fascination of books like this. Maybe there's a similarity with children loving dinosaurs: the thrill of them being real monsters, but we're out of reach. With dinosaurs, time keeps us safe, and with NK, it's geography.

## KamRun says

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Prominent Korean defector Shin Dong-hyuk admits parts of story are inaccurate

North Korean Camp Survivor Admits He Was Not Straight About His Story

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### Adrienne says

I think Shin's story is an important one, but the way that it's presented makes it a little tough to really connect with. Shin, born and raised in a North Korean labor camp, was the first person actually born in a camp to escape. Having had no prior knowledge of the outside world, he was raised, in his own words, as an animal, taught to rat out others, to feel little more than fear, with no affection for anyone. He does some pretty horrible things as a result and while I can logically understand why he would act like he does--since that's all he's been taught--it's still hard to process emotionally. The same with once he has escaped--he doesn't really take any initiative or responsibility in his own life, doesn't want to listen to anyone who is willing to help him, etc.--which again, makes sense, given what he has lived through but it makes it hard to go beyond an intellectual concern to an emotional concern. The author, in his acknowledgements, calls Shin an "amazing person", and I think I can agree with that mentally, but my heart isn't as touched as I thought it would be. That could perhaps be due to the style of the book; there are a lot of times when the author interjects information from other sources, I think to provide evidence of the veracity of Shin's story, but the fact that he keeps constantly trying to prove it and takes us away from Shin creates a distance that can be a little jolting. Or, I could just be too hard-hearted and other people are completely touched by it. I think I'm touched by Shin's story, but not so much the presentation. And as an American who can't even imagine what it would be like be born and raised in an environment of such hatred and fear, I am probably biased in ways that I don't even understand. Anyway, like I said at the beginning, I do think it's an important story--the world needs to know about North Korean labor camps and how they affect people.

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### Mohammad Hanifeh says

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### Melinda Worfolk says

4.5 stars.

This is an incredibly gripping book. While I was reading it, I was so immersed in the story that it took a

I am glad I read Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* before reading this, because I already knew how bad the situation is for ordinary citizens in North Korea, and it was all the more powerful to realize that there are people who live even worse lives in the country's prison camps.

Blaine Harden's writing is spare and relatively unsentimental, which suits the subject matter. Although its tone is quite matter-of-fact, it is not unsympathetic, and the condemnation of North Korea's human rights abuses certainly comes across. Shin is a hard person to like--he was raised to be an informant on his family and friends, and he was responsible for some brutal violence. But in the context of the world he was raised in, it is completely understandable. I had to feel sorry for him as he slowly realized that the way he grew up was not normal, and he had to deal with the horrific things he had done.

Overall, I'd recommend this to anyone interested in North Korea, who is not put off by graphic details and brutal descriptions. I would not say I enjoyed this, but I thought it was well worth reading.

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## Elizabeth B says

This was not at all what I was expecting. From the marketing material, I expected a story of survival from the North Korean camps that, until now, has been largely untold. Knowing a little about the atrocities of the camp, I expect to this to be an emotionally charged book but, unfortunately, I found it quite the opposite.

From the beginning we learn that Shin is an unreliable narrator. The author is quick to point this out and explain to us how Shin has changed his story repeatedly over the years. The book goes on to prove this by repeatedly telling us Shin's lies and then correcting them. However, by this time, you already have learned not to believe what you read and we have absolutely no reason to believe the "corrected" version is the truth and that Shin won't recount it later. It's pointed out how Shin's previous publication of his story was a dismal failure and perhaps, someone should've taken note on that: it wasn't lack of interest in his story it was an unwillingness to be continually lied to. The author is quick to defend Shin's actions, even using definable psychological terms to explain away Shin's untruths. Unfortunately, most readers (including myself) aren't going to care. Lie to me once, shame on you. Lie to me twice, shame on me.

Aside from being an unreliable narrator, Shin is just not likeable. Unlike so many other stories that have come from tragic world events, Shin has learned nothing from his captivity by the end of the book. He blames the rest of the world, takes advantage of those who offer him assistance, blames his financial failings on those around him rather than taking responsibility for himself. Once in America, he expects people to do for him constantly and, honestly, he just comes off as an ungrateful brat. I don't mean to demean what he has been through - I am certain he has had a horrific life that none of us can imagine. But millions have had tragedies and what makes a story marketable is not the event itself but what the person has taken away from it or what they can teach us from it. In Shin's case by the end of the book, he has learned only to lie continually and be ungrateful...which is not at all a marketable approach to his story.

A bigger problem was the writing style. The author is a journalist by trade so I expected the dry writing of a news article and, in that, I wasn't disappointed. That's exactly what I got. Even in the most dramatic of moments I was left feeling nothing because of the writing style. Before you think this is a story all about Shin, you should know this isn't the case. For each chapter, there is a brief paragraph or two (sometimes we are treated to a whole page!) of Shin's story and then the author spends 7-8 pages telling us facts and figures about something Shin mentioned. It disengages you and reads like a history text rather than an emotional memoir of Shin's journey. Shin's story is merely a catalyst to launch us into a history lesson - not the focal point of an chapter or the book itself as we are lead to believe.

The biggest problem of all, however, is the failure of the author to disclose his own agenda at the beginning. While we are told early on about Shin's untruths, we are not told until midway through the book that the author has a goal of his own with the publication of this novel: clearing up his name. Apparently, the author published a piece on Shin years ago and, it turns out, the information was false. Mistakes happen all the time in journalism and I appreciate that dedicated journalists want to set the record straight once they know they have printed something false. It's a testament to the author's honesty that he wants to correct the misinformation once he learned of it. However, this is not disclosed in the book until midway through. We, as readers, aren't told of the author's own agenda which makes the revelation feel like a complete betrayal of our confidence. This could have been easily fixed: had the author discussed it at the beginning, he would have put the reader on the same footing as himself. We would have felt empathy for him - he put his name on the line, his reputation on the line, and was taken advantage of by the unlikeable Shin. Unfortunately, that

never happened. Instead, midway through we are thrown the curve that the author messed up and is now getting the "real" story out there.

So...let's recap. We have a narrator that lies repeatedly and now an author that has his own agenda to clear up the lies he unknowingly wrote years ago. Sound like a mess? Yeah, it is. And messy doesn't equate to good, legitimate reading. This book could have made an interesting newspaper article, I suppose, but as a book it's lacking, biased, and misrepresented. Check it out from the library if you must but don't waste your money on purchase as you may find yourself a regrettable enabler to this whole sordid tale.

ARC Galley Proof

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### **Melanie says**

5 stars...not because it's a "classic" but because I learned so much about North Korea. I knew North Korea was a horrible place but I had no knowledge of the prison camps. The conditions are horrific. For example: A classmate of Shin's (the man who's story is being told) was beat to death by a teacher in front of the class for having a few kernels of corn in her possession. Shin's mother and brother were hung, while Shin watched on, for having an escape plan. Shin is the one who reported them to authorities for discussing the escape, because this is what the people are told to do. Shin's father was put in the camp because a family member of his escaped from North Korea to South Korea. Subsequently Shin and his brother were born in the camp and knew no other existence. Shin's escape is nothing short of miraculous. Since escape Shin struggles to exist in a free society.

On a side note: Dennis Rodman befriended Kim Jong-un? Is he an idiot or just ignorant?

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### **Jake Miller says**

"High School students in America debate why President Roosevelt didn't bomb the rail lines to Hitler's camps. Their children may ask, a generation from now, why the West stared at far clearer satellite images of Kim Jong Il's camps, and did nothing."

No more brazen and poetic meaning could be found than reading this line from the book, once upon a time seems almost pertinent to this book. But once upon a time gives the semblance of fiction, and while this book eerily reminds one of a few George Orwell novels; this book my friends is not fiction.

This is the life and hardship of Shin Dong-hyuk, his meandering through camp 14 that he was born to, the camp he once called home. A home that left all forms of humanity in the rut and taught nothing but animalism "no pun intended :)" and like any totalitarian society its machination is bred and fulfilled through the manipulation of the future generation, by no choice or even differing awareness they learned to snitch, steal and to see your own parents as rivals for food.

Shin did all this without a care in the world, it was all he knew; this was home to him. In time he grew to resent his mother, this repugnance would soon lead to a chance encounter with an outsider who would open Shins mind to a world beyond the vile fence. A world filled with as shin said "cooked meat", he would no

longer have to eat rats and insects to survive, no longer would he dig through feces to find kernels of corn to make it through the winter... no longer

and so the journey to escape was born in Shins mind. This book presents another interminable moment given to us on a platter that man can look back and ask such a simple and profound statement, why?

I was enamored with this book by Blain Harden and I still am, the moment I started reading it I couldn't stop; Shins journey is both inspiring and disturbing.

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### **Petra X says**

Ostensibly getting rid of families, rather than individuals, considered undesirable by the regime, in actuality slave labour for the State.

A mixture of 1984, Animal Farm and the Nazi Dachau concentration camp. It is the story of North Korea and worse in every single respect than every dystopian novel you've ever read. Here, one is born, lives one's whole life and dies in a vast camp where fear rules through hunger and brutality. One man, only one, escaped and this is his story.

Not an easy book to read, but rewarding. Even if everything in this book has been exaggerated, it would still be the worst nightmare of how people actually live on planet Earth in the 21st or any other century.  
4 1/2 stars.

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### **Mo Shah says**

I'm split on this book.

On one hand, the subject matter is utterly compelling. Little is heard in mainstream media about these detention camps that hundreds of thousands of prisoners live in for (literally) generations. Entire Families are doomed because of the real or imagined actions of one, and apparently treason must be wiped out over three generations. So children are born in these camps between assigned parents and never learn filial love or even learn any emotional state higher than the animal need for basic survival.

But the writing is somewhat frustrating. The facts are recited and researched well enough, but the way the story is told gets in the way of having more impact. Interspersed within the personal story of Shin the author throws in history and sidebar. Useful for context, I suppose, but it takes away from the powerful personal nature of the story. It's akin to reading the Diary of Anne Frank but having a narrator interrupt with

voiceover explanation. And ultimately, it does a disservice to the obvious need for the world at large to become more personally outraged as to what's going on over there.

I suspect the author is right when he says that sometime in our future our children will be asking us why the rest of the world didn't do more to intervene with what was going on inside North Korea. I'm not entirely sure what I'd tell them.

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## Osric says

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## Clif Hostetler says

Ever wonder why the world didn't do more to end the horrors of Stalin's gulags or Hitler's work camps? Someday our children (or perhaps grandchildren or great-grandchildren) will ask the same question about our world today. Why doesn't the world do more to end the horrible inhumanity imposed on people in the work camps of North Korea? And the political prison camps in North Korea have existed twice as long as Stalins Soviet gulags and twelve times as long as the Nazi concentration camps, and there's no end in site of the between 150,000 and 200,000 people who live in those camps.

*“Yet while Auschwitz existed for only three years, Camp 14 is a fifty-year-old Skinner box, an ongoing longitudinal experiment in repression and mind control in which guards breed prisoners whom they control, isolate, and pit against one another from birth.”*

The existence of these camps can be verified by anyone with a computer and internet using Google Earth, and still there's limited awareness among the world's public of conditions in these camps. North Korea's belligerant reputation combined with nuclear weapons has prevented international pressure to be focused on their work camps.

*“When North Korea deigns to enter into international diplomacy, it has always succeeded in shoving human rights off any negotiating table. Crisis management, usually focused on nuclear weapons and missiles, has dominated American dealings with the North.”*

It takes a pretty strong stomach to read this book. I could write a long list of horrible things described by this book, but I've decided to refrain from going there. You can read other reviews for that. The story is not a pretty one, and frankly leaves readers such as myself feeling helpless with the knowledge conveyed. I suggest that at the least, good citizens of the world owe it to the prisoners of North Korea to at least be

informed about the existence of their conditions.

Here's a link to my review of "Orphan Master's Son," a novel about life in North Korea.

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

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## Jason Koivu says

The story of a man escaping a prison camp would pique my interest at any time, but add the detail that it's a North Korean camp and I'm *definitely* interested. After all, North Korea's been in the news lately. Perhaps you've noticed.

Shin Dong-hyuk was born into a prison labor camp. It's totalitarian rules and draconian punishment was life to him. He barely knew his father and viewed his mother as competition for food. He was raised to snitch out his fellow prisoners to the guards. This included family. Spying and reporting on others was the only way to receive kind treatment at the prison. Working hard and never screwing up merely kept one from being beaten.

Thousands have fled the destitute country, but few have escaped from one of these prisons and successfully navigated their way into China and then South Korea, an especially difficult undertaking for a young man who knew next to nothing about the world beyond his prison walls. This is what made me hesitant to read Blaine Harden's *Escape from Camp 14*. How could this seemingly impossible tale be true? Then I heard that Shin had lied about certain details regarding his story and I thought, oh boy, here we go...

However, Harden did a good job in allaying my fears. It turns out Shin's lies did not change the details of his escape or the horror stories of his confinement. No, his lies were for self-preservation. He lied out of shame for the deaths he had caused as a boy who knew nothing of compassion.

This is a truly remarkable story and a nicely constructed book. It is compact and sticks mostly to the prison camp aspect of the situation in North Korea. Some pertinent recent history and political information is relayed in order to frame Shin's story, but this is not the book you are looking for if you seek out a well-rounded and deeply detailed account of...well...how the hell North Korea got so fucked up. I did come away with a better understanding, however, and it made me want to find out more.

One last thing before I finish up. This is a tough read. It's brutal. "Heart-wrenching" ain't the half of it. To put it into perspective, these camps are akin to the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet gulags, and they have been in operation since the 1950s. The prisoners within them are now mostly the children and grandchildren of those who fought for the South during the Korean War, because political prisoners of this nature are doomed to this life for three generations before the family is deemed to have paid the price of their transgressions. Only humans could create such a Hell.

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