



WITHOUT YOU, THERE IS NO US  
By Suki Kim  
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## Reading Group Guide

# WITHOUT YOU, THERE IS NO US

Suki Kim

**A haunting memoir of teaching English to the sons of North Korea's ruling class during the last six months of Kim Jong-il's reign.**

Every day, three times a day, the students march in two straight lines, singing praises to Kim Jong-il and North Korea: *Without you, there is no motherland. Without you, there is no us.* It is a chilling scene, but gradually Suki Kim, too, learns the tune and, without noticing, begins to hum it. It is 2011, and all universities in North Korea have been shut down for an entire year, the students sent to construction fields—except for the 270 students at the all-male Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), a walled compound where portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il look on impassively from the walls of every room, and where Suki has accepted a job teaching English. Over the next six months, she will eat three meals a day with her young charges and struggle to teach them to write, all under the watchful eye of the regime.

Life at PUST is lonely and claustrophobic, especially for Suki, whose letters are read by censors and who must hide her notes and photographs not only from her minders but from her colleagues—evangelical Christian missionaries who don't know or choose to ignore that Suki doesn't share their faith. As the weeks pass, she is mystified by how easily her students lie, unnerved by their obedience to the regime. At the same time, they offer Suki tantalizing glimpses of their private selves—their boyish enthusiasm, their eagerness to please, the flashes of curiosity that have not yet been extinguished. She in turn begins to hint at the existence of a world beyond their own—at such exotic activities as surfing the Internet or traveling freely and, more dangerously, at electoral democracy and other ideas forbidden in a country where defectors risk torture and execution. But when Kim Jong-il dies, and the boys she has come to love appear devastated, she wonders whether the gulf between her world and theirs can ever be bridged.

*Without You, There Is No Us* offers a moving and incalculably rare glimpse of life in the world's most unknowable country, and at the privileged young men she calls "soldiers and slaves."

**Suki Kim** is the author of the award-winning novel *The Interpreter* and the recipient of Guggenheim, Fulbright, and Open Society fellowships. She has been traveling to North Korea as a journalist since 2002, and her essays and articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Harper's*, and the *New York Review of Books*. Born and raised in Seoul, she lives in New York. To learn more, visit [www.SukiKim.com](http://www.SukiKim.com).

### Discussion Questions:

1. Before reading Suki Kim's memoir, what were your impressions about life in North Korea? By the end of the book, had your understanding changed? How does Suki's account differ from others you may have read?

2. In Chapter 1, Suki writes that the “unrequited heartbreak” of her family’s separation during the Korean War prompted her to undertake repeated trips to North Korea. How does this background inform the narrative? Have you ever returned to your family’s country (or countries) of origin? How connected do you feel to the cultures of your ancestors?
3. In the prologue, Suki refers to PUST as a “prison disguised as a campus.” How does PUST’s isolation affect its culture? How do Suki and the other teachers deal with the monotony of life at PUST?
4. Suki carefully plans her lessons in order to expose her students to tidbits of information about life outside North Korea, especially technology and the Internet, without running afoul of the “counterparts.” If you were in Suki’s situation, what subjects or ideas would you want to teach?
5. On the trip to the apple farm, Suki is initially charmed by the idyllic rural landscape, but she is horrified to discover that the workers are stunted and emaciated. How do Suki’s encounters with North Koreans outside PUST affect the way she views her students? Were there any moments you found particularly striking?
6. In Chapter 20, Suki describes PUST’s “remarkably tight” buddy system. Though impressed by the boys’ devotion to each other, she is disturbed by how quickly these alliances can shift: “I noticed that with the shuffling of classes from summer to fall, most of the pairings changed as well, and students were never seen with their former buddies again.” What does this suggest about the nature of relationships in North Korea? Is true friendship possible under these circumstances?
7. Though Suki’s students are smart and hardworking, they struggle to write simple essays. Why do they find this task so difficult?
8. The curriculum at PUST was restricted not only by the government but by the religious values of the missionaries. How did these restrictions affect the quality of education? What did Suki achieve for the students by letting them watch *Harry Potter*?
9. Were you surprised that the North Korean government condones a missionary-run school on its soil? What purpose does PUST serve for the North Korean government? For the missionaries?
10. Although Suki’s students were in their early twenties, and many had attended co-ed schools, they seemed to have had limited experience with dating. What do their beliefs about love reveal about gender and family in North Korea? What role does Suki’s relationship with “the man in Brooklyn” play in the narrative?
11. In Chapter 1, Suki writes: “Historians often refer to [the Korean War] as the ‘forgotten war,’ but no Korean considers it forgotten.” How does the war affect Suki’s life today? The lives of her students? Did it surprise you that North Korea considers the United States its “number one enemy”?

12. Discuss the book's title, taken from a song Suki frequently heard the students chanting: "Without you, there is no us, without you, there is no motherland." How do daily rituals help tie the students to the Kim regime? What other aspects of everyday life serve this purpose?
13. Suki's students learn to condemn the United States and South Korea in their Juche training, yet they are eager to hear Suki discuss her life in New York. How do they reconcile Suki's background with her role as an authority figure? Are there any points when their relationship frays?
14. In Chapter 13, Suki is deeply moved when her students crowd around her to take their class picture. She writes, "The teacher who took the photos told me that all the students wanted to stand close to their teachers. Being physically near them was the most they could do to show their love." Were there other times in the book when strong feelings remained unspoken? Have you experienced something similar in your own life?
15. Suki's students believe that the Korean language is superior and universal. Yet their government allows, even encourages, English-language instruction for its top students. How was Suki able to use language as a bridge? What did it mean to her students when she dared to speak Korean in their final days together?
16. Though Suki is unnerved by the ease with which her students lie to her, she eventually grows to love them. Why do you think this was the case? After reading the book, do you find the boys to be sympathetic?
17. Some in the West speculated that the death of Kim Jong-il would destabilize the North Korean dictatorship and might open the door to reunification. After reading *Without You, There Is No Us*, are you hopeful about North Korea's future? Why or why not? What responsibility, if any, does the international community have to alleviate the suffering of the North Korean people?

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