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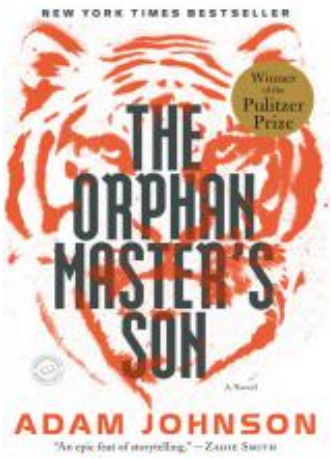
The Orphan Master's Son

by Adam Johnson



About the Book

The Pulitzer Prize?winning, *New York Times* bestselling novel of North Korea: an epic journey into the heart of the world?s most mysterious dictatorship.

Pak Jun Do is the haunted son of a lost mother --- a singer ?stolen? to Pyongyang --- and an influential father who runs a work camp for orphans. Superiors in the North Korean state soon recognize the boy?s loyalty and keen instincts. Considering himself ?a humble citizen of the greatest nation in the world,? Jun Do rises in the ranks. He becomes a professional kidnapper who must navigate the shifting rules, arbitrary violence and baffling demands of his overlords in order to stay alive. Driven to the absolute limit of what any human being could endure, he boldly takes on the treacherous role of rival to Kim Jong Il in an attempt to save the woman he loves, Sun Moon, a legendary actress ?so pure, she didn?t know what starving people looked like.?

Part breathless thriller, part story of innocence lost, part story of romantic love, THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON is also a riveting portrait of a world heretofore hidden from view: a North Korea rife with hunger, corruption and casual cruelty but also camaraderie, stolen moments of beauty and love.

Discussion Guide

1. How much did you know about North Korea before reading THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON? How has it changed your perspective on life there?

2. THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON has been characterized as a thriller, a love story, and a political dystopia. How would you classify the novel in terms of genre? How do you think each of these genres manifests itself in the book?

3. Speaking of genre, Adam Johnson once categorized the novel as a ?trauma narrative.? How do you interpret that

term? Do you think it suitably describes the novel, and if so, in what ways?

4. How did you feel about the inclusion of Kim Jong Il as a central character in the book? How would you say Johnson depicts him? Were you surprised by his portrayal?

5. Discuss the differences between the first part of the novel, ?The Biography of Jun Do,? and the second, ?The Confessions of Commander Ga.?

6. How do the propaganda chapters, written as if spoken from a loudspeaker, play into your reading of the novel?

7. What do you feel the first-person narrative contributed to the story? Did you feel more or less removed from a world so closely guarded?

8. Reviewers have drawn comparisons between THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON and classic dystopian novels such as NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR and BRAVE NEW WORLD. Are these apt comparisons? Does Johnson?s fiction, which is based on fact, have a different impact from that of novels which center on invented worlds?

9. At one point, Dr. Song says to Jun Do, ?Where we are from, stories are factual. If a farmer is declared a music virtuoso by the state, everyone had better start calling him maestro. And secretly, he?d be wise to start practicing the piano. For us, the story is more important than the person. If a man and his story are in conflict, it is the man who must change.? What does this mean in the context of the novel?

10. In one of the most poignant and powerful moments in the book, one of the interrogators remembers the way in which his father explained life in North Korea: ?Even if we walked this path side by side, he said, we must act alone on the outside, while on the inside, we would be holding hands.? What does the quote imply about the reality of living in such a repressive society? How does it speak to humanness in the face of inhumanity?

11. Discuss the significance of ?Jun Do? as a homonym for ?John Doe,? the Western name for the unnamed and the everyman.

12. Discuss Jun Do?s physical and emotional journey, and his transformation from the beginning of the novel to the end.

13. One critic described THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON as ?darkly comedic,? and another as, at times, ?ridiculously funny.? How do you feel about the use of comedy in conjunction with the brutality of the novel?

14. How should the rest of the world respond to the violence and tyranny of present-day North Korea? Do we have a moral obligation to intervene? What can we do to help the people of North Korea without supporting its government?

Author Bio

Adam Johnson is the author of FORTUNE SMILES, which won the National Book Award and the Story Prize, and THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON, which won the Pulitzer Prize, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the California Book

Award. His previous books include the short story collection EMPORIUM and the novel PARASITES LIKE US. Johnson was born in South Dakota and is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe. He lives in San Francisco with his wife and children and teaches creative writing at Stanford University.

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