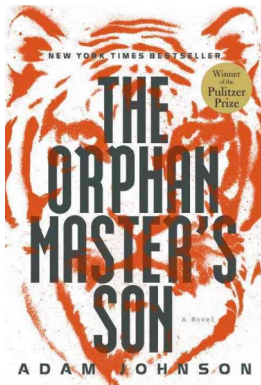


The Orphan Master's Son



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Every so often a novel comes along that takes your breath away. *The Orphan Master's Son* remained unopened on my nightstand for a couple of weeks. But as soon as I dove into this literary thriller that also includes a love story I was hooked. It's set in North Korea, and amazingly, it's written by an American.

Pak Jun Do grew up in an orphanage, yet he was no true orphan (as he repeats many times in these pages) since his father raised him, or more accurately, Jun raised himself near his father. Years earlier, his mother, a singer, had been whisked off to Pyongyang, the capital, where all the beautiful women of the provinces were sent, so he never got to know her. Jun Do's job was renaming each orphan upon his arrival--he named each boy after the 114 North Korean martyrs. Jun Do also assigned jobs, taking the worst for himself. But since even children in North Korea work at backbreaking, dangerous jobs, sometimes Jun's choices led children to their early deaths. For instance, he placed a hook in the hands of Bo Song who tried to rescue citizens from the flooding river, and the boy immediately disappeared under the swirling waters.

Eventually, the orphanage closes and the orphan master enlists the remaining orphans in the army before disappearing from Jun's life. Because orphans have no one to lobby for them, they get the worst jobs. This small group ended up patrolling the tunnels that separate North Korea from South Korea. They were "tunnel soldiers, trained in the art of zero-light combat." Jun's unit spent most of its time under the earth living like moles.

One day a man in uniform comes for Jun Do. Because Jun earned a black belt in *Taekwondo*, the government drafts him and forces him to become an international kidnapper. With zero training, he boards a fishing boat. Officer So takes him to Japan and directs him to an almost empty beach where he must "pluck" (as he terms it) an unsuspecting Japanese guy.

Unfortunately, the man has a dog. As the operation commences, Jun realizes that the officer has no plan so the kidnapping basically proceeds by blind luck. Amazingly, Jun Do succeeds but he becomes haunted by the painful yowls of the stranger's dog as their small boat leaves the shore. Next, Jun Do is assigned to be radio operator on a fishing boat. The fishermen are very upset because they consider Jun Do a spy. This crimps their style--they can no longer keep the best fish for themselves or bring home unusual gifts from the sea such as thousands of loose Nikes. All night Jun--teasingly nicknamed Third Mate by the fishermen--scans the radio dials searching for messages that threaten the homeland. Each night, he concentrates on an American woman who is rowing around the world with a comrade. She is the night rower. The other woman rows each day. He also listens to a group of internationals--a couple of Americans, a Russian, and a

