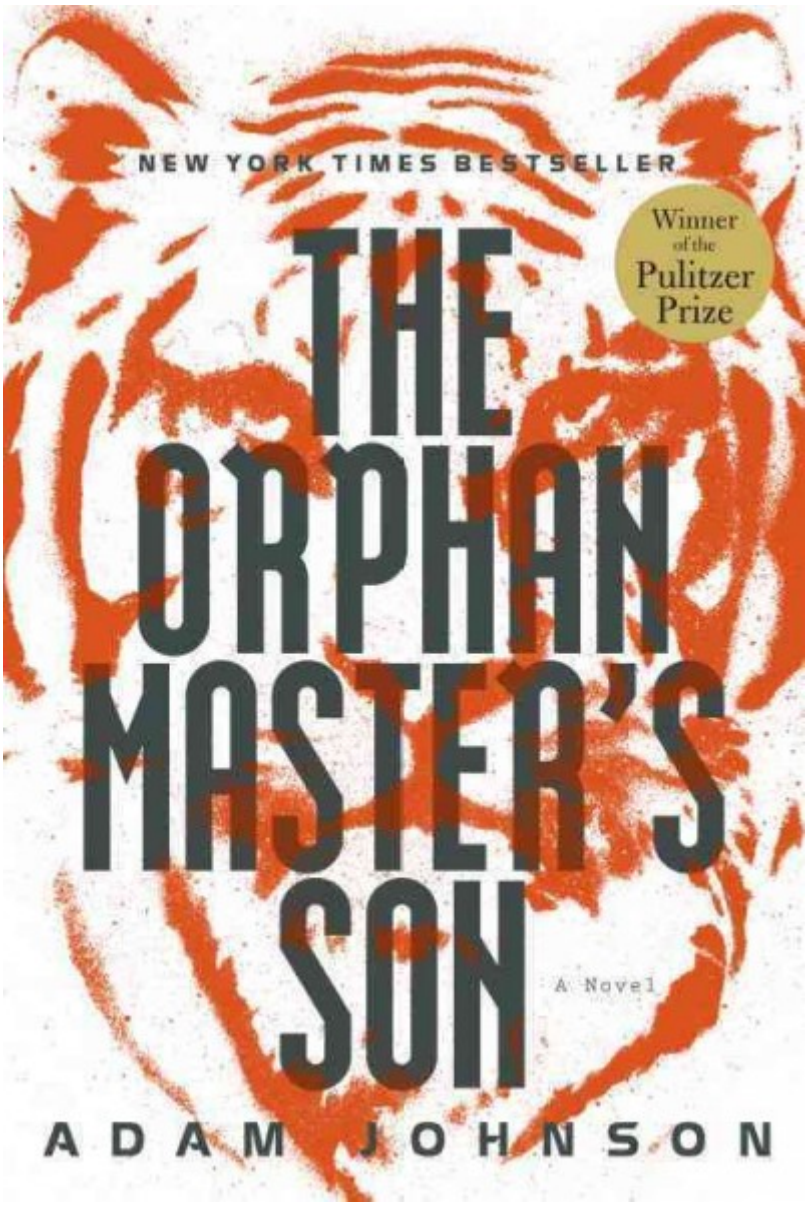
The Orphan Master's Son



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Every so often a novel comes along that takes your breath away. *The Orphan Master's Son* [2] 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 South Korean whom he is convinced are speaking from below the waves.

This is the most lyrical section of the book. Wow. Does Johnson capture the magic of being on the sea at night, the introspection and wonder of being a solitary person, never truly loved, listening to random voices from across the world. He's captivated by the woman rower--all the fishermen believe she rows in the nude--but Jun is most intrigued by the way she bares her soul to anyone listening as though the radio were her private diary. And those voices from below, you must read the book to find the amazing twist about where they originate.

Johnson also captures the theater of the absurd that many people live under in North Korea?s repressive state: the ?Good Morning, Citizens? blasted over loudspeakers each day, the beautiful woman returning each evening with some special prize that she "has traded for," the absurd hero worship, the way an official beats you to a pulp one day then returns four days later to pin a medal upon your oozing chest.

There are so many more stories to share from this fast-paced novel, including a really funny, satiric session set in Texas where Jun is brought to fool a senator. The book is a compelling and very well-written novel about an almost-orphan in search of himself, his history, and particularly for someone to love. If you are curious about a country that is very hidden and secret, yet at the same time our arch enemy, this novel will enlighten you, but more importantly, it will provide you with many insights about the best and the worst of being human.

For another truly exceptional read about North Korea, try Harden Blaine?s *Escape from Camp 14* [3], a nonfiction account that covers some of the same territory but from an insider?s perspective.

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Posted by Dory L. on Sep 25, 2012

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