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ILLUSTRATION BY LIA KANTROWITZ

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Entertainment

# The Contraband Book North Korea Doesn't Want You to Read

The story collection 'The Accusation' is the first book written by a current North Korean to be smuggled out of the DPRK.

By Mary von Aue    Illustrated By Lia Kantrowitz

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A new book by an anonymous North Korean author might be the most dangerous book on the planet right now. "His life is, of course, hugely at risk, and everyone involved with the book is in danger," literary agent Barbara J. Zitwer said of *The Accusation*, a story collection that had to be smuggled out of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the 69 years since the Korean peninsula was divided following World War II, North Korean defectors have been a source for firsthand accounts of the Kim regime, but for an author to reach an international audience while still functioning within the DPRK system is an historic milestone.

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Along with works by defectors, *The Accusation* fills an otherwise vacant space often occupied by rumor, hearsay, and America's own nationalist rhetoric. When left up to the West, the Kim regime's history of violent suppression is usually presented in either chilling yet misdirected documentaries or in controversial parodies, both of which generally shroud the country in mystery as a sinister, communist Other.

"He's writing about a world that we know nothing about," Zitwer recently told me over the phone. As an agent, Barbara Zitwer is responsible for bringing Korean literature to an international audience, having represented Han Kang's Booker Prize-winning *The Vegetarian*, among others, but never has she been able to work with a writer still inside the DPRK. "Most people in the world, they have no idea what North Korean people are like. They just see them in movies and think they are all automatons. Nothing could be further from the truth. He's giving us an open window, a view, of this world."



Bandi's work is no less scathing of the North Korean government, but offers a glimpse into the lives of those directly affected by its policies. In seven pieces of fiction, Bandi (which means *firefly*) presents life in the DPRK and the daily anxieties that come with living under totalitarian rule. In the 1995 story "On Stage," the mother of a recently deceased child sheds "tears of grief for the Great Leader." "Their tears are genuine, aren't they?" Bandi writes. "It's hard to tell because the DPRK has made professional actors of us all, able to cry on cue after years of hard living."

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Each story is time-stamped, beginning in December 1989, toward the late stages of Kim Il-sung's regime and ending in December 1995, shortly after the dictator's death. In each story, Bandi follows citizens trying to function under a clearly dysfunctional government, from disillusioned war heroes and country elites to families attempting to reunite despite being denied a simple travel permit. While this conceit lends itself to satire and witty moments, the overarching theme is that each individual is paralyzed by fear: At any moment, an accusation can take hold and their devotion to the Party is questioned. In "On Stage," a father's boss creates a "Fault 1 Demobilization" to help bring the son "back to his senses," an order to keep from sending him to the prison camp, which would destroy the family's reputation. Throughout the book, Bandi drives home the idea that if one person messes up, the entire family is screwed. One relative's bad reputation will haunt them in their jobs and general livelihoods.

These are anxieties that Bandi clearly shares, seeing as only a small handful of people know the writer's true identity. What is known, according to the book's afterword by South Korean writer Kim Seong-dong, is that Bandi was or is a member of the Chosun Writers' League Central Committee, the DPRK's state-authorized writers' association, which is a tightly controlled network of writers tasked with creating the country's content. Adhering to the guidelines set forth by the Department of Propaganda and Agitation, Bandi and his comrades publish in government-operated newspapers and magazines because it is the only means to publish.

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Bandi isn't the only writer to come out of the Chosun group. North Korean poet Jang Jin-sung also got his start with the Chosun Writers before defecting to South Korea. But Kim believes that Bandi still works within the central committee and lives a double life: propagandist content mule by day, spokesman for the resistance by night. For nearly two decades, Bandi has written "in patient hope of a time when things would be different, when his denunciation of the North Korean system might circulate freely in a world outside its borders," according to Kim.

It's a powerful denunciation that barely made it out. According to Do Hee-yun, a representative of the Citizen's Coalition for the Human Rights of North Korean Refugees, Bandi first tried to give his work to a relative who had planned to defect. The pseudonymous writer chose not to defect himself, fearing for the safety of his children; instead he gave a relative his manuscript of short stories and poems to take with her as she fled to China, but since there was no guarantee she'd reach the border without being searched by police, she left the manuscript behind.

Months later, she made it across the border only to be picked up by Chinese soldiers. Noting her "smart appearance," they demanded a bribe of 50,000 yuan (over $7,500 USD), money that she naturally didn't have on her. She asked to be taken to the station, where she could contact relatives who might be able to pick up the tab. During the negotiation, a unit commander alerted a blogger who wrote about North Korean refugees, and that blogger reached out to Do, who worked with his human rights group to pay off the soldiers and secure the woman's release to South Korea.

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After being sent to the Settlement Support Center for North Korean Refugees, the woman was finally able to meet Do in Seoul, which is how he learned of the prominent North Korean writer still working in the DPRK, hoping to release his manuscript into the world.

> **The manuscript made its way out of the DPRK to South Korea by way of China, hidden inside the pages of *The Selected Works of Kim Il-sung*.**

"At first, I didn't have much interest, because the relative didn't know much about the exact contents of the manuscript," Do explained over email. "But since it was written under much hardship, they expected it might be of some help to the North's human rights movement and we were willing to push ahead."

A Chinese friend of Do's planned to visit a North Korean relative who just so happened to live in the same small city where Bandi lived. Over lunch, that friend presented Bandi with a letter from his relative in South Korea, instructing the writer to disguise his manuscript as a state-approved book and give it to this anonymous envoy. Months after the original plan was hatched, the manuscript finally made its way out of the DPRK to South Korea by way of China, hidden inside the pages of *The Selected Works of Kim Il-sung*.

"There's nothing shocking like political prison camps or public execution in this book, but I think it shows that the everyday life of North Koreans is that of slavery," Do told me. After he read the manuscript, he rushed to publishers, hoping that a clearer image of life in North Korea might catalyze more activism. "I want us to see the only slavery society existing in the 21st century and ask ourselves, as truly free individuals, whether or not we have the duty to act."

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He continued: "I see this as a book that can make the people who are hanging on in North Korea realize, just as we do in the international community, that they are living as slaves, and give them strength and courage to stand up for change."

Indeed, as *The Accusation* continues to be translated in more languages, activism in the literary world is gaining momentum. On March 30, Do, Zitwer, and 20 other international publishers will meet at the Korean Demilitarized Zone that divides North and South Korea to stage a symbolic reading from *The Accusation*. Not only will Bandi's stories be read into a loudspeaker in several languages, but human rights activists, North Korean defectors, and writers such as Krys Lee and Lee Jung-myung will also speak. It's a reading aimed "to free North Korea," explained Zitwer.

"Risking one's life to resist a system of oppression can be interpreted as having a premonition of that system's end," writes Kim Seong-dong. The US may never get its hands on another work from Bandi, or any other writer living inside North Korea for that matter. But its very existence is still a hopeful symbol that change is inevitable, if not imminent.

*Follow Mary von Aue on Twitter.*

*The Accusation by Bandi is available in bookstores and online from Grove Atlantic in the US and Serpent's Tail in the UK.*

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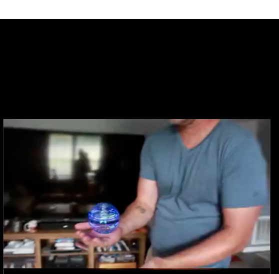

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