



Book Club Set

# The Last Exiles

By Ann Shin

## About the Author

Raised on a farm in British Columbia, Ann lives in Toronto with her partner and two daughters. Aside from cooking or taking walks, she spends her time writing fiction and producing films and series. Her documentary *My Enemy, My Brother* was shortlisted for a 2016 Academy Award and nominated for an Emmy. Her previous documentary, *The Defector: Escape from North Korea* won 7 awards including Best Documentary and Best Documentary Director at the 2014 Canadian Screen Academy Awards, a SXSW Interactive Award, and a Canadian Digi Award. Her book *The Family China*, (Brick Books, 2013) won the Anne Green Award and was shortlisted for the Gerald Lampert Poetry Prize.

## About the Book

An unforgettable saga inspired by true events, *The Last Exiles* is a searing portrait of a young couple in North Korea and their fight for love and freedom

Jin and Suja meet and fall in love while studying at university in Pyongyang. She is a young journalist from a prominent family, while he is from a small village of little means. Outside the school, North Korea has fallen under great political upheaval, plunged into chaos and famine. When Jin returns home to find his family starving, their food rations all but gone, he makes a rash decision that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, miles away, Suja has begun to feel the tenuousness of her privilege when she learns that Jin has disappeared. Risking everything, and defying her family, Suja sets out to find him, embarking on a dangerous journey that leads her into a dark criminal underworld and tests their love and will to survive.

In this vivid and moving story, award-winning filmmaker Ann Shin offers a rare glimpse at life inside the guarded walls of North Korea and the harrowing experiences of those who are daring enough to attempt escape. Inspired by real stories of incredible bravery, *The Last Exiles* is a stunning debut about love, sacrifice and the price of liberty.

## Discussion Questions

### 1. AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Suja and Jin live in one of the world's most notorious dictatorships, North Korea. There are upwards of 50 authoritarian regimes ruling today in countries across the world. Have you, or has anyone you've met, lived under an authoritarian regime? What are some other stories of escape that you know about and can share?

### 2. NO TURNING BACK

Facing the point of no turning back: What happens when the world you know and love is stripped away and you realize it's all a lie? This is what happens to Suja as she begins to see the truth of the regime that governs North Korea. Her realization emboldens her to make decisions that she never considered before. Have you experienced this kind of watershed moment in your life - with work, relationships, community?

### 3. DYSTOPIA

What features of the North Korean society make it a dystopia? How does it compare with other dystopias you have read about?

### 4. INFORMATION

Most people who live in North Korea have no access to outside information, or outside news sources. A North Korean's understanding of their own country is shaped by the regime's news agencies and by the Party. At what point in the novel did Suja begin to question her assumptions about North Korean society?

### 5. PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is an important tool of authoritarian regimes and is heavily used in North Korea. But there is a lot of propaganda in Western societies as well. What kinds of propaganda do we encounter in our own societies today? On what platforms and social media channels do you see propaganda?

### 6. CHOICES

As a heroine, Suja faces a number of circumstances, some of which are within her control, some out of her control. One decision that was entirely within her control was her decision to leave her family and her entire life in Pyongyang to try and find Jin. Do you think she made the right choice?

### 7. STEREOTYPES

How do you think Asian women have been stereotyped in books, films and television? What do you think of that stereotype? How do the female characters in *The Last Exiles* compare to the stereotype?

## 8. COURAGE

How one responds to life's challenges is a testament to one's courage and moral fortitude. What do you think about the decisions Suja made once she was on her escape journey out of North Korea and into China?

## 9. MORAL DILEMMAS

At several points in the novel Jin is faced with moral dilemmas: What did you think of his decision to leave Mee-jung to be trafficked by the Chinese farmer couple Biyu and Lok? If you were in that situation, what would you have done? Jin finds himself in a dump truck and faced with the decision to try and save Bae or leave him. What would you have done if you were in his shoes? Jin works off his debt by working for Sarge, a smuggler. Do you think he had other options he could have explored?

## 10. BROKERS

In the novel, Sarge is a human smuggler who calls himself a 'broker.' He, like many North Korean 'brokers,' guides defectors across China into Southeast Asia to find safe asylum. He charges defectors a fee for this work. Do you think brokers like Sarge are exploitative, or helpful, or both?

## 11. REFUGEES & MIGRANTS

Some say human smugglers exist because they service a need to ferry refugees that is not addressed by governments and NGOs. What do you think governments can do to better address this issue? What is your country's policies around undocumented refugees and immigrants? Should we change our approach to undocumented refugees?

## 12. PROVERBS

There are a number of sayings in the book, like: 'You need an empty hand to hold something new.' or 'You need a little evil in your heart to survive.' They reflect the kinds of proverbs or sayings that are common in Korean culture. There are similar sayings in every culture, which are universally significant, while at the same time reveal something unique about each cultural home. Take this opportunity to share some sayings from other cultures. What do they reveal about each culture?

## 13. THE FORM

With the proliferation of media and social media, there are a number of different ways to tell a story. What do you love about the novel form? What other forms of stories do you enjoy, whether it be TV series, films, magazine articles, podcasts, Instagram stories, reels etc? Do you think The Last Exiles could be adapted and told in another medium? What might be the advantages or disadvantages of this story being told in other forms?

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<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MLrx9w01HXdpY3tiiJ8ReA89p0lOhL5-/view>

## Other Links and Resources

THE LAST EXILES - Book Club Kit:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MLrx9w01HXdpY3tiiJ8ReA89p0IOhL5-/view>

The Last Exiles by Ann Shin Interview:

<https://hyemusings.ca/the-last-exiles-by-ann-shin/>

## Share your thoughts with other readers!

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: