

IN NEED OF AN ICON

Interview with Blaine Harden, Author of *Escape from Camp 14*

*For an issue like “North Korean human rights” to enter the mainstream, it needs a genre, an icon, and an audience. In her New York Times essay, “The Story of ‘Night,’” journalist Rachel Donadio frames Elie Wiesel’s rise to fame as “a case study in how a book helped created a genre, how a writer became an icon and how the Holocaust was absorbed into the American experience.” Similar phenomena seem to be unfolding for former foreign correspondent for the Washington Post Blaine Harden’s re-telling of Shin Dong-hyuk’s escape from a political prison camp. *Escape from Camp 14*¹ has maintained a sustained spot on the New York Times best-seller list and is being slated for inclusion in some high school college curricula.*

Though it has a long way to reach Night-level status, it is safe to say that Camp 14 is increasingly being grouped into the canon of the concentration camp/Holocaust genre, that Harden and Shin are becoming icons of sorts, and that Shin’s story is being absorbed into the American experience. Indicative of Shin’s stature is the fact that he needs no introduction, and his personal history requires little more than bullet points: 1) born in a North Korean prison camp; 2) betrayed family members and saw them killed; 3) miraculously escaped camp; and 4) resettled in South Korea. But we must now also add to that: 5) went on to become the subject of a best-selling book. Shin’s story, encapsulated in the book is one of a short but growing list of essential touchstones in a tragic new cultural genre: “North Korean defector-refugee media.”

It is worth recalling, however, that only very, very rarely do the heroes of these pieces plough their furrows alone. In Shin’s case, the foil was decorated journalist and author Blaine Harden, and here, in a fascinating interview with Lecturer of Asian History at Queen’s University Belfast and Sino-NK Editor-in-Chief Dr. Adam Cathcart, Harden discusses the global impact of his book.

–Editor

Adam Cathcart: *Can you talk about the global impact of the book, in translation and beyond the US?*

Blaine Harden: Right now there are 24 languages. So that is virtually all of Europe, every major country in Europe and the smaller countries. In Brazil it

¹ Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*, (London, Penguin Group, 2012).

did very well. In Asia: the Korean version came out in late April and in late February in Chinese. It came out in Japanese in the fall, and the Russian edition is coming out early next year. So it is in every language except Spanish for some reason.

So that is the global component and the sales abroad in Europe have been extraordinarily good compared to what we expected. It has been a bestseller in parts of Europe, particularly in northern Europe. It was the best-selling book in Finland for about a month and a half and has sold well in Germany. So this is very unexpected.

Cathcart: *And to what do you attribute that success? Is it anything in particular or just the newness?*

Harden: It's the power of the story. Who is this young man who until he was 23 years old did not know right from wrong, and who didn't know the world was round, and who, when he was 13, betrayed his mother? He watched her die without any emotion and was glad to see her die. What kind of man can he become outside barbed wire? That's the power of the story. The relationship of North Korea to the West, and the relationship between North Korea and China, and who is the leader in North Korea: All that is subordinate to the power of his story.

When I heard about him and first wrote up his life in the *Washington Post*, I underestimated the power of the story to catch people and make them gasp. But the reaction to that story that ran in the *Post* four years ago was so great that I recalculated and I went back to Shin and I said, "if you would tell me your story I could do what I was sent to Asia to do: to tell readers how North Korea works in a new, fresh and compelling way." It's his story that does it. There's really not much information in that book that can't be had elsewhere, except for his story. He came to South Korea and his sense of self-preservation was so acute that he knew he had to lie about his betrayal of his family. He knew that if he told the truth—that he was the one who sold out his mother and brother so he could get more rice and an easier job and follow camp rules—that he would be seen as a monster. He might be imprisoned. His sense of self-survival was so acute and he kept with that lie very consistently until he told me in southern California in 2010 that he had lied to protect himself. By 2010, he felt there were enough people who trusted him and loved him, who weren't asking anything of him. He felt that he owed them the truth.

Cathcart: *To combine those two threads, Shin's narrative with the European reaction: You write with a very clear purpose in evoking, occasionally, the Holocaust experience; Anne Frank, for example, and Elie Wiesel is another. At other times you cite literature on trauma and how people operate in a camp situation. My sense is that we are at a moment in Europe where there's a logical question about what the next step is: You keep remembering the Holocaust, but there is a question about what the application is today. Is *Escape from Camp 14* speaking to that need?*

Harden: I think that's exactly it. I used the references to Elie Wiesel and Anne Frank and other survivors of the Nazi death camps as a way of giving context to readers, giving them a way to understand Shin's story. But the way the book was read, particularly in Europe, was as an existential lesson about what kind of man can be born and bred in a place like Camp 14.

And then also [we can see] the lesson of the Holocaust, and [that the pattern is] actually being repeated in a certain way in North Korea. These gross human rights violations are a pattern that the world tends to ignore. It's not the same as Nazi Germany, but there are enough echoes of it and the Europeans saw that immediately and reacted to it.

There is an extensive human rights infrastructure in Europe and in the US. And Shin's story gives that infrastructure something to mobilize around. Also his story is not ancient history: Camp 14 continues to operate. There are very good satellite images of it and the other camps. The same life is lived in those camps now as when Shin escaped in 2005. I've talked to three generations of camp survivors and they say the camps have not changed in any real way in the way that they're operated. It's this classic Stalinist model of limited food, punishing work, limited sleep, brainwashing and early death. So I think [those parallels are] part of the appeal in Europe.

Cathcart: *To move the human rights conversation to the US, looking particularly at the role of Korean Americans: Melanie Kirkpatrick, in her book *Escape from North Korea*, sees kind of a rising wave of Korean-American involvement and consciousness in North Korean human rights issues, especially among students. But often Korean-Americans do not want to be associated in any way with North Korean issues: "It may as well be in Africa," as one of my Korean-American students put it. Could you speak to this notion of Korean-Americans having conflicting impulses when they read your book or consider getting involved in this issue?*

Harden: Well I think one of the great organizing mechanisms for Korean-Americans is the church in the United States. The churches have been very successful and they are very important parts of the lives of many Korean-Americans, first, second, and third generations. The churches have not been very active in human rights. They have not embraced this book and have not championed Shin or the question of human rights in North Korea. And why they have or have not done it I'm not sure. I think there's a conservatism and unwillingness to get involved in politics because they are interested in making a living and having their kids do well. I don't think the book has changed that very much but what the book has done and what Shin's story has done is it has grabbed the imagination of a lot of younger Korean-Americans whose parents probably did not tell them much about North Korea. North Korea was just sort of a mystery and they knew in the headlines that it was a troublemaker. I remember going to Los Angeles recently for a talk to a Korean-American group and the young people were just flabbergasted to hear about Shin's life. And they were interested in getting involved. But they grew up in families where this is not a subject of conversation. And I think that is still the case.

Cathcart: *That's an interesting pivot point to think about the North Korean leadership today and Kim Jong-un. Do you think that the leadership in Pyongyang is at all interested in ultimately making a change with places like Camp 14? Is there any endgame for these camps beside the destruction or dismantling of the North Korean state itself? Do you see Kim Jong-un as having any interest at all—even if it's just for propaganda purposes—in saying, “We are scaling back a bit [on the repression] and things are changing?” Is there any reason to believe that this could ever happen or that this new generation sees this as possible?*

Harden: There doesn't seem to be any evidence at all that it's begun to happen yet, nothing that would suggest that. In fact the UN rapporteur suggested that people who oppose Kim Jong-un's succession to power were sent to the camps. So the information is very limited. However, the symbolic stuff that he's done would suggest that he understands the power of symbolism. His wife wearing pants in Pyongyang, talking about farm reform, all of this stuff suggests that he understands the power of symbolism to change the popularity of his government, improve the popularity of [his] government and to allow the country to open up economically to the outside world.

So it seems to me that there's a possibility that could happen. Historically when Stalin died the camps faded out of existence and the same thing with Mao.

It didn't happen overnight. But I think within six or seven years the camps were gone and the Soviet Union basically shuddered. That could happen in North Korea but there are no signs of it yet.

Cathcart: *When North Korea looks at Myanmar, do you think they are taking an active interest in how that regime, or others like it, are defragmenting some of their controls?*

Harden: I don't know, but they had a relationship with Myanmar that involved the sale of some hardware and some solidarity in their isolation. And I'm sure they're paying attention to the benefits that Myanmar is harvesting from changing what it is doing.

The thing that strikes me and has struck every analyst who studied North Korea from South Korea—the economic types, the technocrats who have relationships with other technocrats in Pyongyang in Beijing—they see a real win-win for the government to follow the Chinese model. You can keep your job, you don't get shot, you have lots of power and wealth and yet you slowly raise the standard of living in the country through bringing in manufacturing—have people work at real jobs, earn real money and eat real food. Why not do that? And you can buy yourself time: the Chinese have bought 35-40 years.

Why can't the North Korean leadership do that? Kim Jong-un is so young. If he wants to hang around and die in his bed like his dad, it seems like a logical calculated move to preserve your power and increase the vitality of the state. But they're not doing it so far. That's the conundrum of North Korea.

Cathcart: *The North Korean media represents defectors as an existential threat, labeling people like Shin with phrases like “human scum.” But what about the redefectors, like the story of Pak Jong-suk reported in the Washington Post?*

Harden: In the story that the Washington Post's Chico Harlan reported, it's clear that the regime put pressure on the family back in North Korea. It seems that a mother went back to try to help her loved ones. That's part of the story. Still, based on my conversations with defectors, life for them in South Korea is not easy. They're always strangers in a strange land. The first generation struggles with language, employment, and, in the work place, they have a hard time distinguishing between constructive criticism and complete betrayal. Often, they fly off the handle and quit their jobs and don't build on success. So even if they don't get signals from North Korea that their son or uncle or mother is

being persecuted, they feel guilty for leaving. Guilt is a huge part of every defector's life. They leave behind loved ones who struggle to find enough food. I think that some defectors are vulnerable to pressure and inducements to go back to North Korea simply because they feel so guilty. It's a shrewd move by North Korea to search for disaffected people. Inevitably, a few may want to go back.

Cathcart: *How much of a threat do the 24,000 defectors in South Korea really pose to the North Korean state, besides the power of their stories? Are they linking up in a way that—to use a somewhat dangerous analogy—could be compared to Syria? Given that trust is such a core theme in your book, do you see North Korean defectors as a cohesive group or as fragmented and distrustful?*

Harden: One of the North Korean regime's long-term successes in self-preservation is using fear to atomize society. It relentlessly stamps out civil society. It bans medical societies, teachers unions and other professional groups that might allow people to meet together in an atmosphere of trust and to share information. There is no civil society outside the party and the military. People who grow up that way come to South Korea and bring those habits with them. Many defectors in the South remain atomized and isolated – from each other and from groups that could help them adjust to life in a new country. This cripples their ability to organize as a cohesive opposition against the North Korean regime. They certainly are not in any position to form a group that could take guerrilla military action against the North. [Another] part of it is the border. The North-South border—the DMZ—is impossible to infiltrate. Defectors can't really organize in China. That's why North Korea has survived so long. The geopolitics of Northeast Asia are conducive to its survival. China insulates it from cross-border guerrilla instability. The heavily militarized DMZ has also served North Korea well. It blocks cross-border meddling and severely limits the flow of information.

But having said that, North Koreans now have a much richer understanding of the outside world. The information seal was substantially breached in the mid-1990s, with the famine, the influx of Western food aid and the rise of

street markets. Smugglers and traders brought in food, clothes and electronic gadgets from China. The US and South Korea now bombard North Korea with radio signals, and many North Koreans listen, using cheap radios smuggled in from China. If you have a radio—and a lot of people have radios now, according to surveys of defectors—you know that North Korea is desperately poor and internationally isolated and regarded by the rest of the world as a pariah. But that knowledge has not yet led to political mobilization, because North Koreans remain socially atomized.

Cathcart: *Your book deals not just with Shin, but also one of his colleagues – Park Jong-chul. This is a guy who’s a North Korean elite, who ends up going to China, goes around the world, comes back to China to vote, has a baby in China, and brings the kids back in to the DPRK. He is not in an “underground railroad” situation: he’s just trying to make money and continue his life as a semi-elite by bringing it back to North Korea. The problem is that the domestic security forces charge him with being a Christian and dealing with South Korean intelligence. He’s an absolutely fascinating person, and quite a counterpoint to Shin’s life.*

Harden: What Park’s story shows is that the border with China has become less of a prison wall and more of a semi-permeable membrane. Smugglers, traffickers, legitimate traders and defectors crossed back and forth with relative ease from the late 1990s to very recently. It appears, however, that Kim Jong-un has significantly restricted the permeability of the border in the past year. What Park’s life shows is that lots of North Koreans have gone back and forth across the border with China – and made their living that way. There are South Korean studies suggesting that street markets constitute up to 80% of the North’s real economy and those markets are largely supplied by people moving across the border to China. Park was just one of tens of thousands of people who built their lives around transit between North Korea and China. And Shin had the good fortune of meeting him.

Cathcart: *Well he’s a crucial person in his development and desire to leave...*

Harden: Park was the reason that Shin conceived of escaping. Shin never would’ve considered leaving the camp had he not met Park. Shin had been

instructed to spy and snitch on Park, but when Park started telling stories about the outside world—especially eating grilled meat in China—Shin made the first free decision of his life. He decided not to snitch, but to listen. Shin told me several times that he mourns Park’s death more than the death of his parents because Park was kinder to him, and so Park was absolutely essential in Shin’s decision to risk the fence.

Cathcart: *You write in your book that there is no celebrity advocating for the North Korean people analogous to the Dalai Lama or Richard Gere for the Tibetan people, etc. But they did have Hwang Jong-yop in Seoul for more than 10 years and I understand that his broadcasts have made an impact inside North Korea. Do defectors talk about him regularly as an influential voice, or was he seen as someone who had taken the best of the DPRK system and was living an easy life?*

Harden: I did not ask that direct question of them. A couple people brought him up.

Cathcart: *But he’s not the North Korean celebrity figure that North Korean refugees were looking for: the central oracle.*

Harden: When I mentioned the power of celebrity in the book, I was referring to a possible reason why human rights abuses in North Korea have remained under the radar in the US and Europe. There has been no Hollywood superstar to champion the suffering of people in the political labor camps. In Burma, Aung Sung Su Kyi was sanctified with the Nobel Peace Prize and became an international celebrity. She helped focus attention on Burma and helped create the current move away from corrupt military rule. This has not happened for anyone tied to the North Korea story, other than members of the Kim family. They continue to be viewed, to my disgust, as semi-comical figures. On the *Daily Show*, a key source of news for many young Americans, Kim Jong-il was merely a cartoon character, not a dictator who starved and tortured. The *Daily Show* made fun of his glasses and hair. A little cartoon figure of the Dear Leader would march across the TV screen as Jon Stewart made clever remarks. Similarly, Kim Jong-un is chubby, has a weird haircut and is easily mocked. He’s perceived as a punch line, not as someone who’s presiding over a human rights catastrophe.

Cathcart: *In your Washington Post piece last December, you talked about how skilled the North Korean leadership has become at manipulating their image internationally. Are they really that crafty? Sort of saying, “Let’s get out an odd story about a unicorn” because they know Western media will jump on it as a form of entertainment when in fact everybody should be writing about missile launches or what have you?*

Harden: North Korea’s state media flaunts missile launches, nuclear weapons and images of Kim Jong-un’s young wife. I sometimes think it’s a calculated attempt by Pyongyang to keep the world from focusing on the cruelty that sustains the state. The most important human problem in North Korea is state-enabled malnutrition: a third of the population is chronically hungry and has been for nearly two decades. Almost all of them are poor – the country is poorer than Sudan or Laos. Political labor camps have been in continuous operation for more than half a century. They are places where slavery, rape, public execution and slow-motion starvation are routine. Nearly everyone inside those camps is being worked to death. Missiles, nukes and the leader’s young wife blind us to the nauseating criminality that sustains the Kim family.

Cathcart: *Concerning the ethics of writing about North Korea and how we deal with the lack of source transparency, one of the things I’m so glad you did with this book is that you did occasionally turn to the first person, writing about the process and the difficulty of your work with Shin, and with covering North Korea more generally as a journalist. I think that’s hugely valuable for people like me, and for people interested in how the stories about North Korea are told. You have a great deal of experience working in other countries—“countries ripe for collapse” as my French edition of your book put it—but I’m wondering how covering North Korea is different from those places.*

Harden: In all those other countries (Burma, Serbia, Congo, Ethiopia), I went there and I talked to the people who were victimized and I saw it. I went there repeatedly and I got a sense of the texture of life. In Milosevic’s Serbia and in Burma I moved around quietly but the authorities seemed to know I was there. It’s just not possible to do this in North Korea. You are risking long periods of imprisonment and worse in North Korea. But in recent years it has become possible to draw strong journalistic conclusions about what’s happening in the North. There are so many defectors who can be interviewed in South Korea. They are a paranoid bunch, but they do talk to journalists and human rights investigators who are willing to invest the time necessary to overcome their wariness. For the Washington-based Committee on Human Rights in North Korea,

David Hawk personally talked to 60 camp survivors. He found a consistent and coherent story about how the camps work. It's basically the same story I got from Shin, who Hawk also interviewed. So there is now a rock-solid, interview-based, multiple-sourced story that is supported by satellite images that have been annotated by camp survivors. The camp story has been documented to the point where it is a respectable piece of social science. I think that when and if the regime collapses, the story we now know about the camps will be verified.

Cathcart: *You mention Joshua Stanton in your text as one of the “tireless bloggers” who are writing about North Korea. But Joshua and others have been critical toward the Associated Press for their work in Pyongyang. Is it worth it for AP to be there in Pyongyang? What kind of restrictions are they operating under?*

Harden: I think it's worth it for AP to be there. Its reporters and photographers operate under conditions that make it all but impossible to produce journalism that is deeply reported, well-sourced and nuanced. Still, they're sending out information and images. The photographer who often goes there, David Guttenfelder, is fantastic. His images of North Korea have enriched our visual understanding of what North Korea is. AP is doing the best it can under impossible conditions. So I admire them for trying to do that. I think it's the right decision.

Cathcart: *On the other hand, North Korea has made quite clear that they're watching out for academics and journalists who come in with bad intentions for the DPRK—basically implying that any given person could be acting as a spy. What is the discussion among journalists about where the line is in reporting from within North Korea? What about the case of Euna Lee and Laura Ling? How much of a danger exists for any journalist who is legally in the DPRK?*

Harden: There is no rule of law in North Korea. Journalists, even those with proper credentials, are helpless if the regime wants to lock them up. If you enter the country illegally as a journalist, the risk is insanely high. You will likely spend a lot of time in a very uncomfortable North Korean prison and will probably have to get the US government to send a former president to get you out.

Cathcart: *We talked a little bit about the Chinese-North Korean border region, or to be a bit more specific, the Tumen River Valley. What value is there for journalists to go to the region to do a kind of border survey?*

Harden: I think there is great value in reporting from there, but it's a very difficult journalistic assignment. Perhaps the biggest risk is endangering defectors – simply by talking to them. There are North Korean spies and security people from the Chinese government in that area. They monitor the movements of South Korean church people and other foreign human rights activists. North Korean defectors try to move secretly to safe houses. Some work inconspicuously on Chinese farms. If you go there as a foreign journalist (especially if you are white) you are so visible. You can lead Chinese police and North Korean agents to defectors or to the people who are trying to shelter them. By your presence there as a Westerner you can hurt people and lead to their imprisonment and torture in North Korea. Second, you need to have savvy interpreters/fixers who speak Chinese and Korean. And then you have to stay around for quite a long time to learn anything new and important and true. Great journalists have done it. There has been some good reporting in newspapers. Anna Fifield did it for the FT [*Financial Times*] a few years ago because she speaks Korean and she found some good fixers who moved quietly and safely. But it's a costly and long-term endeavor, given that most journalists normally turn their stories around in two hours. This is something you have to prepare for over the course of many months, if not years.

Cathcart: *In China domestically, we've seen a limited opening up of the spigots on the discussion of North Korean defectors, particularly in early 2012. How you think the appearance of your book might change Chinese views of North Korea? Is it possible for Chinese public opinion or the Chinese Communist Party to apply some pressure on North Korea about this issue?*

Harden: I think it goes back to the power of Shin's story. He was bred by guards to be worked to death. His mind and values were molded by the guards who ordered his parents to have sex. He was part of a state-created system that bred children to be slaves. And Shin was raised to believe in a set of rules that encouraged him to betray his own mother – and cause her death. Then he managed to meet somebody who told him about the outside world, and he had the courage to risk his life by wiggling through a high-voltage fence and run for freedom. This is a sensationally interesting human story. I hope that in China readers will be captivated by it and learn about the North Korean government's cruelty to its own people. If they know Shin's story, perhaps they will demand that their government stop supporting the Kim family. In any case, that's my hope.

Cathcart: *What about the Chinese treatment of Shin when he crosses the water, and meets a wise old man...*

Harden: Shin's crossing of the border into China was an anti-climax. By the time he made that crossing, it was a workaday behavior for tens of thousands of North Koreans. The guard asked him, "When you come back, will you bring me something to eat?" Shin was smart enough to realize that the crossing had become a routine transaction. He also had been informed that when you go across the border, it's not that foreign, at least not initially. On the Chinese side of the border, people speak Korean. They are familiar with the defectors and they often give them employment, if it serves their financial interests. They're useful. Tens of thousands of North Koreans have gone into the ethnic Korean part of China and found a life, as the spouse of a farmer or as a worker. For many of them, it's a better life than they had back home. They can eat and they can find medical care and they can get paid hard currency for hard work.

Cathcart: *At one point, Shin is getting paid five yuan a day to work. He gets a couple of handouts here and there, but it's really his first job, isn't it?*

Harden: A Chinese pig farmer gave Shin his first job. It was the first time he wasn't a slave. And it happened so fast. After crossing the border, he had one of the best days of his life. He had a proper meal with rice and meat. He had a job and a warm place to sleep. He could sleep eight hours without being disturbed. The pig farmer even went to a store and bought Shin some medicine to get the lice off his body.

Cathcart: *He's also taking showers every day, which had never happened before. This brings to mind that China has talked recently about bringing in more North Korean workers, more systematically. If the North Koreans are coming across the Chinese border legally to work—maybe 20,000 at a time—what's wrong with that?*

Harden: There's nothing wrong with that. It's a better life for them, except when they are victims of sex-trafficking or physical abuse or indentured servitude. In China, they often have no legal rights.

Cathcart: *So it would be possible to say, "This is a repugnant regime in North Korea," but steps that would result in more food, or information, come into North Korea from the outside.*

Harden: To repeat myself, the biggest human rights problem in North Korea is hunger, and severe malnutrition for pregnant women and newborns. There is widespread cognitive impairment caused by malnutrition. If people can cross the border and find food and bring back food, which they are doing, that decreases the chances of famine and severe hunger.

Cathcart: *The activist Robert Park has asserted that North Korea is engaging in genocide against its own people, and this is a crime against humanity. In Syria, we've seen the government systematically denying food to its domestic opponents—in other words, we are not just talking about weapons or repression. Do you believe that the North Korean government is in fact engaged in a slow-scale warfare against people outside of Pyongyang that would keep them hungry and unable to think about anything besides eating? When people talk about genocide, is there anything to these accusations?*

Harden: I think genocide is a pretty loaded word. There is no need to exaggerate the scope of the human rights tragedy. There is data showing that the farther you live from Pyongyang, the less you eat, the more likely you are to stunted and cognitively impaired. That's based on food and nutrition surveys done by the UN World Food Program and UNICEF. The government maintains an apartheid policy of moving people away from the capital if they are not considered to be loyal or trustworthy. Those people moved to the periphery do not eat much. Pregnant women have serious problems of malnutrition and their kids have chronic to severe—and sometimes lethal levels—of malnutrition. And that's the policy of the government. That's a very bad system and may be unique on the planet. The political labor camps are also a part of the state. They perform a very useful service for the regime. The camps isolate and eliminate those who have the courage to speak out (and those unlucky enough to be snatched upon by informers). And they scare the hell out of everybody else and keep people quiet. To that nasty end, the camps work. That's why they've been there for more than half a century. Does it add up to genocide? I don't know, but it is clearly reprehensible and criminal.

Cathcart: *The Kim Jong-un regime has spent a lot of money in Pyongyang—and the city now has electricity 24 hours a day and is posed, as ever, as a real party for kids. We in the West have mocked a lot of these parks and playgrounds that he's built, but the funding speaks for itself, and life seems to be improving for residents in Pyongyang. Is that enough to sustain the regime? Are people in Pyongyang living in fear? Something like two million people or 10 percent*

of the country is there. Is their living in comfort fully counterbalanced by the atrocities occurring the camps beyond the capital? Or is the fundamental part of the regime so rotten that it doesn't matter how much comfort people have in Pyongyang?

Harden: To live in Pyongyang you have to be a trusted person. You have to come from a trusted family or have proven yourself to be trustworthy. So by improving the life of the people in Pyongyang, the regime has been tending to its own survival. To cater to the needs of the people who matter seems like a shrewd tactic for self-preservation. You now have the AP in Pyongyang, so it also makes sense to dress up the capital to manufacture images showing that life is better.

Cathcart: *My last question is just about process. One of the things we do at Sino-NK is mentor younger writers and work to bring new voices in. So we have writing groups, and we talk a lot about process and publication. Your book has been hugely successful but obviously it wasn't written in a day. Could you talk a bit about your process, not necessarily doing the research, but just sitting down and knocking this out? How did you approach a big project like this?*

Harden: It goes back to the story of Shin's life. This is a story that has a wonderful arc to it. So it was easy to write. It has a clear beginning: a little boy goes with his mom to watch a public execution. It has the awful scene when Shin, at age 13, betrays his mother and brother. There's his magical encounter with Park, who teaches him about the outside world, and then there's the amazing escape, with Shin crawling over Park's electrocuted body. I tried to take maximum advantage of these scenes to make the story irresistible to the readers. Then I tried to fold in reportage about North Korea, but without drowning the story in context. It was relatively easy to organize and write. Reporters don't come across stories like this very often. If you are a reporter and if you do stumble across a powerful human story, my advice is to drop everything and pursue it. Go as deep into it as you can. Shin presented lots of problems for me as a reporter. He is a really smart person with a phenomenal memory. But he was also very traumatized when I met him. Some of the most interesting and important parts of his story caused him pain to talk about. So what I did was slowly nibble at the details he was willing to offer, going back again and again to make the narrative as rich as possible. I probably should have waited longer and got more detail. But I tried my best. What makes for a readable book about a remote country is

a character-driven adventure story, one that makes a reader's heart beat quickly and painlessly increases understanding. Shin's story does that. **Y**