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Only Beautiful Please: A British Diplomat In North Korea



Synopsis

Coverage of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) all too often focuses solely on nuclear proliferation, military parades, and the personality cult of its leaders. As the British ambassador to North Korea, John Everard had the rare experience of living there from 2006, when the DPRK conducted its first nuclear test, to 2008. While stationed in Pyongyang, Everard's travels around the nation provided him with numerous opportunities to meet and converse with North Koreans. Only Beautiful, Please goes beyond official North Korea to unveil the human dimension of life in that hermetic nation. Everard recounts his impressions of the country and its people, his interactions with them, and his observations on their way of life. He also provides a picture of the life of foreigners in this closed society, considers how the DPRK evolved to its current state, and offers thoughts on how to tackle the challenges that it throws up, in light of the failure of current approaches. The book is illustrated with often striking photographs taken by Everard during his stay in North Korea.

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Customer Reviews

This is an incredible book, and it is one of my two favorites of all of the many books and videos I have consumed about North Korea, a fascinatingly isolated place, that is seemingly trapped in a time warp. John Everard was an ambassador to North Korea from the U.K. at a fascinating time (i.e., on the heels of the great famine of the 1990s, as private markets start to become more openly accepted in North Korea, and people are less inclined to treat their leaders, who let them starve, as gods). I found Everard's writing style to be very engaging. Everard's ways of trying to see the real North Korea, even as a privileged ambassador, is enriching. Besides his friendships with staff and others, his book reveals that he was able to get a measure of freedom by bicycling around independently (well, sometimes he was trailed by government officials, but those are fun stories, too.) He brings a traveler's spirit, and a real compassion for the people of the country, to his writing that I both respected and enjoyed. Most importantly, Everard shares his personal and political insights into the country in a very engaging and effective manner, always with full disclosure of the benefits and limits of his experience. He is clear with the reader when he is pretty sure he is getting the real story (i.e., through confirmation by multiple, unnamed sources) versus the government's version of the story (i.e., the kinds of pre-planned visits to classrooms provided to ambassadors). It is literally a life and death matter to protect the privacy of sources, so sourcing issues are challenging for books on North Korea. Those books that do not handle it as well as this one leave the reader unsure of what to believe.

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