

*Comrades and Strangers:
Behind the Closed Doors of
North Korea*

By Michael Harrold
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Review by John Feffer

Michael Harrold worked as an editor in a strange country for seven years. He met a girl, courted her, and lost her. He learned the language and made some friends, but confesses, in the end, that he only scratched the surface of the culture. He put up with a great deal of tedium, drank more than he customarily did, and, like many expats, had a few extraordinary experiences. Then he got into a fight and left the country under a cloud.

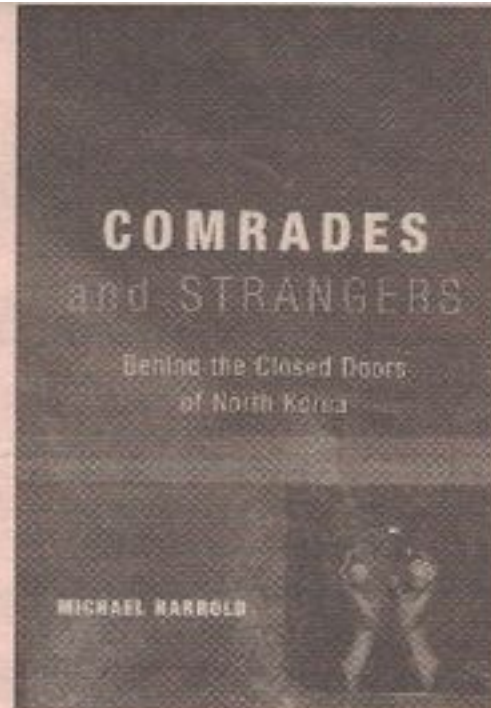
All of this would probably not add up to a 400-page book if the strange country were not North Korea. Few foreigners have an opportunity to spend more than a couple weeks in the country. Those who stay longer usually don't kiss and tell. But Harrold is neither journalist nor diplomat. He changes the names of the characters in his book, but otherwise reveals a great deal about what little he saw — namely, a narrow slice of Pyongyang life in the 1980s and 1990s.

Harrold is an odd narrator. He's rather like Chance the gardener from Jerzy Kozinski's novel *Being There*, a naïf who seems willfully ignorant of the political intrigues that swirl about him as he attempts to enjoy the simple pleasures of Pyongyang. He was not drawn to North Korea for ideological reasons. He simply wanted a year or two of adventure. Inertia — and perhaps the promise of marrying a nice North Korean girl — kept him there longer. He puts up with extraordinary invasions of privacy, fulfills the often ludicrous demands of his employers while editing the writings of Il Sung Kim, and encounters social obstacles that would have easily frustrated the more adventurous. Initially for the adventure, Harrold ultimately settles for more conformity than even a British civil servant must endure,

draw and ate and played pool with them. His liaison with a North Korean barmaid even prompts him to ask whether honorary membership in the Korean Workers' Party is an option. It is a flirtation with all of the heightened nuance and delayed gratification of a Jane Austen novel. The bottom line, though, is that the North Korean authorities frown on marriage with outsiders, so Harrold never gains entry to North Korean society through the marital back door.

Just as his extensive interactions with the locals confound expectations, our hero reveals, in story after story, a society that is more dynamic than conventionally thought. He teaches a class at Kim Il Sung University and the students want to know if he has visited the private markets. Several acquaintances besiege him with requests to form import-export businesses, culminating in a proposal to unload a ton of dried seal penises on some worthy country. He buys beers for friends and gives their children chocolates. He wanders more or less freely around Pyongyang, playing snooker, shopping in department stores, riding the metro. But there are always invisible lines that, when crossed, demonstrate that, however privileged Harrold might have been, he was still living a very circumscribed life.

At the international festival of youth that Pyongyang hosted in 1989, Harrold catches a glimpse of what might be: A North Korea that follows the same trajectory of *glasnost* as the Soviet Union. "The crowds roaming the street were made up of Koreans and foreigners, mixing in a perfectly natural way," he writes. "I ran into Koreans I knew, waiters and waitresses, barmaids, interpreters and drivers, friends and acquaintances, some of whom were such casual acquaintances I scarcely recognized them, people who at other times might not even have risked acknowledging me, but who now stopped and chatted, and invited me to join them for a bite to eat or a drink; actually to sit with them in the open air, in public, and talk."



Harrold protests that his bloody and bruised face proves that, on the contrary, he is the victim.

But it isn't the physical blows that upset Harrold. Rather, it is the reaction of the "silent, blank-faced" crowd that gathered around the fight: "these were waitresses and cleaners, doormen and managers, people I'd talked to and joked with, shared cigarettes with and for whose children I'd bought chocolates. They'd watched in silence. Not one of them had shown any sorrow, any sympathy." Several days later a North Korean acquaintance sees him at a department store and shouts out to the surrounding shoppers, "Do you know what this bastard did? He should be in prison."

Craving acceptance — even to the point of acting in a North Korean film — Harrold discovers that in the end he is just a foreigner, a citizen of an imperialist country at that. The state publishing house terminates his editing contract, and he leaves.

Fortunately this is not the end of the story, for Harrold is invited back the next year to an arts festival that features, among other grotesqueries, a pro-wrestling tournament. A young, green-haired Japanese woman wrestler punishes her opponent before what one can only imagine to be a bemused North Korean audience, in an event presided over by none other than punch-drunk Muhammad Ali.

Although Harrold's narrative does not thrill with high drama, it does paint an interesting picture of social interactions within the North Korean elite. His seven years were not spent in complete isolation. He met dozens of locals —

But this is just a brief period of openness before the regime, frightened at what happened in Eastern Europe later that year, clamps down. Harrold hangs on until 1994. His departure is abrupt. One night, he gets into an altercation with a drunk outside a hotel. Blows are exchanged. The authorities claim that the North Korean fellow is in bad condition at the hospital.

This return visit is an opportunity for Harrold to see North Korea as others do. No longer Chance the gardener, he observes, "The obsession with the great leader that had once seemed harmless, even beneficial as a unifying factor, now looked like the self-serving manipulation of an entire society's thinking aimed at preserving, through the exaltation of its figurehead, a political system lacking a sound moral basis."

Yet Harrold retains a certain nostalgia for the time when he had been able to understand the North Korean way of life, however bizarre to Western sensibilities, when surveillance was normal and self-censorship the norm: "While there, I had learned to appreciate a unique country, its strange politics and, above all, its people and their warmth and good humour." Still, when invited back to his old job, he declines the offer. The famine is beginning and he doesn't want to eat food that is increasingly precious. Nor does he feel comfortable with the growing influence of the army. He moves on to China, and then to Poland, where he lives today.

Overly long, perhaps, and with more mundane details than are absolutely necessary, *Comrades and Strangers* is still a fascinating book. Through it, a reader can learn in an afternoon what took Michael Harrold seven years.