



**Anna Fifield.** *The Great Successor: The Secret Rise and Rule of Kim Jong Un.* New York: Hachette Book Group, 2020. 336 pp. \$17.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-5293-8725-4.

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Kim Jong Un rules more than twenty-five million North Koreans with a repressive and isolated methodology that often defies belief. As the third-generation dictator of the Kim family, he continues to baffle historians, critics, and neighbors with his survival and, by some measures, successful rule. Despite sometimes being perceived on the international stage as more of a caricature than legitimate statesman, Kim remains firmly in control of an autocratic government and holds the same near-deity status among the people of North Korea that his father and grandfather enjoyed.

In *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un*, Anna Fifield weaves a captivating story of his often surreal existence, while painting an informative and intriguing picture of North Korean economic, military, and diplomatic policy under Kim. Fifield's extensive research and knowledge enable her to make a story that is sometimes reminiscent of a dystopian novel believable in every word. Fifield is the Beijing bureau chief for *The Washington Post*. She previously covered Japan and the Koreas for the *Post* and was the Seoul correspondent for the *Financial Times*. She has reported from more than twenty countries and has visited North Korea a dozen times. She was a Nieman journalism fellow at Harvard University, and in 2018, she received the Shorenstein Journalism Award from Stanford

University for her coverage of Asia. The book is based on her extensive experience covering and visiting North Korea as well as hundreds of hours interviewing diplomats, government officials from all over the world, escapees from North Korea, and people who know Kim.

This book is divided into three sections. The first is devoted to the history of the Kim regime and the secretive childhood and adolescence of Kim Jung Un and his siblings. Fifield describes the multiple relationships and children of Un's father, Kim Jong-Il, and some of the reasons Un was chosen to be the successor. The stories of Un's life in Switzerland defy belief with their normalcy when compared to the life he lived before and since in North Korea. Un lived the quiet life of an affluent teenager and aggressively pursued his love of basketball. The focus on this otherwise insignificant teenage hobby lays groundwork for understanding interactions of the Kim regime with enigmatic American basketball star Dennis Rodman, covered in fascinating detail later in the book. The section concludes by describing the deliberate methods Un's father used to ensure peaceful succession by his son.

Part 2 is about Kim's ascension to power after his father's death and the early years of his leadership. This is the longest and most compelling portion of the book. Despite the memes and comedi-

ans who have had a field day with the unlikely dictator, Fifield describes the skillful ways that Kim, not yet thirty, consolidated power in a society where age commands respect. While acknowledging various world leaders and analysts who question his rationality, the book makes clear that regime survival is the preeminent consideration in all Kim's decisions. Further, the author helps readers understand the sometimes perverse but very rational calculations behind his behavior. One recurring topic of the book is Kim's management of the delicate leadership balance between satisfying the population with just enough quality of life improvements and instilling the necessary fear to avoid a popular uprising. After taking power, he skillfully allowed a level of marketization in North Korea that placates both the kleptocrats surrounding him and the North Korean population. At the same time, he was merciless toward those he deemed a threat, most notably, his own brother, Kim Jong-nam, whose 2017 assassination is described in detail. Un's success at juggling the carrot and stick is hard to dispute and the author describes this balance in vivid detail.

The last section is all about North Korea's growing nuclear weapons program and the relationship between Kim and US president Donald Trump. Since the author established regime survival as Kim's primary motivation, here she provides a detailed summary of the path to a nuclear bomb and the aggressive and very personal role that Kim played in the program. Based on Kim's awareness of the fate of Muammar al-Gaddafi, she convincingly portrays his view of the nuclear weapon as the only tool preventing the United States from forcing a regime change in North Korea. Defying traditional deliberate diplomatic process, Kim and President Trump's meetings made compelling news without much substantive progress toward real de-nuclearization of North Korea, according to the author. Fifield describes how Kim successfully avoided war, improved his relationship with President Xi Jinping of China, and won, if not the formal lifting, at least signifi-

cant lessening of the sanctions imposed on North Korea for its nuclear weapons program. Fifield makes it clear that Kim is quite a cunning diplomat and negotiator when it suits his purposes. If forced to pick a winner in the Trump-Kim competition, Fifield appears to believe it was the Korean.

This is a book for the casual reader, a student of history, or an experienced diplomat. For those who have professional reasons to understand North Korea, the author's extensive experience and research provide as detailed a description of the mysterious Kim as any classified intelligence analysis from the Western world can likely match. What the book does not do in any length is suppose who or what comes after Kim. He is described in the book as "five foot, seven inches tall, and his weight is estimated to be about 300 pounds" (p. 256). This is not a healthy description for any person, and it is difficult to imagine Kim ruling for many decades to come. Regardless, this story is compelling and the subject matter extraordinarily relevant. *The Great Successor* is a recommended read for anyone interested in understanding Kim and his regime.

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