



Discussion Questions for *The Girl with Seven Names* by Hyeonseo Lee and David John

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I was very taken with this book and read it twice in just a few days. I have been curious about North Korea and bought this and another book very recently. I also know someone who escaped from a different country with a much shorter story, so I found it intriguing. I can't image what so many immigrants went through to get to other countries.

Here are my discussion questions:

Why do you think Hyeonseo Lee says leaving North Korea is not like leaving any other country on earth?

What does Hyeonseo Lee mean by saying a single Korea does not exist?

How did she feel when she found out North Korea is a byword for evil?

When there was a fire, why did her father rescue the portraits? Who were the people on the portraits?

How and where did her parents meet and how long was it between their first and second meetings? Why was there another wedding with her mother first?

How does Hyeonseo Lee describe the caste system that operates in North Korea?

Why is it impossible to rise within the system?

How did her grandmother's safekeeping of the cards ensure the family's high *Songbun*?

How did the grandmother prevent the marriage for some time, and almost have the baby adopted?

How does bribery work in North Korea? Was Hyeonseo Lee's family involved? When did the system with bribery begin?

What were some of her seven names and when did she acquire each?

Her birth name was Kim Ji-hae.

The second name was Park Min-young. Why? When did she get this name?

Who gave her the third name? Chae Mi-ran.

Then she was to be a Korean-Chinese called Jang Soon-hyang. Why?

What were her other names? Why did she assume them?

She lived in several places in North Korea with her family.

What was Hyesan like?

What was it like in Anju?

Then they relocated—to North Korea's second-largest city, Hamhung. What was good about living in Hamhung?

It was at school in Hamhung that she received her initiation into "life purification time," or self-criticism sessions, a basic feature of life in North Korea since introduced by Kim Jong-il in 1974. How did she and her friends deal with these sessions?

Then the family moved back to Hyesan. Kindness toward strangers is rare in North Korea. There is a risk in helping others. What unusual episode happened when they were going to take the train back?

In Hyesan, the second house they lived in seemed to be cursed. What happened?

Mothers superstitions drove her to fortune tellers. What story from a fortune teller became a kind of deliverance myth, that Hyeonseo Lee would remember in moments of danger?

When and why was winter the time for school vacation?

Aunt Pretty had an appendectomy. Discuss what happened.

The care of portraits was very important. Hyeonseo Lee states:

"About once a month, officials wearing white gloves entered every house in the block to inspect the portraits. If they reported a household for failing to clean them—we once saw them shine a flashlight at an angle to see if they could discern a single mote of dust on the glass—the family would be punished." How did these inspections control the population?

What is another example of capitalistic thinking in North Korea that could be punished, such as putting clothes on dogs, a well-known example of capitalist degeneracy?

What were the holidays and how were they celebrated?

February 16 Day of the Bright Star

April 15 Day of the Sun

What were the mass games for Liberation Day on 15 August? Why were they the most sacred dates in the calendar?

How did they celebrate the Day of Victory in the Great Fatherland Liberation War (the Korean War) on July 27th?

Party Foundation Day, on 10 October.

What kind of information was taught in school regarding history?

When was the famine?

Why was there a campaign in 1992 called "Let us eat two meals a day."

What was the real cause of the famine? Did the North Koreans know the real reason?

How does the North Korean system continue to this day, and how does the organized system of surveillance on every family contribute? Does Hyeonseo Lee think North Korea will change anytime soon?

What did people do on the weekends?

Is schooling in North Korea really free?

What happens if someone in North Korea is caught with a Bible?

Hyeonseo Lee found out her father was not her biological father. How did she react?

What were the classes at school, and what topic was the most important?

What was the math problem example shared in the book?

Are North Koreans able to travel to other countries?

Can they watch foreign television?

Who arrested Hyeonseo Lee's father?

What are the two kinds of prisons in North Korea?

What was the reason Hyeonseo Lee gave for terrible drunken fights breaking out among men in Hyesan during the public holidays?

What did the mother do when the death certificate of the father said suicide?

Why did school close on the 8th of July, 1994? What happened over the next days? How did Hyeonseo Lee deal emotionally with these events?

What did the students know about sex? Menstruation?

What besides food was in short supply during the famine? What did school children have to bring to school in order to help?

Did all the provinces experience the famine in the same way at first? How did Hyeonseo Lee know?

How many students in Hyeonseo Lee's class were in the songbun 'hostile' category? What did this mean for their futures?

When did Hyeonseo Lee see Changba? How did she feel looking back at Hyesan?

Why do you suppose there were none of the heavy green military trucks, the most common vehicles around Hyesan in Chanagba?

Her uncle and aunt made her feel instantly welcome. What did Uncle Jung-gil and Aunt Sang-hee do for a living?

She became almost engaged. When did she run away?

Why did Hyeonseo Lee move to Xita, Koreatown?

What did she learn about South Korea and North Koreans who succeeded in reaching Seoul?

What happened to her at the Police 'Xita Road Station'?

Hyeonseo Lee was attacked with a full beer bottle. What happened and why? Who did she think did that to her?

Four years of frugal living meant that she had saved enough to pay a broker to find her family in Hyesan. It was many years later when she saw them again. Explain the travel and situations that happened, and how it appeared to be impossible several times.

Who were some of the people, bribed and not bribed, who helped her along the way back to Seoul with her mother and brother?

Why couldn't she tell she was related to her mother or brother on the trip to Seoul?

What is Hanawon? Where is it? What is the curriculum? Who attends?

How long did it take for the mother and son to reach Seoul after Hyeonseo returned again?

Why did Hyeonseo Lee and her then-boyfriend break up when her mother and brother arrived?

What work did the mother do in Seoul? Was she used to such work?

Why did both the mother and the son want to return to North Korea? Did they go back?

What are the two kinds of people who leave North Korea and how do they adjust to living in Seoul? Why?

The book does not have a happily ever after ending. What are the problems people who leave North Korea face for the rest of their lives?

Why was Hyeonseo Lee flown to California? To Australia?

Where did she get married?

How has this book affected you?