

Summary of A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Human Story Retold Through Our Genes: Conversation Starters

Pages: 59

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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Summary

of

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Conversation Starters

By BookHabits

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First Published in the United States of America 2017

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Introducing PRE-ORDER

A River in Darkness tells the true story of Masaji Ishikawa and his escape from North Korea. Ishikawa explains that many people try to cross the Yalu River that separates North Korea and China in order to escape North Korea. However, not everyone is successful. Nearly three decades before people were trying to escape from North Korea to China, people were trying to escape from China to North Korea. This was because China was going through its Cultural Revolution and what was called the "Great Leap Forward." These events caused a mass starvation to happen in China. Now, the same was happening in North Korea.

Ishikawa explains some of the history of North Korea throughout A River in Darkness. He talks about the town of Hyesan that is known for producing coal and copper and the Pochonbo area about twelve miles from Hyesan. Pochonbo is known for a battle that happened there in 1937 between the Koreans and the Japanese. The Japanese occupied part of Korea, and Korea wanted them out of the country. The Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Corps was led by Kim Il-sung, and they obliterated the Japanese army. Pochonbo became known as the "Holy Land of Revolution" because of this. There is a statue of Kim Il-sung in the city and a giant monument for the revolution in the city.

The Holy Land of Revolution became the place famous for being the place people would congregate as they were trying to escape North Korea. Because so many people were trying to escape, the Holy Land of Revolution became monitored by security guards 24 hours a day. There were horrifying stories Ishikawa heard about people who tried to escape. Ishikawa never knew if they were true or just propaganda produced by the state to keep the people from attempting to leave.

One of the worst stories Ishikawa heard was about a family of four who escaped to China. He refers to this story as the "nose-ring case." Once the family was in China, the North Korean police found them there. The police got wire and pushed it through all of their noses, and they were linked together by their noses. When the police brought the family of four through Chinese customs, the customs officers were shocked. They told the North Korean police that these things were not allowed in China. This angered the North Korean police, and as soon as they stepped foot on North Korean soil, they shot the entire family.

Masaji Ishikawa's story began in Japan. His mother was Japanese and his father was Korean. During this time in Japan, it was hard for Koreans to assimilate into Korean culture. Koreans were looked down upon by the Japanese. To survive these times, Koreans formed their own communities in order to look after each other. There was also a lot of North Korean propaganda circulating around Japan at this time. People were promised that if they moved to North Korea they would have a great life. They and their families would be prosperous. They would have everything they ever dreamed they could have. These were all lies in order to get people to migrate back to North Korea. Eventually, Ishikawa and his family made the journey back to North Korea when Ishikawa was thirteen years old.

When the family got to North Korea, they realized that life was going to be brutal. They often did not have food or any other basic necessities one would need in order to survive. There were few jobs in the country, as well, and each family was put on meager food rations. Often people would work all day and night only to earn a small amount of food. In addition, the government was monitoring everything they did and said. People, including Ishikawa's family, were worried that if they said anything suspicious they could be considered traitors. This could lead to them being placed in a concentration camp.

As he got older, Ishikawa made it his goal to escape to China from North Korea. He made his way to Hyesan. When he arrived, it had been two days since he had eaten. He went to the market right away, but he had no money to buy anything. He went looking for food that had been dropped on

the ground and finally spotted a corn cob with hardly any kernels left on it. As he looked around the area, he spotted many other homeless people. One child in particular reminded him of his own children, but the thoughts were too painful for him. In Hyesan, he had no place to sleep so the bushes in the park were his bed.

The following day, he made his way to the river to scope it out. The first thing he noticed was that the river was much more narrow than he imagined it being. He also noticed there were guards every fifty yards along the river. He made the statement that if the river were frozen, he could have crossed it in seconds, though it would have been enough time for him to be killed. The first day, he noticed a woman washing her clothes by the river. A child carried something across the river to a man on the other side, and the guards did nothing. However, when the woman went more than a yard into the river, the guard shouted at her to get back.

When Ishikawa went back to the river that night, the moonlight was too bright for him to cross, and the guards were out patrolling. He decided he should wait for a darker night to cross the river. Finally, after two days of waiting, he made the decision that it was a safe time to cross the river. He hid in the bushes by the river to wait for his chance to cross. He was too weak to get back up after he laid down, but he used the last bit of inner strength left to stand up and make his attempt. Then, the river became stronger and faster.

Ishikawa no longer cared if he was shot by a guard because he was going to die soon anyway. He tried to swim across the river, but he hit his head on something and he was swept downstream. When he woke up, he was lying on a riverbank and saw a light on in the distance. He immediately thought to himself that turning a light on at night would be considered treason in North Korea. This was his first clue that he was no longer in North Korea.

Discussion Questions

A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Human Story Retold Through Our Genes by Adam Rutherford and Siddhartha Mukherjee: Conversation Starters

A Brief Look Inside:

EVERY GOOD BOOK CONTAINS A WORLD FAR DEEPER than the surface of its pages. The characters and their world come alive, and the characters and its world still live on. Conversation Starters is peppered with questions designed to bring us beneath the surface of the page and invite us into the world that lives on.

These questions can be used to create hours of conversation:

• Foster a deeper understanding of the book
• Promote an atmosphere of discussion for groups
• Assist in the study of the book, either individually or corporately
• Explore unseen realms of the book as never seen before

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