

The Prisoner

Hwang Sok-yong

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Verso Books (Aug 3, 2021)

Hardcover \$34.95 (688pp)

978-1-83976-083-9

For many, the Korean peninsula is shrouded in mystery. In his memoir *The Prisoner*, esteemed writer and democracy activist Hwang Sok-yong illuminates the turbulence of twentieth-century Korean politics to reveal a society seeking freedom, but still caught in the ravages of the Cold War.

The story opens in 1989, as Hwang returns home after four years in exile, having broken the taboo against visiting North Korea. He is arrested at the airport and is dragged, blindfolded, to an underground room. After twenty days of interrogation by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, he is sentenced to five years in prison.

The arrest was not his first.

Born in Manchuria, Hwang's early childhood was spent in Pyongyang, until his family fled south during the Korean War. With bold imagery and epic in its scope, his raw, disturbing narrative flashes between personal and political accounts. The writer and activist is seen at the forefront of South Korea's democracy movement—being incarcerated, protesting military dictatorships, serving as a soldier, and traveling abroad. He also covers the political realities of his divided country, and the machinations of the world powers that are intent on keeping the Koreas divided and subservient. The effects of the Korean peninsula's politics on its people are at the fore as Hwang documents their perilous fight for freedom and reveals his role in unmasking the realities of life in a divided Korea.

The Prisoner is a passionate, detailed memoir about the activist's "canary in the coal mine" role. It warns that "a society where artists have lost their faculty of criticism and submit unconditionally to power is well on its way to losing its democracy."

KRISTINE MORRIS (July / August 2021)

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