



LEAVING CHINA

An Artist Paints His World War II Childhood

JAMES McMULLAN

BOOK TALK:

In the author's own words: "This story of my peripatetic life during the Second World War, and of my family's beginnings in China, is also a story of that nervous boy gradually finding his strength in art and a way to be in the world that was not his father's or mother's idea of a man's life."

MARCH

YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION

Ages 12 and up, grades 7 and up

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55 full-color illustrations

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JAMES McMULLAN is an award-winning illustrator whose work has appeared in a variety of books for adults and young readers. He has been internationally recognized for his seventy posters for Lincoln Center Theater. McMullan received the *New York Times* Best Illustrated Book award in 2002 for the picture book *I Stink!* and was also awarded with the Society of Illustrator's prestigious Hamilton King Award.



PRAISE FOR *LEAVING CHINA*:

"James McMullan's book is so hauntingly evocative that it made me nostalgic for a time and a place I never experienced."
—Gene Luen Yang, author of *American Born Chinese*, *Boxers*, and *Saints*

"Hypnotic . . . Presented to the reader with the lilt and lyricism of a fairy tale. *Leaving China* is a picture and prose poem, exotic and deeply personal."
—Jules Feiffer

"Who knew that behind all those wonderful watercolors I have admired since coming to New York are all these magic memories of childhood? It is like finding pearls inside unexpected shells."
—Peter Sís, author of *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*

"Evocative and sensitive . . . The paintings bring significant emotional and cultural context to this story of a young artist's struggle for self-acceptance."
—*The New York Times*

★ "A fascinating, seamless portrait of a young life and the wartime world that will have appeal not only to young readers but to adults as well."
—*Booklist*, starred review

READER'S GUIDE

1. James McMullan's first memory is vivid: as a two-year-old, he threw a grape while playing with his neighbor's dog, and the dog attacked him, leaving him with a huge gash that required stitches. Why do you think McMullan chose to begin *Leaving China* with this memory? How does it set the tone for the rest of the book?
2. The McMullan mission kept many baby girls alive. What is your understanding of infanticide at this time in China? How did the author's grandparents' work to combat infanticide shape their lives? The author wonders whether some of the surrogates the McMullans used for nursing may in fact have been the actual mothers of the babies. Why does he think that might have happened?
3. The author's parents met in Canada but went to China to start their married life. His father wanted to be a musician, but after he married he joined the family business instead to support his new wife and stepchildren. In what ways might the author's life have been different if his parents had remained in Canada?
4. When the Japanese invaded Cheefoo, life changed for all the expatriates there. Intimidation and anxiety became everyday challenges during the military occupation. Think about the changes the author describes in the book. Which one do you think affected him and his family the most?
5. The war created many disruptions for the McMullans, but it also led to exciting new experiences. The author and his mother traveled extensively around the world, sometimes staying with family and friends. What were some of the benefits and difficulties of this travel?
6. In memoirs, authors write about their lives based on remembrances. James McMullan also uses illustrations to tell his story. Talk about the use of illustration in *Leaving China*. What artistic elements does the author use to convey his story? What does the art reveal about McMullan's thoughts and feelings that the words don't?
7. The author struggles with pleasing his parents and becoming the "strong little fellow" (page 68), that they expect him to be. Do you think young Jimmie succeeds in becoming the son they envisioned? If the author had been born when you were born, do you think his parents would have had different expectations for him?
8. How does the author portray his mother? Choose five words that describe his mother. What are five words that describe his father?
9. What passage or experience stood out most for you in this story? Did you find that your favorite written passage and favorite illustrations describe the same events?
10. Discuss some of the key characters the author remembers: his aunt Rose, his grandfather, his cousin Alan, General Sir Adrian Carton de Wiart, Mr. Ryan, the Russian painter, and the author's few friends. What was important to the author about each of them?
11. What are some of the themes and symbols in the illustrations that stand out to you? How would you describe the style of these illustrations? If you're familiar with other works by James McMullan, how are the illustrations in those works similar to or different from the ones in *Leaving China*?
12. At the end of the book, the author and his mother go back to live on Salt Spring Island? Does this choice surprise you? Why do you think that's the final event the author describes before summarizing his life since that time in "All the Rest, Very Briefly"?
13. The author describes himself as a "sissy kid" that others made fun of (page 58). He also describes himself as having a "timid, introspective personality" (page 62). How do you see him? List some of the qualities you see in him, and use specific passages to support your view.
14. Find passages throughout the book that show his attitudes and feelings about his own personality. Who were positive role models for him? Who helped him accept himself? Who encouraged him?
15. McMullan's descriptions of his father's love of music, clothing, and the "smart set" social life fill many pages. His father's military career and his mild guilt for not being more like his Christian missionary parents are also highlighted. What do you think the author's feelings were toward his father? What words and phrases show what McMullan thought about his father? Did he show a closeness with his father? Give specific examples from the text.
16. McMullan's relationship with his mother was also complex and charged with many emotions. Watching his mother prepare flower arrangements, as well as drinking and socializing while his father was away, led to conflicting feelings. Give specific examples of illustrations and written passages that express his thoughts and feelings about his mother.
17. There are several passages and illustrations that show young Jimmie experiencing art: looking at the Chinese scrolls in the family home in Cheefoo (page 44); in Salt Spring Island, where he saw the Russian painter doing a landscape (page 66); and when he was drawing superheroes for his friends (page 92). Describe these experiences in your own words. Contrast them with his sports and school descriptions in the book. What conclusions can you draw from your observations?

This guide was written by JoAnn Jonas, MLIS librarian, teacher/educator, youth materials specialist, and book reviewer.



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