A Boat to Nowhere Short Guide

A Boat to Nowhere by Maureen Crane Wartski

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

A Boat to Nowhere Short Guide....................1

Contents....................2

Overview....................3

About the Author....................4

Setting....................6

Social Sensitivity....................7

Literary Qualities....................8

Themes and Characters....................10

Topics for Discussion....................12

Ideas for Reports and Papers....................13

For Further Reference....................14

Related Titles....................16

Copyright Information....................17

Overview

This is not overtly or particularly a story about the Vietnam War. It is, rather, about the effects of any war on the quality of individual lives—the dislocations, emotional terrors, and physical sufferings that national conflicts bring to the lives of all citizens.

Wartski personally experienced the American-Japanese war, and she lived in southeast Asia just as the American Vietnamese War was building. In her Vietnam visits during this time, she saw the devastation already apparent after the earlier, ten-year French-Vietnam war that had ostensibly ended in 1954 with the Geneva Accords but never in fact resolved any of the issues that fed that anticolonial conflict. Thus, her empathy with and continuing interest in what happened in Southeast Asia—as well as her own ethnicity—fueled this story about Vietnamese boat people. Even though the experiences are not directly hers, the book rings true because it is about "issues and characters I myself could honestly understand and appreciate."

Although this is not primarily a political story, Wartski is clearly biased against the "New Government of Vietnam," her fictional name for the Hanoiled Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) that abruptly ended American involvement in the Vietnam war when it entered Saigon on April 30, 1975. She suggests the welldocumented ruthlessness of its "cleansing tactics" toward any Vietnamese citizens who did not agree with its policies, principally excessive taxation of already impoverished villages and eradication of centuries-old traditions by local "re-education" or, worse, total reprogramming in concentration-like "resettlement" camps. Her anger is directed as well, however, at human cowardice, greed, and malice of all kinds, and not all of her villains are Communist.

It must be noted that this book and its sequel, A Long Way from Home, were published in 1980, just five years after America officially quit Vietnam and before the U.S. had begun to adjust to its failures there. The war and its veterans were an embarrassment to Americans; the Southeast Asian refugees pouring into the country often generated Americans' resentment rather than sympathy; and the national healing that began with the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial on November 11, 1982, was barely a hope.

Wartski realized that "it would be an unusual publisher who would take a chance" on such a "painful [and] controversial" subject as the Vietnam war and its aftermath. Westminster Press undertook the challenge, and though the books received some negative reactions (too "real," "too frightening for younger" readers), they were generally applauded for their honesty and timeliness. In fact, in 1980 A Boat to Nowhere won the distinguished Annual Book Award of the Child Study Committee at Bank Street College of Education for "dealing honestly and courageously with problems in the world." Nor is it out of date in the light of perceptions of the Vietnam War today.

About the Author

Maureen Ann Crane was bornJanuary 25, 1940, in Ashiya, Japan, a beautiful community on the Inland Sea, to Albert Edwin Crane,businessman, and Josephine Wagen Crane, a teacher from Geneva, Switzerland. Though not with great clarity, Maureen remembers the soundWorld War II bombs raining on nearby Kobe and Osaka; she was not evacuated to a war-free countryside, andthese sensory memories have fueled the strong antiwar stance that permeates all her work. Because of the war's disruption and devastation, she was taught at home by her keenly intellectual Uncle Harry; she could recite Shakespeare's Julius Caesar at five and had read literary classics in English and French by ten. She was, in fact, so advanced that, after formal elementary schooling at a convent school, she skipped seventh grade and completed her junior and senior high schooling at the Canadian Academy in Ashiya by seventeen. During the school years, on what she really "wanted to do was write;" she regrets that she did not learn as a child to write Japanese, the a language she spoke fluently, but at the young age of fourteen, she published a story in English for a London magazine.

Her professional literary career was officially launched in 1957 when she became a summer free-lance writer for so the Kobe-based English Mainichi, one of Japan's best dailies. She began university studies in 1958 at the University of Redlands in California and received a B.A. in 1962 from Sophia University, a prestigious Jesuit school in Tokyo.

While at Sophia, she met Maximilian Wartski, who was an American serviceman born in Danzig, Germany (now Gdansk, Poland); they were married on June 1, 1962, and Maureen became a naturalized U.S. citizen. The couple lived in Bangkok, Thailand, where Maximilian was posted, from 1962 to 1966; their sons Bert and Mark were born there in 1963 and 1966. During these years Maureen, herself a Eurasian, grew to know and value even more deeply the people and culture of Indochina, where she traveled freely, briefly visiting even Vietnam. After 1966 the Wartskis made their home in Sharon, Massachusetts, where Maureen became a teacher of high school English (and occasionally history) in the Sharon public schools. She continued writing and teaching during the 1970s, using her experiences with young people—her sons and her students—to add realism to the short stories, plays, and four books for young readers that she wrote between 1979 and 1981.

Today she writes full time (sometimes under the name M. A. Crane), more for adult than juvenile audiences.

But she still values young readers, whose "sensitivities and sensibilities have not become blunted, [and whose] experience has not been dulled." In fact, her story about a young Vietnamese girl will appear in a forthcoming anthology about the children of minorities, and she plans other stories for adolescents. Most importantly, whether writing for youth or adult, Wartski always brings relevance, emotional honesty, and intensity to whatever she undertakes.

Setting

The year the novel's events take place is not specifically stated. However, the New (after April 30, 1975) Communist Government is in power and has worked its reforming way down to the southern tip of the Mekong Delta region, to a small (nameless) village that has been effectively hidden—and thus shielded from most of the war—by a thick jungle forest.

The Boat People of this story are clearly not from the group historians call the "first wave" of American-connected refugees who left Vietnam in the last days of the war; nor are they from the "second wave" of Vietnamese migrating northward into China three years later. Rather, they seem to be part of a 1978-1979 "third wave" of disenchanted or fearful people who escaped in fragile boats that set desperate sail across the South China Sea for Thailand and Malaysia.

By this time, however, most Southeast Asian countries had a glut of homeless Vietnamese (as well as Cambodians and Laotians), and, for both political and economic reasons, were turning boatloads away from their shores, back to the sea. Foreign ships that had earlier picked up the hapless victims could no longer find ports of debarkation, and they, too, resigned thousands to watery death. The fictional milieu is indeed based on fact.

The first eighty-two pages of the story take place in the tiny Village, located on an inlet facing the Gulf of Siam, about two hundred miles southwest of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Only six families share a communal, traditional, peaceful existence; the men fish in the bay and do carpentry, while the women cook the rice and vegetables they plant and cultivate.

There is no school building, but all eagerly attend the outdoor lessons given by the aging, erudite Headman whose curriculum stresses Vietnamese history, culture, and tradition. It is, in fact, the violation of ancient "Vietnameseness," so abhorrent in the New Government's methods (as well as in French and American "colonialism"), that prompts the setting suddenly to change. The remaining one hundred six pages take place on the violent waters of the Gulf of Siam and the South China Sea, as the story's Boat People reluctantly flee their homeland. Life in both the Village and on the sea is presented realistically, but especially graphic are Wartski's descriptions of the ocean's alternate premonsoon (thus, before April) storms and calms as the small, open fishing boat flounders in huge seas. Her method of writing a first draft "quickly and spontaneously" serves well in these scenes, which have a gusty vigor that never seems overedited or overwritten. They are, in fact, among the strongest elements in her story.

Social Sensitivity

Anyone reading this book will want to go beyond Dick Teicher's single map to an atlas that puts Vietnam in a larger geographical context—and then on to a source that explains the War. The first is the shorter task. Although Wart2840 A Boat to Nowhere ski has always been consistently antiwar, she is writing in 1980 not of war but of its aftermath; her political stance is not obvious, even though she portrays the post-1975 Communist regime as evil and repressive, a judgment that history confirms. But young readers will want more factual knowledge of the causes and events in a war that absorbed the major world powers for thirty years (1945-1975) and precipitated Boat People—knowledge beyond what they get from intentionally biased modern films and media events— so that they can make up their own minds about the issues that put Thay Van Chi, Kien, Mai, and Loc out to sea.

Wartski's book goes far to erase the image of the "Gook," the offensive term American soldiers first used for the enemy and then for all Vietnamese; each of her four main characters is an individuated human being, a recognizable "person like us" rather than some featureless yellow menace. Further, the anguish of her characters transcends both ethnicity and time; by dramatizing the plight of these refugees, she invites the reader to ponder on contemporary others who are homeless or outcast due, if not to war, to circumstances beyond their control. She looks hard at people who think only of themselves: the Thais who wouldn't save four people; the tanker that wouldn't save three; the pirates and outcasts who cared about none. Although not a conventionally religious person herself, Wartski clearly implies the scriptural sounding (and psychologically valid) belief that survival is possible only by, and worthless without, selfless concern for others; aggressively self-sufficient Kien reluctantly learns to be "his brother's keeper" and thus to make his own life mean something.

This is a hard book to read mindlessly—or to read without seeking more information that will inevitably lead to an awareness of important social issues beyond the Sea Breeze.

Literary Qualities

An obvious strength of this story is its well-paced, suspenseful plot, which Wartski achieves by skillfully intermingling generally believable, fluent conversation and clean, short-sentence narration. As its title indicates, the first, "preparatory" part of the story is from Mai's point of view; readers establish necessary emotional rapport with the characters by seeing everything through the alertly sensitive eyes of a girl, just twelve, who, like Anne Frank, is at the beginning of womanhood. Wartski makes little of Mai's sexuality, but readers (females especially) are likely to respond to the feeling-dominated perspective Mai has on people and events. The last part of the adventure is from Kien's more pragmatic point of view; characters' feelings are secondary to the speed and turbulence of events, which are described with a forceful objectivity that thrusts the emotional burden onto the reader. By subtly adjusting her dialogue and descriptions to fit the two different narrative points of view, Wartski allows readers further access to the complexity of people and events.

She is also a master of suspense through foreshadowing. The opening scene is an attention-getting model of Wartski's skill with creating impending dread, as playful, trusting Loc runs suddenly frightened from the forest.

Throughout, Wartski sows seeds for future events: Grandfather remembers his days sailing the moody South China Sea and speaks of his love for Vietnam; streetwise Kien scorns the ostrich-like naivete of villagers but learns to sail their fishing boat; Loc and Kien, who know hunger, eat village cooking with bottomless zest; "Thais are friendly people;" the refugees hope to avoid pirates and sharks, but not the large boats that ply the China See trade routes; finally, Kien's embittered, lost relationship with the American Jim suggests a more positive American connection at the end. Because of these and many more instances of Wartski's skillful foreshadowing, the relentless inevitable never seems contrived or coincidental.

She movingly develops two important symbols, earth and water. The earth is, of course, Vietnam—both its spirit and its substance. Historians generally agree that the French and Americans never cared to understand the Vietnamese earth-based ethos; they never fully appreciated the perpetual, ongoing devastation to which all sides doomed the country with their bombings, burnings, and defoliations. Not only is the earth a spiritual mother who cradles revered ancestors but, because Vietnam is mainly a rural culture, the earth is also a generous producer of the food which sustains and the forests which protect the people.

Thay Van Chi loves the motherland's history, culture, and traditions as much as the New Government hates them; he holds this spiritual love in his head, but around his neck he carries the bag of Vietnamese sand that becomes his last link with the beloved homeland.

For him the bag of earth is enough as a symbol of Vietnam's Soul; but for Kien, it serves a practical purpose, and in A Long Way from Home, a much-needed goad that pushes him back to his roots.

Water is equally important in the Vietnamese cosmos; geographically, the land has more than two thousand miles of ocean shoreline, to say nothing of two great rivers and their deltas (the Red in the north and the Mekong in the south) and hundreds of smaller ones.

Water is the great Road that brings commerce to the peninsula, yields fish, and nurtures rice, vegetables, and forests. Water is life to the Vietnamese.

And yet in this story, water is also death, either in the form of waves, undrinkable saltwater, or miles of featureless space to be covered.

Wartski uses Vietnamese folksongs not as symbol but to acknowledge its place in national tradition and to highlight important moments: Kien jarringly brings consciousness of the war into the Village with an old song, Oh, rifles are coming close my sister Ah, the cannon is booming, mother!

Why don't you take your baby and run away?

At sea, the family sings a traditional Vietnamese folk song for mutual courage as they tentatively approach the hostile Thai village; the same song sustains them, lashed to the mast, through a hurricane and fills vacant hours as they drift on calm seas; finally they bury the old teacher at sea to "the folksong they had sung on the night of the great storm."

Wartski is a persuasive creator of vivid settings, believable characters, compelling adventure, straightforward style, all of which she puts to the service of an important theme.

Themes and Characters

The powerful, universal theme—that human beings can survive incredibly cruel natural and man-made circumstances in the name of responsibility and love—guides character as well as setting. The main actors in this drama of survival are an adult and three children, who become the Boat People.

Historically, most boatloads of refugees were overladen, some even sinking under the weight of too many people. However, Wartski limits her cast to four, because her purpose is to show individual rather than collective experience and growth. The eldest traveler, village headman and scholar, is Thay (teacher) Van Chi. As the venerated leader of the small village, he is a wise, humane keeper of Vietnam's traditions.

Thus he is the inevitable target for "reeducation" by the New Government; rather than face internment and probably death in their resettlement camp, he reluctantly flees his beloved homeland, taking with him only a few provisions and a bag of its good earth. At first, having been a sailor in his youth, he is a confident leader of his little crew. But exposure, hunger, violent weather, and age eventually take their toll; he weakens and finally, "the wise old eyes had become fixed" in death.

Kien is a fourteen-year-old interloper on the sheltered calm of the village.

Unlike the villagers, he is a veteran of the ugly war; he has lost his parents, home, friends, and illusions; he has run away from orphanages and for years has lived hand to mouth in Saigon and the countryside, in the process developing a brittle, cynical expertise in surviving for and by himself. At first, the villagers resent and fear him, but eventually a bond of mutual dependence grows and he even seems "at home." With the coming of the New Government, Kien's survival skills, though misinterpreted by the simple villagers, become all important and only by his "street smarts" is escape effected. But always Kien is alone and shouts defiantly, "I am Kien! . . . I care for no one! I belong to no one!" Only at the death of Thay Van Chi does he reluctantly accept his "family" and his place as its leader.

Mai is two years younger than Kien, and she too has lost her doctor-father, and then her mother, to the war. But she has been cared for by her grandfather, Thay Van Chi, and is a serious, gentle and emotionally secure girl who struggles at first with resentment and dislike for the brash loner Kien. Eventually she accepts, becomes friends with, and is finally mutually dependent upon the boy whose pragmatic intelligence and endurance help her to be brave and survive. Mai's little brother, Loc, who was also brought from the urban zone of war to the secluded Village by his grandfather, is playful and rambunctious—in fact the only agent of lightness in the story; he is the first to glimpse Kien, the "Monster Man" of the forest, the one who admires the older boy's manly skills, and eventually owes his life to Kien's act of bravery.

Not a human character or even anthropomorphized, the "boat" of the title is nevertheless crucial to the story.

As portrayed in Dick Teicher's helpful line drawings, the Sea Breeze is a twosailed sampan, perhaps thirty feet long.

Originally the village's fishing boat built by Duc the carpenter and jealously manned by Big Tam, his fisherman brother-in-law, "the good old boat" carries the refugees through hurricane winds and water, blistering sun, and pirates' bullets until they reach safety; only then, "somewhere, out on the wide sea, her work done, the Sea Breeze [finishes] her voyage alone." The boat's name, incidentally, is another way Wartski remembers the beauty of her seaside home before it was changed by war: "the sea breeze always blew gently there."

The cast of other characters is small: Hong is Tam's good-hearted but overreactive wife, who, like the other villagers, misunderstands Kien. The representatives of the New Government of Vietnam are villainous in both appearance and actions: their leader, Guyen Thi Lam, is a woman with a shark's smile; with her uniformed, gun-toting henchmen, Dao and Hoa, she callously delivers the New Government's harsh directives, burns books, accepts bribes, and foreshadows the repression to come. Once the voyage has begun, the sea is the chief antagonist. But human enemies abound, too: the Thai villagers who refuse to accept the starving four and turn them back to the sea; the pirates who mindlessly destroy their mast, sail, and oars and then viciously toss Loc into shark-infested waters; Ramirez of the Casa Verde who could have but did not rescue an old man and children; Bac Tong and the other crazed residents of Outcast Island who shelter and feed the four, only to secure the Sea Breeze for themselves. And behind all is the larger, faceless antagonist, the war that alienated and twisted all who experienced its ripple effect.

Topics for Discussion

1. At first the villagers fear and resent Kien, whom they do not know.

Then he helps them, they learn to know, accept, and even like him. But they easily turn on him when he appears to be collaborating with the New Government trio. Why are they unable to accept Kien trustingly?

2. Mai and Loc come from a very different family background than Kien —both socially and economically. Do these differences in nurturing explain their differences in behavior?

3. What seems to have happened between Kien and Jim? Is Kien entirely fair in being so bitter?

4. On the surface, "share and share alike" is a commendable idea. Why is it (or is it not) a good idea when Guyen Thi Lam asks the villagers for their "fair share" of fifty percent?

5. Hong, Mai, and the other females have "traditional" roles in the life of the village. Discuss what this means and why or why not this works.

6. Kien uses deception to escape from the New Government. Would Thay Van Chi employ the same tactics?

Why? Whose way is best? Is lying ever justified?

7. Bac Twong and the others on Outcast Island believed in the "survival of the fittest." Did Thay Van Chi? Did Kien? Explain.

8. Who are the "villains" in this story? Why? Who are the heroes? Why?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. National songs are an important symbol of national pride, and in recent years freedom to sing them has been a major issue in independence movements, notably those of Latvia and Lithuania. Explore what happened to traditional Vietnamese folk music after 1975 at the hands of the Communist government.

2. What happened to the boat people who were saved from the sea? Explore the experiences of Vietnamese refugees who found asylum in Thailand.

3. What was daily life like in the lower Mekong Delta before 1950? What is it like today? Explore possible reasons—geographical, historical, and social—for the differences.

4. What kind of education did Thay Van Chi probably have? What kind would Kien, Mai, and Loc probably have had if they had stayed? Explore the differences between pre- and postwar Vietnamese systems of education.

5. Vietnam was a country with many religious traditions. Which one is most evident in A Boat to Nowhere? Support your views with a brief exploration of major Vietnamese religions.

For Further Reference

Fiction Clark, Ann Nolan. To Stand Against the Wind. New York: Viking, 1978. Written shortly after the war, this story is a well-researched, sympathetic chronicle of a Mekong Delta family as it changes through the war years.

Dunn, Mary Lois. The Man in the Box.

New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968. Written at the peak of America's involvement in the war, this is the tense story of an American flier who is saved from Viet Cong torture and death by kind villagers.

Garland, Sherry. Song of the Buffalo Boy.

New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1992. This compelling book follows the friendship, romance, and struggle for existence of a con-lai (mixed blood) girl and her sweetheart, in settings that reveal rural and urban life in Vietnam from 1973 to 1989.

Graham, Gail. Crossfire: A Vietnam Novel. Illustrated by David Stone Martin. New York: Pantheon, 1972.

This powerful story of a GI and four Vietnamese children alone, floundering in the jungle, and unable to communicate, focuses on the war's bitter blurring of good and evil.

Huynh, Quang Nhuong. The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam.

Illustrated by Vo-Dinh Mai. New York: Harper & Row, 1982. This is a collection of wryly humorous reminiscences that bear on war only at the end.

Lee, Jeanne M. Ba-Nam. Illustrated by the author. New York: Henry Holt, 1987. This picture book, not directly about the war, explains Vietnamese traditions and customs that bear on their reverence for ancestors.

Nonfiction Becker, Elizabeth. America's Vietnam War: A Narrative History. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992. This is a superbly concise, widely knowledgeable, and well-balanced overview of the causes and pursuit of the war by a historian of note.

Hayslip, Le Ly. When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace. New York: Doubleday, 1989. For mature readers, this haunting memoir recalls tradition, family, and wartime youth from a Vietnamese point of view. A film, Heaven and Earth (1993) is partially based on this book.

Hoobler, Dorothy and Thomas. Vietnam Why We Fought: An Illustrated History.

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990.

The pictorial nature of this overview is helpful, as are the excellent chronology, glossary, and bibliography.

Wartski, Maureen Crane. "Writing for Young Adults." Writer (December 1986): 17-19. The author of A Boat to Nowhere discusses her motives and methods for this and some of her other work.

Related Titles

Written on the heels of this book is its sequel A Long Way from Home, which follows Kien, Mai, and Loc as they adjust to a strange new life in America under the sponsorship of a member of the Camelot's crew. Mai and Loc adjust well to their new American family and community life. But Kien, again a loner and misfit, runs away in hope of finding his own place. Life among other Vietnamese refugees in California is as challenging for him—albeit in a different way—as life on the open sea. Kien discovers once again that he can become an integrated person only if he forgets himself.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996