

# The Call Short Guide

## The Call by John Hersey

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# Characters

David Treadup may well be Hersey's most convincing character. He is, as Hersey has admitted, a composite of several missionaries whom he knew, including his father, Roscoe Monroe Hersey, to whom he has dedicated the novel. Unlike Treadup, Roscoe Hersey was a mild person, although totally dedicated. David Treadup, in contrast, pursues his work with boundless energy and ferocity. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with his work.

Over six feet tall and rugged in proportion, he tirelessly covers a circuit of many villages on his Indian motorcycle, giving his science lectures. Intelligent, he acquires early in life a skepticism which never quite disappears, even during that time in his life when he is most devout. His open mind is a result of a teacher he had during high school, Absalom Carter, a physics teacher remarkable for his inventiveness in the classroom, who helps guide his reading habits as well as convincing him to major in science during college. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* is a lifelong inspiration to David, as are the *Dialogues of Plato*. Hersey succeeds in showing that this is a good man not by labelling him as good as he did Major Joppolo in *A Bell for Adano* (1944), but by depicting David's development from childhood through his school years and by showing David in his chosen work on the mission field where his beliefs and integrity are thoroughly tested.

David's wife, Emily Kean Treadup, comes to share his compassion for the people they are serving. Treadup loves her deeply, but their marriage was necessary to him because no single person could go to China as a missionary. She is more sensitive than he to some of the evils in Chinese society, such as the mistreatment of women and the ravages of the drug trade. Her patience and humor bring a stability into David's life which helps counteract his natural intensity.

The Chinese characters are also well drawn. The Chinese who becomes the greatest influence over David when he is a twenty-seven-year-old novice on the mission field is Lin Fu-chen, the founder of the Pekai Middle School where David teaches. He is an upperclass Chinese who speaks English well and is also acquainted with Western culture. He helps the young man become more familiar with Chinese customs and etiquette. A contrast to Lin is Wang, who is only after the material benefits he can get from Westerners.

Later in his career, Treadup will team up with Johnny Wu, a teacher with as much zeal as David himself, to bring literacy to peasant China.

The evangelist who converted Treadup and convinced him to become a missionary is James B. Todd. Todd is a fiery, charismatic preacher who impressed David profoundly when he first met him at Syracuse University while David was an undergraduate. By the time Todd comes to China to practice his evangelism, Treadup's earlier zeal has lessened, and the two are not as close. Todd is an evangelist in the mold of Dwight L. Moody and the present-day Billy Graham.



This long novel is populated with numerous minor characters. They include historical figures such as the young Mao, Chiang Kai Chek, and the Christian General Feng. Hersey also briefly introduces his own family.



## Social Concerns

A child of missionary parents, John Hersey spent the first ten years of his life in Tientsin, China. During this time he acquired a knowledge of conversational Mandarin that he never lost. He had spoken the language before he learned English. He also never lost his love and admiration of the Chinese people. At the age of seventyone, he wrote *The Call*, a novel whose hero is a young missionary stationed in China in the early through mid-1900s.

David Treadup genuinely wants to help the Chinese people. At the offset he differs little from the evangelical fundamentalists by whom he was trained. However, he soon becomes aware that American-style evangelism is not making that much of an impact and decides that education might succeed where Bible pounding so often fails. He begins giving science lectures to young upper-class Chinese because he feels that if they are educated, the population as a whole will benefit. He does not immediately realize that upper-class Chinese do not believe that it is possible to educate the peasantry.

While in France, where thousands of conscripted coolies have been imported to dig trenches, he witnesses the wretchedness and illiteracy of these people. Treadup becomes convinced that it is peasants of China, not the Mandarins, who need educators. He has already faced opposition from the directors of his mission board who insist that Christ is what the Chinese people need above everything else. But when Treadup returns to China he is determined to fight the illiteracy and ignorance of the masses.

What can a few men — despite the intensity of their zeal, and few are more zealous than David Treadup — hope to accomplish by working with the overwhelming masses of Chinese?

Theirs is the oldest extant civilization in the world. Many of their traditionally educated people regard the young missionaries as barbarians, and there is much in this attitude which is all too accurate. But Treadup struggles to make the peasants literate and to introduce scientific concepts that might improve the lives of the people he serves.

# Techniques

In *The Call* Hersey has written a work which involves some of his oldest memories and his deepest interests.

China was the country of his birth, and the first ten years of his life were spent there. Years later he would say that he never quite got over feeling a stranger in the United States. In this book he combined the personal feelings he had for China and its people and a mass of information he had researched on those subjects. The book took eight years to write, and while working on it, he returned to China in 1981 for the first time in thirty-six years. As well as revisiting the scenes of his childhood, he wished to learn what if anything remained of what his father and other missionaries had done in China. Had they contributed anything at all to the development of the modern country?

Actually, as he points out in *The Call*, the Communists had carried out many of the programs his father and other YMCA missionaries had suggested at the turn of the century, programs in such areas as education, sanitation, and agriculture.

David Treadup is like Noah Levinson of *The Wall* (1950, please see separate entry) in that he has a passion to record everything that happens to him from his preparatory school days to the end of his life. He always keeps diaries and writes occasional essays on his experiences. He writes letters frequently to his wife while he is away from their home. His wife Emily writes to her relatives often commenting on David's activities from her own more down to earth viewpoint. Late in life after his interment by the Japanese, Treadup writes an essay he calls "Search" and the narrator/editor often juxtaposes material from this essay, an attempt by Treadup to find a pattern in a life's work he has come to believe meaningless, with David's comments shortly after the event had occurred.

The narrative in its six hundred and ninety pages traces the progress of a career which began in intense fervor to the conclusion reached late in life that God does not exist, and that through all the years what he did was done with no divine aid. The history of modern China from 1905 to the post-World War II takeover by the Communists, and the lives of the characters are carefully meshed in what may be Hersey's "finest novel of contemporary history."

Treadup meets Sun Yat Sen, China's first president after the Revolution of 1912, and his successor Yuan Shih-K'ai who is forced to abdicate, in 1916, leaving the country with no strong central government and at the mercy of competing warlords for a decade. After 1937, when the Japanese occupy most of China, Treadup becomes practically a prisoner of war, and feels that his work has been futile. Returning to China after the war as part of a delegation of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association, Treadup finds that even all the funds that UNNRA has at its disposal cannot effectively counter the corruption and sloth of Chiang Kai Chek's government. After the Communists take over in 1949, he is imprisoned, tried, and exiled from China as an



"enemy of the people" on the basis of trumped up charges attested to by many of the people he had formerly helped.

Hersey uses Treadup's loss of faith as a climax to the novel. His experiences in postwar China are anticlimactic. His former village people in their false testimony seem further proof of the futility of his life's mission.

# Themes

The title of this novel, *The Call*, indicates one of its themes. Many young Americans like David Treadup were convinced that God was directing them to go to China. Once in the place where God had sent them, many must have wondered why their work was so unrewarding. Treadup, late in his life, interred by the Japanese and separated from his vocation decided that he had not really been serving God. He was not even certain any longer that God existed.

Treadup became an educator, and like Hersey himself, this became a lifelong concern. Hersey attended private schools, but became convinced that unless that great reservoir of intelligence in the American population was somehow tapped, the progress of the country would suffer. Everywhere the needs of bright students were slighted. In 1959 Hersey wrote a twenty-eight-page pamphlet for the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, *Intelligence, Choice, and Consent*, in which he defended the right of bright students to an education worthy of their intelligence. A year later came *The Child Buyer* (1960), a satire on the American system of education.

*The Call* is an outline of many things, including an overview of education both in the United States at the turn of the century and on the mission field as well. Chinese history itself is well covered from the end of the Manchu dynasty to the Communist takeover in 1949, from Treadup's first years in China to the time when he was expelled by the Communists who opposed everything the missionaries represented. Much can be learned here of Chinese customs and of their language.

In a time when evangelism is unusually strong in the United States, *The Call* addresses the positive and negative aspects of this kind of religion.

Treadup's religious beliefs, combined with his romantic desire to explore a new world, lead him to China. He comes finally to the point when he has more faith in the Chinese people than he does in the God of the Bible.



## Key Questions

John Hersey suffered from the lack of serious critical attention through much of his career, and the quality of his work is uneven. Some of his books do repay careful study, however. *The Call* is possibly the best of his fictional works. He brings to it the same interests in contemporary history that characterize most of his books. It also shows his prose style at its best. It is about Christian workers in a foreign land, but is never preachy, a charge frequently made against Hersey's books. Possibly, he was in certain ways a sort of lay preacher. Like many contemporary writers he found much in twentieth-century history repellent. A discussion might pursue the question: Do strong moral concerns make a book less valuable than a work which remains neutral to such considerations?

Another approach might be: Was the presence in foreign countries of men and women anxious to Christianize the peoples there proof of their love of those peoples, or merely proof of the arrogant presumption that the customs and beliefs of non-Christian people were trivial in comparison to what the missionaries had to offer?

Hersey's knowledge of Chinese history is obvious throughout the novel. He knew some of it at firsthand and researched the rest thoroughly. Which does he make more interesting, life in China before or after World War II?

How does he show that he shares David Treadup's compassion for China's poor? To what extent is it possible to really understand a people whose culture is so different? This subject is one which troubles Treadup frequently.

Members of a reading club might read texts on Chinese history and civilization to supplement the information Hersey provides to check his accuracy and perhaps to see the material from another perspective.

1. Why does Hersey give a brief history of the Treadup family? Life in Salt Branch probably differed little from most country areas in late nineteenth-century America. Does the fact that Treadup was a country boy help him later in understanding Chinese peasants?

2. Describe the tone of the novel.

What effect do the narrator's frequent editorial comments produce?

3. Treadup during his prep school period met a person who would have a lifelong influence on him. Why was Absolom Carter so important not only during his formative years but even years later on the mission field?

4. For most of his professional life, Hersey was very much concerned with American education. Is this concern in *The Call*? How does he make it a part of this long book?



5. At the time when he decided that China needed his ministry, David Treadup was intensely religious. Were there other aspects of contemporary history and of his personality which were almost as compelling behind his choice?

6. When he goes to China, Treadup knows very little about the country and its people. But his outlook was no more provincial than that of most people of his day including most of his fellow missionaries. How does he try to cope with the strangeness of his situation?

Why does he make phenomenal progress learning Mandarin after barely scraping by in Latin and Greek at Syracuse University?

7. If Treadup knew little about China, he really did not know Emily Kean that much better, although he had fallen in love with her. Why did his choice of her as a wife prove to be the wisest thing he ever did?

8. Hersey includes an episode of World War I history few historians have dealt with at any length: The transaction by the allies with China which resulted in 240,000 Chinese coolies being shipped to France as behind-the-lines workers who thus freed many British and French soldiers for active service in the trenches. Although these men were paid a small amount of money for their work, they were practically slaves. What is the result of Treadup's work with these coolies?

9. Sun Yat Sen, General Feng YuHsiang, and Chiang Kai-Shek at one time or another call themselves Christians. Why do they all prove disappointments to the missionary movement?

10. When he decided that God does not exist, why does Treadup feel depressed but also free? Why does not he tell Emily of his loss of faith when he returns to the United States?

11. The Chinese Revolution takes place in 1912, but an event also occurs which has a lifelong effect on Treadup.

Upon returning to China after World War II and landing in Shanghai why does he visit the old Christian cemetery?

12. In 1950, after almost all missionaries had been forced out of China, it was estimated that they had converted less than one per cent of the population. Are Treadup's experiences when he returns as a worker for UNRRA emblematic of the failure of over a hundred years of Christian work in China?

# Literary Precedents

Although Hersey did not publicly comment on Pearl Buck's novels about China, they were contemporaries and he certainly knew her work. Any perceptions about China in the Western World were to some degree influenced by Buck's *The Good Earth* trilogy, and it is a precedent if not an influence.

## Related Titles

In Hersey's first book with a Chinese background, *A Single Pebble* (1956), a young American engineer, determined to build a dam on the Yangtze, goes up the river on a junk, an experience David Treadup also has in *The Call*. The book is an allegory using a river journey as a means of self-discovery. The engineer, like David Treadup, comes to recognize a grandeur in an ancient way of life, and to admire the patience of China's common people. He ends his journey with the realization that China possibly should not be changed too rapidly.

Hersey's second book featuring China is another lengthy allegory. The story of a white minority enslaved by the Chinese, *The White Lotus* (1965), is really a commentary on black-white relationships in the United States during the 1960s.



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