

Eighth Moon Short Guide

Eighth Moon by Bette Bao Lord

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Contents

Eighth Moon Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Characters.....	3
Social Concerns.....	4
Techniques.....	5
Themes.....	6
Key Questions.....	7
Literary Precedents.....	9
Related Titles.....	10
Copyright Information.....	11



Characters

Sansan, the protagonist of *Eighth Moon*, tells the story of her life from age four through seventeen. Focusing on her family and her school friends, she also reveals much about life in Communist China. She is a candid and forthright narrator as she reveals her shortcomings, her aspirations, her fears, and her deep love for her family and her land.

"Mama" is Sansan's guardian. When her sister and brother-in-law leave for a trip to the United States, Mama agrees to keep their year-old daughter.

When this trip stretches to seventeen years, she continues to raise the child.

Mama is not an appealing character.

She is a short, dumpy woman who is suffering from some glandular disease which causes her body to swell up. She also has a terrible temper. She sometimes beats and berates Sansan. She tries to keep Sansan in China by telling her that she belongs to them, that since she and her family raised her, she owes it to them to stay and care for them in their old age.

"Papa" is another conflicting character. Sansan admits that her first memory is of Papa caring for her during an illness. It is a very touching portrait of the man who later brings her a small present every day when he returns from work. After the revolution when food and money becomes scarce, this special treatment stops. Papa supports the revolution and favors the reforms, but he continues to like his comforts.

Grandmother is a matriarch of the family. She lives in the basement of the house surrounded by trunks containing the artifacts of her former life, where she has hidden her treasures away from her daughter. She is symbolic of the old ways. Her feet were bound and she has to pull herself along on a rope to get out of bed. She is strong and tells her granddaughter the truth about her family. She also helps Sansan leave China.

The other main character in the book is Sansan's "real" mother who writes to her from America and eventually contrives to get her to Taiwan by feigning sickness. Although it seems incongruous that she should have left this young girl behind for seventeen years, it is apparent that she really does love Sansan.



Social Concerns

This book examines life in China under Communism; it provides a great deal of insight into the workings of the different programs initiated by the Communists in China in order to create economic stability, increase production, and assume a place as a world power.

It graphically shows how the different programs were enacted and how people responded to them. The first changes seem quite slight. The first change is one which everyone feels is good: Young Sansan is delighted to learn that education and school are free. Her parents will no longer have to pay for her education. Then she learns that she must contribute by working on different programs or projects. Although she is reluctant to do so, she begins to work on the first project — a project that seems quite easy. All the students build furnaces for the school.

Once this task is completed however, the students are assigned eight-hour shifts to man the furnaces. Next they are told they will work in the country during their vacation. After that they learn there is another series of duties that must be performed. Food becomes scarcer. Along with these work projects comes the program of constructive criticism or Young Pioneer meetings where students confess their wrong-doings and accuse others of counterrevolutionary behavior.

The portrait Lord paints is one of a country in transition from a feudal way of life to a more modern life. The changes bring fear and privation. Many people are punished for speaking their minds. Some of the punishments are very subtle, some are overt. Punishment ranges from no one speaking to the offender all the way to being sent off to work camps or to prison.

No one has any choice in their lives.

The students are assigned jobs by the state, and although she wants to become a doctor, Sansan is assigned to teacher's school. She knows that because she is so young, when she becomes a teacher many of her students will be older than she is. She also knows that she will never earn much money. However she has no recourse until she flees China. This loss of personal freedom for the glory of the state is one of the greatest concerns of the book and one which Lord skillfully interweaves through Sansan's story.



Techniques

Eighth Moon is told from the perspective of its female protagonist Sansan. It is essentially a first-person narration with some shifting in time sequence which helps to clarify the action. The book begins when Sansan is on the train leaving the Peking station to meet her real mother. She begins to reflect upon her old life and reveals that her "Mama" and "Papa" were not her "real" parents. She then goes on to let her thoughts roam back over her life in China during the seventeen years that she spent there.

The narrator's voice is an important part of this work. It was carefully created by Lord and has a unforgettable ring of authenticity. The book was constructed from over 250 pages of transcribed interviews that Lord had with Sansan's sister, and the narrator stands as a both an observer and participant.

She shares her insight into her Chinese clan or family, her school, her development as a young woman, and her constant hunger and vitamin deficiency.

One of the most poignant parts in the book is the time her clothing was so threadbare that she had to dye her underwear with blue ink so that no one would see it through the large holes in her pants. Then when her "real" mother sends her some used clothing from America, Sansan cannot wear it because she will be criticized for wearing something so fine because the government has begun the "campaign of the glorious patches" in order to praise those who patch their clothes.

Themes

Eighth Moon is about the twin themes of love and responsibility. "Mama" takes in her sister's daughter and raises the girl as her own, and no one tells Sansan that she has been left behind or that she has another family. Not until she fears she is dying does the grandmother tell Sansan the truth.

Once she learns the truth, Sansan knows that she must go to her "real" mother if she has the chance. She knows that she loves her "real" mother and is sorry that she feels so little responsibility for her adopted mother and father. Her "real" mother feigns illness in Taiwan and Sansan is allowed to go there in order to nurse her back to health. The government acknowledges Sansan's responsibility to her "real" mother so they release her to go and nurse her. Her adopted mother feels (grudgingly) that Sansan has a responsibility to her mother and although she also feels that Sansan owes her respect for having raised her.

The grandmother also feels that Sansan should go to her mother.



Key Questions

Eighth Moon gives much insight into the family life of the Chinese and the life in China at a time when few Americans had any contact with the country.

There are many contrasts between life in a Communist country and life in a democratic country like the United States. The book provides many opportunities to reflect upon these differences.

1. Why is the title of this work taken from a night in the Chinese lunar calendar when the moon is at its fullest and families traditionally come together to celebrate?

2. Sansan tells the reader that her early "happy days blended into one another without much to remember: I played, waited for Papa, ate dinner and fell asleep. Life seemed to go on like this forever, until the soldiers came."

What are the significant differences between what her life was like before and after the revolution.

3. Sansan learns fairly early how to take part in the "political and life discussions." It seems that initially everything she does or says is wrong. How does she learn to control her self? Is this an effective way of controlling someone's free speech?

4. Sansan represented the school in making requests from local factories and stores. Her technique is very successful. Why do you think it is successful?

5. Sansan talks a great deal about Lao dung. She says that they did not receive grades for it but that the remarks made by fellow students were recorded and included in their "personal files" at school. Think about the types of things that are in your grade school files. Why do you think these remarks were so important to their future?

6. In 1958, the Chinese government started a program called "The Great Leap Forward." What was the program and what was it supposed to accomplish. Do you think it could have ever have been successful? Why or why not?

7. Although she was not very enthusiastic about the physical labor, Sansan was in favor of the government's program of free education. She studied hard and wanted to go to medical school. She studied hard for the examinations which would determine her future. She scored 320 out of 400 points but was not allowed to go to medical school instead she was sent to teacher's training. Do you think it is a good thing for the government to decide what people should study? If education was free, did the government have the right to fill certain vacancies by sending students to study in those areas?

Would something like that work here in the United States?



8. When Mama hears a rumor that there will be a shortage of undershirts, Sansan reads in the papers that it is a false rumor and did not buy any. She learns three weeks later that the undershirts are to be rationed. How does she feel? What important lesson does she learn? How would you feel about the press?

9. Sansan studies Mao's writings on common language and learns that a poor man's and a rich man's thoughts can never be the same. What is important to one man means nothing to the other. According to Mao in a capitalist country there is no common language, there are no common ideas but there is a constant bitter struggle between the classes. Do you feel this is true?

10. When "Mama" tells Sansan she has a letter from her sister in America, she tells her that "we raised you and you belong to us." Sansan feels that there is nothing she can say to this woman who raised her because she would never understand that Sansan belonged to herself. Do you feel this statement is the typical statement of a adolescent? Would Sansan have still felt the same way if these people were her "real" parents? Why do you think so?

11. During the last oral criticism by her classmates, Sansan is criticized by one of her classmates, Big Nose, who had been her close friend for over six years. He raises six items against her.

She is shocked. Why you think he did it? Why do you think it affected Sansan in the way it did? How would she have dealt with it if she had remained in China? What lesson did Big Nose incident teach Sansan?

12. Sansan made a promise to Skinny Monkey before she left China. What was that promise? Do you think that she kept it?

Literary Precedents

Although this is not a diary, it has many similarities to Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1952). Both books deal with a girl's coming of age during a time of political upheaval. There is never enough food, there is never enough privacy, and there is constant, unrelenting fear. The young women have to watch every word they say; only in these books are they able to reveal their thoughts about the people and situations they encounter.

Related Titles

Many of the clan characters from Eighth Moon were interviewed by Bette Bao Lord for her Legacies (1990; please see separate entry). It is fascinating to see them from another vantage point.



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