

Empire of the Sun Study Guide

Empire of the Sun by J. G. Ballard

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Plot Summary

It begins on the eve of the Pearl Harbor attacks in 1941. Jim is the only child of a wealthy British couple living in Shanghai for business reasons. Shanghai is already occupied by Japanese forces, concerning many people, including Jim's parents, about escalating violence. Jim, however, is not afraid of the war, but interested in it. He admires the Japanese soldiers' bravery and has a strong fascination with fighter planes. Soon after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Japanese open fire in Shanghai.

In the confusion and chaos after this attack, Jim gets separated from his parents and spends several days in Shanghai looking for them and a place to stay. All of the homes in his neighborhood have been seized by the Japanese government, but he manages to stay in them until Japanese families move in. When he has to leave his neighborhood, Jim sleeps near the Bund, the area around Shanghai's waterfront.

Jim soon is discovered by the Japanese and sent to a detention camp. There he is reunited with Basie, an American he had met at the waterfront. He and Basie form a working relationship where Basie teaches Jim survival skills and Jim runs errands for Basie. Most of Jim's closest relationships are of this type, instead of being traditional friendships.

Both Basie and Jim are selected to leave the detention center and go to a camp. This pleases Jim because it increases his chances of finding his parents. On the way to the camp, Jim meets Dr. Ransome, another prisoner, who eventually becomes Jim's closest acquaintance. It takes several days for the prisoners to get to a camp already built for them or that will accept them, given their sickly conditions. Until they find a camp that will accommodate them, they are confined to the truck. They finally arrive at Lunghua camp, which becomes their home for the next three years.

During the three years Jim is at Lunghua camp, he enjoys some of the happiest years of his life. The prisoners worked together to form a community within the camp and they have entertainment, lectures, and a school. All of this plus the chores Jim does for Basie and Dr. Ransome give him purpose, stability, and provide a makeshift extended family. While Jim still wants to be reunited with his parents, he doesn't necessarily want to leave Lunghua.

As the years progress and Japan is on the verge of surrendering, conditions worsen at the camp. Food is running out and Jim has to do what he can to survive. His health is ailing and Dr. Ransome doesn't have the necessary supplies to help him or the other prisoners. Mr. Maxted, the once debonair, cultured man from Jim's youth, is now an emaciated shell of a human being.

The Japanese soldiers, who once tolerated Jim's curiosity about them, now are nervous, anxious, and more violent. The sense of community the prisoners had formed is crumbling as most people look out only for themselves now. Jim tries hard to maintain the sense of home Lunghua once had, even if he knows it's gone.



As the American air attacks become almost continuous on Lunghua, the Japanese soldiers evacuate the camp, telling the prisoners they are going where the rations have been re-located. They are allowed to take one suitcase each. Jim soon learns the soldiers' true intentions are to lead the prisoners away from the sight of the Americans so they can execute them. Some prisoners collapse and die on the march and are left there by the soldiers. Before Jim figures out the soldiers' true intentions, he vacillates between staying with the rest of the prisoners or falling behind with the dying. Mr. Maxted, who can barely manage the walk himself, convinces Jim to keep walking until they reach Nantao stadium, where he then forces Jim to play dead so the soldiers leave both of them behind.

Mr. Maxted soon dies and Jim has to decide what to do next, now that he is completely on his own. He decides to head back to Lunghua. Along the way, he sees American planes dropping canisters to the ground. Jim finds one and discovers it is full of Spam, chocolate, powdered milk, and American magazines. For the first time in three years, he eats something other than sweet potatoes. Newly revived, he continues to Lunghua and finds it now occupied by a few of its former British prisoners who have hoarded many of the dropped canisters. They don't want to let Jim in, but let him stay after he tells them lies about the riches he found at Nantao stadium. Just as Jim is convinced he can now stay at Lunghua, the prisoners decide to leave the camp, packing their supplies in a truck. They take Jim with them back to Nantao stadium and make him wait in the truck while they attempt to find the goods Jim said were there. Jim takes that opportunity to escape but doesn't go far when he barely avoids attack by another roving gang of scavengers. As it turns out, one of the people in this gang is Basie, who stops the gang from killing Jim. They take Jim with them as they loot different places, threatening his life by using him as a decoy. They return to Nantao stadium to loot it based, again, on Jim's lies about its contents. Jim once again is told to wait in the car and, once again, escapes. He makes it to Lunghua camp where he runs into Dr. Ransome who tells him the war is over and takes him home to his parents. Two months later after Jim's health has been restored, he and his parents take a ship to England, never to return to Shanghai again.



Chapter 1-4

Summary

Jim is a privileged British boy living in Shanghai with his mother and father right before Japan invades Shanghai in World War II. The threat of war is always on his parents' minds.

At a Christmas party Jim and his parents attend, he escapes to the terrace. There, he encounters Mr. Maxted, the father of Jim's closest friend, Patrick. Jim recalls fun times he's had with Patrick and Mr. Maxted, who has a better sense of humor than Jim's own father. From there, Jim continues to an abandoned field until he comes across the Hungjao military airfield and flies his model airplane. He continues walking through the field to the fuselage of a Japanese fighter plane he's visited before. He sits in it and excitedly pretends to work the controls. He then launches his own airplane far away and runs after it. He climbs on to the roof of an old fort to look for his plane and sees an entire infantry of Japanese soldiers just sitting. Suddenly, he hears his father calling him to come inside. His father has also seen the soldiers and makes an effort to be very still as he approaches Jim so as not to unsettle them. Leaving Jim's plane in the field, they head back to the house. They find most of the guests in a rush to leave.

Soon after the party, Jim's mother tells him that they are going to leave their house immediately and stay at the Palace Hotel for a few days. The next morning, Jim wakes up, intending to study before heading to school, but he is distracted by the view of Shanghai's busy waterfront. He watches a Japanese gunboat fire at a British ship. It sends a shock through the hotel breaking windows and a shard of glass hits Jim's nose. As other ships start firing, people flee the area. His parents, as well as the other guests, evacuate the hotel. They join the throng of people in the streets, scrambling inside their Packard. When Jim's father sees British sailors falling to the pier from their bombed ship, he leaves the car to rescue them. He orders Jim to stay with his mom in the car, but the Packard is soon attacked and his mom yells at him to get out of the car. Jim and his mother get separated from each other. Jim makes his way to his father who, along with the other Britons, has finished rescuing the fallen soldiers. Exhausted and muddy, they rest in the shallow water as Japanese soldiers approach.

Analysis

Chapter 1 sets up the lifestyle Jim was accustomed to before the war. While he is aware of the war and often dreams of it, his parents are more concerned by its threats than he is.

Jim, however, has a keen interest in the elements of war which perhaps keeps him from being afraid. He admires the soldiers' weapons and demeanor. He particularly likes the Japanese soldiers' bravery. The increased threat of war Jim's family feels in chapters 2



and 3 is brought to a head in chapter 4. Shanghai has become a chaotic mess in the bombings of the British naval ship. This environment stands in stark contrast to the environment he's used to: a safe home and an orderly life. However, Jim reacts calmly to all of the immediate changes. This ability to act rationally under stress will help him later throughout the war.

Vocabulary

expatriate, propaganda, coolie, taipan, raffish, tumulus, fuselage, pumice, nostalgia, palisade, parapet, infantry, slipstreams, accolade, rickshaws, jetty, opium, moored, turrets, semaphore, salvoes, sampan, stern, cutter, platoon, battalion, hull, bayonets



Chapter 5-8

Summary

Jim and his father are taken to a hospital by the Japanese although they are put in different wards. Jim's father is rumored to be staying in a ward on a lower floor. When the guard on Jim's floor is called away by a corporal, Jim immediately takes the opportunity to find his father. He finds the fire escape to his father's ward. When he tries the door to the ward, an armed Japanese soldier shouts toward Jim from the roof. Jim suddenly hears soldiers running across the courtyard and he fears they are chasing after him for escaping his room. Later he learns a sailor has escaped. When Jim enters the ward, he spots the Japanese corporal who promptly slams the door on his face. Back in his ward, Jim asks the staff about his father and a nun tells him his father is going to the military prison in Hongkew. When she finds out he's from Amherst Avenue, she tells him he should go home where he would probably find his mother.

Jim leaves the hospital. When he reaches his home, he sees both his street and home are abandoned. He notices a Japanese scroll tacked to the front door. When a Japanese military vehicle enters the street, he quickly breaks into his own former house to hide. He finds his mother's clothes and open suitcases scattered across his parent's bedroom. Jim stays in his house for days waiting for his parents to return. He sustains himself on dry food from the pantry. After a while, he bicycles to his friends' houses. At one house he sees the same scroll that was on his own house and finds the house servants removing the furniture from the house. When Jim inquires about his friends, one of the servants slaps him hard. He thinks he is being punished for something he did to the family. When one servant approaches him to hit him again, he rides away. He continues on to his friend Patrick's house and sees it has been ransacked like his own. He comes across a neighbor who suggests he go with the truckload of British families driving past them. At first he doesn't want to be with prisoners, but then decides he should turn himself in, hoping he'll see his parents at the prison.

Unable to find a Japanese soldier willing to listen to Jim's plea to turn himself in, Jim continues to live in abandoned houses in his old neighborhood, such as the Maxteds' home. One day he tries to ride to all of the places his parents went to in the past, but some areas are blocked off. He continues to look for a soldier to whom he can surrender, one who won't first attack him. He doesn't feel safe approaching any of them. Later, when he comes back to the Maxteds' apartment, two neighbors who had not objected to his staying there for the previous week, scream at him to leave, without stating a reason.

Analysis

Jim's confusion about what has caused the Japanese takeover reveals his innocence. In chapter 4, he thought his movements at the hotel window made the Japanese bomb



the British ship. In chapter 5, he thinks his leaving the children's ward caused the soldiers to run through the courtyard. However, for someone as naïve as this, he is brave to escape his ward and look for his father.

Many of the adults Jim comes across seem to want nothing to do with him. From the Chinese servants who slap him when he asks about his friends to the neighbor who chastises him for riding his bicycle as if it were any other day, they all seem to be short on patience. While the recent events could easily explain their ill tempers, there is no explanation for the adults' lack of concern for Jim's well being. For some unknown reason, they act as if he has wronged them. Similarly, the Japanese army doesn't care to hear what he has to say.

Vocabulary

convalescent, cantilever, turncoat, tram, precariously, jaunts, cordon, foliage, tableaux



Chapter 9-12

Summary

Jim jumps from one abandoned house to another, staying at each no more than a few days. He knows it won't be long before either the food runs out or the Japanese occupy these houses. At one house he stays in, he sees a group of Japanese soldiers in the backyard cooking a meal. He slowly approaches them and one soldier realizes Jim is starving. He offers him food and water. Jim begins following them on their patrols and running errands for them and within a week is receiving almost all of his meals from them. One day the soldiers don't return to the house. Instead, a different group of soldiers appears and kicks him out of the house.

For two days Jim wanders along the Shanghai waterfront, sleeping at night in an abandoned taxi. When two Chinese civilians attempt to steal his bike, he gives in easily, too tired to endure a fight. One day he paddles a sampan across the water to a freighter he has wanted to explore. He sees someone dressed in an American captain's uniform watching him from across the water. He also notices a young sailor in a dinghy approaching the freighter. The sailor, an American, rows up beside Jim and offers to help find his parents. When Jim takes his hand, the sailor roughly pulls Jim into his boat, accusing Jim of trying to bother him. He takes Jim to a large ship where the sailor and his partner live. Jim hopes they'll help him find his parents.

Jim meets the other occupant of the ship, Basie. The sailor who brought him there is Frank, Basie's reluctant errand boy. While Frank immediately dislikes Jim, Basie appears more kind, but he soon searches Jim for anything of value. He easily confiscates Jim's watch because Jim is too tired and hungry to protest. Basie does, however, feed Jim. Basie is also very curious about Jim's wealthy background. He asks if there are a lot of abandoned houses where Jim used to live.

Jim remains with Basie and Frank for three days. They unsuccessfully try to sell Jim to traders at the markets and Jim, again, is too tired to resist. One evening, after they've visited the markets, Frank and Basie drive through the neighborhoods Jim told them about and he realizes they're planning on leaving him in his old neighborhood. He asks them to drive to his house. Just as they're about to throw him out of the car, two Japanese soldiers open the front door of the house, scaring Basie and Frank. The soldiers run to the car and violently attack Basie and Frank. Jim gets thrown from the car, but does not get attacked. All three get captured.

Analysis

When Jim sees the group of Japanese soldiers cooking in the backyard, he temporarily abandons his plan to find his parents as he discovers an opportunity to earn food by



helping the soldiers. But when they disappear and he is forced from the property, he learns his first lesson of war: that “kindness ... counted for nothing.”

Knowing he is no longer safe at any of the homes in his old neighborhood, Jim goes to the next place he knows best, the waterfront. Not only is it one of the more populated areas of Shanghai where he might find people he knows, it is the home of all of the military ships that fascinate him so much. Studying those ships is the only thing that can take his mind off of his troubles.

When he meets up with Frank and Basie, he overlooks their poor treatment of him, still hoping that, as adults, they will help him find his parents. Jim quickly realizes these two Americans, like so many other adults he’s encountered, are not going to help him. In fact, he is afraid of Frank and Basie as they make their intentions of exploiting him clear. However, because Basie feeds him, and because Jim is tired, alone, and has nowhere else to go, he remains with them. He tries to be of as much service to them as possible in return but they still want to be rid of him. The attempt to sell him to traders exemplifies the worth of his life during this period. He is viewed as a commodity to be traded and exploited rather than as an innocent child.

Vocabulary

spartan, verandah, bivouac, feckless, colliers, dinghy, copious, taipans, cussedness, godowns, destitute, scuttled, pallid



Chapter 13-16

Summary

Jim is sent to a makeshift detention center at the open-air movie theater. He is there with approximately thirty other people in varying degrees of sickness. Those who die are replaced with new prisoners. Everyone avoids him; the cooks call him “disgusting” and a “dirty boy” to keep him away from their children. One day at roll call, a new group of prisoners arrives and Jim hopes, in exchange, he’ll be taken to a camp where he’ll find his parents. He knows only healthy people are taken to the camps and the dying ones stay behind, so he tries his best to look healthy. He is not picked this time. As he inspects the new groups of detainees, he recognizes Basie. Jim takes it upon himself to care for Basie and nurse him back to health. Basie soon starts giving Jim orders – like helping the cooks chop wood and start the fire – in order to help him survive at the center. While this helps Jim get more food, he still is avoided by people in the camp, including even Basie.

Another truck of new passengers arrives and Jim runs to the front in hopes he’ll be selected this time. The sergeant appears to be on the verge of picking Jim, happy to be rid of him, but he remembers the stove needs tending to and knows Jim’s skill with it. He orders Jim back to the stove, sentencing him to more time at the center. Basie, however, is picked to go. Jim realizes if he stays here without Basie’s help, his food supply will dwindle and he’ll soon die. When he notices neither the driver nor the sergeant knows how to get to their destination, Jim tells them both he knows how to get to Woosung. This convinces the sergeant to let him leave the center.

Jim is very happy to be in the truck, even though the driver hates him, like everybody else, for no discernible reason. At this point, he actually feels “able to enjoy the war” and cannot understand why his fellow prisoners don’t share his enthusiasm. Soon the driver gets lost. Just as he is about to give up hope of making it to the camp, Jim sees a squad of Japanese soldiers working near the railway leading to Woosung. The truck driver parks near the soldiers to get directions to the camp. As Jim waits with the rest of the prisoners, he realizes that if they don’t get water soon, some will die, forcing them to return to the detention center. He risks his life by approaching the soldiers and asking for water.

Analysis

While Jim is happier at the detention center than his other makeshift homes, he knows his chances are better of finding his parents at one of the internment camps. His reaction to Basie’s arrival is elated, even though he knew Basie wanted to be rid of him. Now that they’ve both surrendered to the Japanese, Jim is sure everything will be alright, as he promises Basie. Through his orders to Jim, Basie becomes the closest thing to an ally Jim has and, in some way, gives Jim purpose.



However, Basie's instruction to Jim that he "find a way of helping people" works almost too well when the sergeant denies Jim's exit from the center because he's the best person to work the stove. What allows Jim to leave the center is not the appearance of good health and manners as he displayed in the past, but proof he could be of service to the truck driver. He managed to make himself useful to the right person and it paid off.

Vocabulary

tic, rictus, cadaverous, derelict, emaciated, stoically, ingratiate, latrine, clinker, riddled, depraved, harangue, insignia



Chapter 17-19

Summary

Dr. Ransome, one of the passengers in the truck, and Jim start talking. Jim doesn't trust him and thinks Dr. Ransom doesn't like him. The truck driver begins driving again toward Woosung camp. When they arrive, they see it's still being built and won't be ready for months. They leave Woosung for the next available camp, a camp for British prisoners, but just as the Japanese sentries are about to let them in, the British camp leaders see the condition of the new arrivals and tell them they can't stay and infect the children. They finally stop at Lunghua camp and airfield and see Chinese slaves filling a runway with tiles and cobblestones. Immediately upon arriving, the prisoners are forced to join the Chinese soldiers building the runway.

Analysis

Fueled by the hope he will reunite with his parents at a prison camp, Jim is in incredible spirits compared to the rest of the prisoners on the truck. In fact, he is annoyed none of the other prisoners share his positive spirit to help make the experience more pleasant. He also displays great initiative, from ensuring the fire is properly started to helping build the runway, without complaint or hesitation. It's not just seeing his parents motivating him, but the fearless acceptance of his new identity as a prisoner. Without wasting his time lamenting his situation, Jim can set about running his "house" so he can survive as best he can. Where other prisoners more easily succumb to the victim mindset, this adolescent boy maintains an unbelievable stoicism.

Vocabulary

brazier, cosh, cong, pontoon, splay, sluicing, gendarmerie, prim, antiquated, internment, erratic, seminary, parapets, remonstrate, emaciated



Chapter 20-23

Summary

It is 1945 and Jim is now fourteen. He has been at the camp for three years. It is now his home and he has forgotten what his parents look like. He learns which camp where his parents are interned, but the Japanese refuse a transfer. Jim shares a room with a couple – Mr. and Mrs. Vincent – and their son. The couple inexplicably resents Jim. Even though there are boys Jim's age in the camp, he is better friends with adults like Dr. Ransome, Basie, and, now, Mr. Maxted. He is happiest when inside his small cubicle because there he can indulge in fantasy and nostalgia, looking at souvenirs like cut-outs from magazines, his earlier possessions, and certain items he has since acquired.

In 1943, when the war was still in Japan's favor, the prisoners formed an entertainment committee of evening lectures and programs. In 1944, they started a school which both Basie and Dr. Ransome insisted Jim attend. But when the Japanese started losing the war, they set a curfew and cut down the food ration as punishment. Jim, still insistent on surviving, focuses on eating every bit of food he can find, including stealing extra sweet potatoes, their main staple. He even eats the weevils found in their daily rations because they provide protein. Now his days are filled with doing homework assigned by Dr. Ransome, running errands for Basie and Private Kimura, and watching the afternoon air raids. He loves watching the Japanese pilots take off from the airfield, especially the kamikaze pilots. One day, several waves of American Mustang fighter planes fly over the camp. It is the largest air attack Jim has seen up until that point. He loves the beauty of the American planes. As he watches two pilots escape from their planes, he thinks of how they will soon be shot by the Japanese ground forces. Their imminent deaths remind him of the likelihood of his own, of how his life means nothing here.

Analysis

Lunghua camp is now Jim's home. He adjusts to it so well other prisoners even suggest he'll be lost when the war ends. It is possibly this uncanny ability to adapt that other prisoners find so off-putting about Jim. Where he is able to eat weevils for their protein, other prisoners are still disgusted by that idea and seem to resent that Jim isn't. Even the garishness of his newfound golf shoes seems to bother the prisoners, whereas Jim sees the practicality in them. But just as they dislike his ready acceptance of prison life, he resents their refusal to work and contribute. In fact, despite his poor health, he exhibits an energy even the other hard-working prisoners can't keep up with. Basie, Dr. Ransome, and Mr. Maxted, the only people who tolerate Jim, act as his surrogate fathers, trying to harness his energy by assigning him chores and schoolwork.

Vocabulary

derelict, inertia, instigation, carapace, brackish, tributary, strafed, pretense, chafed, reprisal, weevils, gerunds, proscenium, rivet, flak, clandestine, cordite



Chapter 24-27

Summary

The Japanese soldiers are further infuriated by the air raid and punish the prisoners by breaking the windows to the barracks so mosquitos can attack them. Jim checks the hospital to see if anyone has died from the shock of the air raid, as they usually do. To Jim, a death means more food to go around and possibly some personal items to appropriate. While Dr. Ransome disapproves of grave robbing, he has his own clandestine scheme to acquire possessions.

Two missionary widows bring a corpse to the cemetery to bury. Jim sees how tired they are from the walk and digs the grave for them. When Dr. Ransome sees Jim digging a grave, he tells him to stop immediately. Jim and Dr. Ransome talk about the war. Dr. Ransome asks Jim about his parents, trying to prepare him for how they might have changed. Jim thinks it'd be better to stay in Lunghua camp, where the Japanese will look after them. Dr. Ransome quickly quashes that hope by telling Jim they are all running out of food. He then gives Jim some condoms to give to Basie for bartering. He gives Basie the condoms and Basie gives him a sweet potato in return and devises a new list of chores for him, including setting pheasant traps in areas of the camp off-limits to Jim. He reassures Jim there will be plenty of food left for them. Basie also gives him old pre-war American magazines. Jim relishes the fantasies he can engage in when reading the magazines. It helps distract him from fearing the camp will close.

One day, the Japanese soldiers bring a Chinese coolie to the middle of the grounds and beat him to death in front of all of the prisoners. They do this to show they hate the prisoners, especially because they are too cowardly to save the coolie.

Analysis

Jim's ability to survive is bolstered by his relationships with Dr. Ransome and Basie. Both men help give Jim purpose – and temper his excitability – by insisting he work and study. However, Basie is more of a mercenary than Dr. Ransome, something Dr. Ransome alludes to when warning Jim about Basie. He is willing to risk Jim's life if it means saving his own. All three men are deft at acquiring extra things, whether food or personal items, in order to survive their conditions. To everyone else, including the Japanese, Jim is a nuisance.

When Jim hears the food supplies may run out, he thinks about all of the work he's done to keep himself fed – the garden, the bartering for extra food, the chores – and realizes none of it matters if the Japanese don't want to feed them. This is more reinforcement illustrating the rules of civil society – kindness, hard work, self-sufficiency – don't apply in camp. As much as Jim tries to establish normalcy and provide meaning



in camp life, he can never fully forget he has virtually no control over his life and his life is worth nothing to his captors.

Vocabulary

reverie, balustrade, barruck, sepulcher, cumshaw, dispensary, botany, monsoon, Maginot Line, pierrot, partition, gewgaws, cocksman, guyed, agog, prophylactics, nacelles, venture, decanted, enure



Chapter 28-31

Summary

The American air attacks are almost continuous, leading to confusion about the war's actual end. Because the attacks on the Japanese mean retaliation against the prisoners through reduced rations, the prisoners are also confused about what side they want to win the war. Because of the confusion, when the prisoners see some of the Japanese soldiers leave the camp, a few climb through the barbed wire, intending to escape. Later that day however, the Japanese soldiers return to the camp with the escaped prisoners, who have been severely beaten. The escapees tell of the confused disorder outside of the camp. Somehow, however, Basie and two other Americans manage to escape Lunghua later that night.

The Japanese troops are reinforced to deter more escapees. An announcement is made they'll be moving the camp to a new location and can take one suitcase with them. This reassures Jim that the camp is only being moved, not closed. Jim takes his suitcase containing his Latin primer, school blazer, an advertisement for a Packard, and a photograph of a couple in front of Buckingham Palace. The march to the Nantao quickly becomes too tiring for many of the weak prisoners. Mr. Maxted catches up to Jim, wanting to stay near him, which makes Jim feel obligated to look after him. At a checkpoint, the group rests while they wait before continuing. Many prisoners lie in the grass and die there. Jim learns the Japanese guards' goal is to walk the prisoners somewhere out of sight from the Americans and kill them. Weak and tired from the physical exhaustion, Jim nearly decides to rest with the other prisoners, but Mr. Maxted pushes him to continue, determined to keep Jim alive. As they continue walking, Jim gets too tired to continue carrying his suitcase. He hesitates, but ultimately lets it go.

The group arrives at a football stadium outside of Nantao and stays there for the night. Mr. Maxted and Jim quickly fall asleep. Jim wakes up the next day, taking care of Mr. Maxted still lying on the ground. Looking around the stadium, Jim notices luxury items, like cars and furniture, the Japanese had plundered during the war. He continues watching over Mr. Maxted when he sees the guards starting to move the prisoners forward. Jim is about to leave the near-dead Mr. Maxted behind when Mr. Maxted suddenly grabs Jim's wrist and pulls him to the ground so the guards will think they're both dead and let them stay there.

Analysis

Jim's survival skills are pushed to their limits as the war ends. In fact, he often hopes he'll die just to have an end. The walk to Nantao and beyond is not just a test of physical endurance, but indicates a will to live. At their first rest stop, Jim's desire to stay behind with the dying Mrs. Philips represents his desire to give up, to die. Mr. Maxted,



however, who is staying alive seemingly just to look after Jim, convinces Jim to keep going. As Jim looks back at Mrs. Philips, he realizes just how close he was to giving up.

In an attempt to shore up his will to live, Jim lets go of his suitcase filled with the only remnants of his pre-war childhood. As much meaning as that suitcase and its contents have, Jim reminds himself that focusing on the present situation and not ruminating on the past will help him survive. This renewed will drives him to care for Mr. Maxted and also to get ready to leave Nantao stadium with the rest of the group. Here again, though, Mr. Maxted interferes with Jim's plans and saves his life.

Vocabulary

pannier, parquet, frocks, amok, circumspectly, rackety, regatta, motes, placid, tarmac, cordon, tarpaulins



Chapter 32-35

Summary

Jim stays in the stadium for a few days after the Japanese leave. He watches over Mr. Maxted's body until he's certain his soul has left him. Soon looters arrive to take the possessions stored at the stadium. Outside of the stadium, Jim weighs his options and decides the safest thing for him to do would be to return to the Lunghua airfield. On his way back, he sees a young, seemingly confused, kamikaze pilot wandering aimlessly through the fields, muttering to himself. He follows the pilot through the fields, which the pilot allows. The pilot then gives Jim a small mango. Jim hopes that if he proves himself useful to the pilot, he will get more mangos.

Jim sees an American bomber fly overhead. Too weak to run for cover, Jim stays put. But instead of bombs, canisters in parachutes drop to the earth. He approaches one of the canisters and sees that it's filled with canned food, cigarettes, and American magazines. He takes the canister with him, but suddenly hears a rifle shot. He takes cover and sees Private Kimura being chased, and then shot, by a group of British internees following behind him. When he sees no one around him, Jim quickly eats the Spam, powdered milk, and chocolate from the canister. This was "the most satisfying meal of his life." He then leafs through the new issues of Readers Digest, learning all new details about the war through its contents.

Upon seeing the familiar sights of Lunghua, Jim feels like he is returning home. He approaches the locked gates, but Mr. Tulloch, the man guarding the gates, doesn't recognize Jim and refuses him entry. It's not until Jim mentions his family owns a Packard that Mr. Tulloch, a former Packard mechanic, unlocks the gates. Before he can let Jim in, the man who shot Private Kimura, Mr. Price, approaches them and tells Mr. Tulloch to throw Jim out. At that moment another plane flies by, dropping canisters to the ground. Most of the men run to capture the canisters and Jim takes that opportunity to walk into the camp. When the men return with more canisters to add to their stockpile, Price notices Jim has made his way into camp. He orders Tulloch to lock him up in a cell, but he becomes interested in the boy when Tulloch tells him Jim came from Nantao stadium. Interested in looting the stadium, he asks Jim what he saw there. Fearful that Price will kill him, Jim lies about what he saw at the stadium to please him. This intrigues Price enough to leave Jim alone.

Analysis

As it turns out, the chaos and uncertainty of life immediately after the war is as troubling as life in the camp. Everyone Jim was close to at the camp is either gone or dead. No longer under the direction of the Japanese troops and fearful of the disorder and danger on the road to Shanghai, Jim seeks the familiarity of Lunghua. He already has narrowly escaped death by leaving the group of prisoners, but then his luck multiplies when



canisters of food from the United States fall to the ground. This is the first real sign of hope, of real change for the better and it has saved Jim from starving to death. But Jim is still in danger of getting killed, even by his own countrymen. Now having to fend for themselves, the formerly lethargic, helpless British prisoners have become hoarders and are as unwilling as before to help most anyone else. As with so many other people, Jim has to offer something of value to them in exchange for his safety.

Jim is unsettled by the role reversals he's seen since leaving the stadium. Watching Private Kimura, the man who once held Jim's fate in his hands, get shot and seeing the corpse of a badly beaten Japanese guard in the camp is too far opposite from how things had been for years. Unlike the other British prisoners, Jim feels no satisfaction from the Japanese suffering at the hands of their prisoners. Not only does he not feel any allegiance to the British, he still feels a bond with the Japanese, if only because it stopped him from succumbing to the misery of camp.

Vocabulary

moribund, stolidly, eclipsed, meridian, capacious, radial, tracery, starboard, estuary, emaciated, pallor, parapet, redoubt, foray, castanets, guilelessness



Chapter 36-39

Summary

Jim walks through the camp, seeing remnants left behind by prisoners. He comes across a pile of bodies in the former hospital. When he looks out to the land outside the camp, Jim sees many scavengers, braving the lawless no-man's land in search of the canisters. He also sees another dead Japanese airman floating in the canal. Bothered by that sight, Jim decides to stay within the relative safety of the camp.

One day, a truck arrives driven by more former Lunghua British prisoners with their Chinese families. They had ventured into Shanghai, but finding it too hostile, returned to Lunghua. They try to get in to the camp, but Price refuses them entry. Somehow a deal is struck and the truck is let in. The addition of these new people further convinces Jim the camp will become his home again and he sets off to find a room for his parents should they join him. As he does this, Mr. Tulloch tells him to calm down and that they're all headed for Shanghai. Indeed, Jim sees them packing up the truck with supplies. As they head to Shanghai to sell their supplies on the black market, Jim thinks about how quickly his plans for a stable life at the camp slipped away.

On their way to Shanghai, Price drives to Nantao stadium, tempted by the made-up stories Jim told him of the plunder there. When they pull up to the stadium, Jim waits by the car as Price and the others go in. After a while, some of the scavengers are chased out by Nationalist soldiers. Tulloch and Price are both shot. Knowing that if he surrenders to the Nationalist soldiers he too will be shot, Jim decides to avoid the stadium and walk the rest of the way to Shanghai. Before he can leave the truck, a Chinese coolie, eager to take the truck's supplies, corners him. In an effort to stave off an attack, Jim says he's a prisoner from Lunghua and they should go to the stadium to take the abandoned cars. One of the members of the group approaches Jim and he discovers it's Basie. Basie recognizes Jim, but does not stop the coolie from beating him. His presence, however, does stop the coolie from killing him.

The group, along with Jim, drives away to loot more places. They employ Jim as a decoy while they pillage. Jim asks Basie if they can go back to Shanghai and Basie says not without the Americans there to protect them. They pull up to a communist town and the leader of the group, Captain Soong, pushes Jim out of the truck to act as decoy again. The group soon follows. Just then a Chinese gunboat starts firing on the communist town, driving its inhabitants away with their belongings. The group runs away back toward the truck. Jim asks Basie if they should go back to the camp when Basie notices the Americans have, in fact, arrived at Shanghai.



Analysis

Jim gets shuttled back and forth in the area between Nantao stadium and Lunghua camp. He still has no idea if the war is over or, worse, if another one is about to begin. No one knows anything except they are completely on their own to find food and shelter amidst the chaos and ensuing violence. As much as Jim is bounced around the area, so are his thoughts about where he belongs. At times he thinks Lunghua is the only place he can be free and other times he thinks it is nothing more than a prison. However, compared to his circumstances now, Lunghua is certainly a safer place to be. Not only is he now in danger of being killed by strangers, Jim risks being killed for lying about the supposed treasures at Nantao stadium. In fact, his life was worth more as a prisoner to the Japanese than it is now to his fellow prisoners and, if not for the arrival of the Americans in Shanghai, Jim almost certainly would have succumbed to their brutality.

Vocabulary

barrack, mucilage, pallor, armada, pall, destitute, offal, bale, camber, lair, insignia, earthenware, evasive, finicky, assiduously grit, hovels, drover, jetty, salvo, cache, hamlet



Chapter 40-42

Summary

The Nationalist Party, with the help of ammunition provided by the Americans, starts attacking communist units. Jim, Basie, and the rest of the group hide out in fear of being killed in the gunfire. They take their chance to return to the Nantao stadium and steal what they can. They have Jim wait in the car for them, as another decoy for roaming Chinese soldiers. Jim accurately predicts the Nationalist Party will be at the stadium, opening gunfire. He leaves the vehicle to hide. As he hides in the fields, he sees a figure nearby and believes it to be the stabbed body of the young kamikaze pilot who offered him a mango. Through the pain of seeing this boy Jim had identified with, Jim becomes confused. He starts to think the Spam meat is alive. And when he touches the pilot, its slight movement convinces Jim he has raised him from the dead. In actuality, the pilot hasn't died yet, but is about to. However, Jim starts making a list of those he will bring back to life.

He heads back to Lunghua camp and sees it's populated with American soldiers. He rushes into the hospital and sees Dr. Ransome there. As he excitedly starts to tell him his plan of reanimating the dead, Dr. Ransome has to restrain him in order to tell him the war is over and he needs to go to his parents. Dr. Ransome takes Jim home to his parents who take a while to recover from their time at Soochow.

In the two months leading up to their departure from Shanghai, Jim likes to visit the reopened cinemas and districts of Shanghai. His health and weight slowly return. One of the places he asks Yang, his parents' chauffeur, to drive him is back to Lunghua. It is now the temporary home of British nationals. The hospital and cemetery have been destroyed. Through his walks and drives in the city, Jim thinks about the events of his last days before he returned to his parents – the flash of the atomic bomb he thought he saw, his raising the dead from their graves – and begins to doubt they happened. He leaves for England on a ship with his mother, soon to be followed by his father, never to return to Shanghai again.

Analysis

The strain of the post-war mayhem has taken a toll on Jim's sanity. The concepts of death and life have become so fluid as to make it difficult to distinguish between the two. The refugees appear to him as the dead starting their own war. Meat seems to be alive and the dead seem to come to life. Jim is certain many times he is already dead and credits the Chinese for not deluding themselves into thinking they're anything but "as good as dead." But even in this confusing haze, Jim makes repeated attempts to return to the stability and familiarity of Lunghua camp.



As he prepares to leave for England, Jim visits Lunghua almost as a way of reconciling his starvation-fueled memories with his returned rationality. While he doubts having seen the flash from the atomic bomb or having brought people back to life, he is still certain World War III had begun. Jim leaves Shanghai feeling neither hatred toward the Japanese nor sympathy for the interned British and Americans. What he does feel is a certainty that China will exact revenge on those who turned the country into their own fighting ground. His last image is of one of the countless coffins put in the estuary by the poor that keeps getting pushed back towards the shore. An image that has followed Jim even before the war, it represents the inseparable connection between death and Shanghai.

Vocabulary

incendiary, howitzer, gaff, quay, godowns, bowers, armada, hillocks, interceding, replica, Lazarus, trams, pedicab, wraith, armistice, nominally



Characters

Jim

Jim is the main character of the novel. The novel covers Jim's life from ages 10 – 14, right before he is imprisoned to right after he is released. Up until his imprisonment, he has enjoyed a privileged life as a single child of wealthy British parents. He attends private school and has a host of servants and a governess to look after him. Jim exhibits both a fearlessness of the dangers and an enthusiasm in the instruments of war. He loves the planes, the ships, and the brave soldiers. His enthusiasm and fearlessness don't wane even when he's interred, which may be a big reason he survives. Reuniting with his parents, however, is Jim's biggest motivation to stay alive in camp. For such a young person especially, Jim is remarkably brave.

Mr. Maxted

Mr. Maxted is the father of Jim's closest friend, Patrick, who has already left with his mother for Singapore at the novel's beginning. Before the war, Mr. Maxted is a successful, fun-loving architect who likes to visit nightclubs and drink socially. He seems to find Jim amusing. He, too, is imprisoned at Lunghua and eventually wastes away to a frail, humbled version of his former self. He is one of Jim's only allies in the camp and, during the march to Nantao stadium, spends the last moments of his life saving Jim's.

Dr. Ransome

Jim meets Dr. Ransome in the truck from the detention center. While Jim believes Dr. Ransome doesn't like him, Jim bonds the most with Dr. Ransome and he, like Basie and Mr. Maxted, takes Jim under his wing. He teaches Jim to grow vegetables, gives him schoolwork to occupy his mind, and watches over him protectively when Jim engages in dangerous activities.

Basie

Jim meets Basie right after the Japanese attack on a British naval ship. A former employee of a cruise ship, Basie tries to profit from the war through stealing and bartering. He is successful since he manages to survive three years in the prison camp without laboring and is able to escape. Without intending to, Basie meets up with Jim three separate times at three separate locations. While he teaches Jim valuable survival skills, Basie also puts him in danger for his own personal gain. Jim last sees Basie trying to loot Nantao stadium when it is attacked by the Nationalist army. He doesn't know if Basie survives.

The Kamikaze Pilot

Jim sees a young kamikaze pilot, not much older than he is, roaming aimlessly and seemingly confused through the fields near the airfield. Jim identifies with this young pilot more than anyone else and so when he later sees him dying, Jim feels a part of himself dies too.



Objects/Places

Lunghua Camp

Lunghua camp is where Jim is imprisoned with over a thousand other prisoners. It comes to represent his home more than his old house on Amherst Avenue. When the war is over and Jim has to find new shelter, he instinctively heads back to Lunghua camp.

Planes

Jim is fascinated with warplanes and dreams of being a fighter pilot. He compares the Japanese planes with the American planes and decides the American planes are the best. It is also the arrival of the American planes that signals the end of the war and new food supplies.

Packard Cars

Jim's family owns a Packard car. It is one of many signs of their wealth. He mentions to Mr. Tulloch, a Packard mechanic, that his family owned one and that fact allowed him back into Lunghua camp.

Amherst Avenue

This is the wealthy street where Jim lived before he was separated from his parents and interned.

Golf Shoes

Jim acquires a pair of golf shoes from Dr. Ransome who got them from another prisoner. Jim's shoes are so garish and out-of-place, that they distract a lot of people, including the Japanese soldiers. Jim likes them, however.

Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes are the main staple for Jim for his three years in camp. He works for people and sometimes steals from them to get an extra sweet potato, knowing that one extra serving can mean the difference between life and death.



Latin Primer

Dr. Ransome gives Jim a Latin primer to keep Jim occupied and to give Dr. Ransome a break from Jim. The Latin primer is the closest thing to a British education Dr. Ransome can give Jim.

School Blazer

Jim's school blazer makes him an easy target for thieves because it shows he comes from wealth. He keeps it all three years in the camp as a memento.

Spam

Spam is the first source of fat and meat that Jim has eaten in three years. He collects several tins to avoid starvation and to help feed other people. When Jim starts losing his grip on reality he thinks the Spam is alive and he is dead.

American Magazines

While in Lunghua, Jim voraciously reads and re-reads magazines like Life and Reader's Digest to fantasize about a different life. He does chores to earn these magazines and when new ones are delivered by American pilots, Jim hungrily reads the new issues.



Themes

Loyalty

Loyalty to one's country and to fellow prisoners is tested in this novel. Jim does not feel any loyalty to the British during the war. He actually entertains thoughts of joining the Japanese Air Force instead of the Royal Air Force. Part of the reason Jim identifies more with the Japanese than the British is because they've had such a strong authoritative role in his life. They've made him do things that nearly killed him and to make sense of it, Jim identifies with them. Jim also doesn't have strong loyalty to the British because the British prisoners are the least willing to contribute and work.

Many prisoners also feel no loyalty to each other. Jim's roommates don't help him when he contracts pneumonia and seem to wish he would die. Basie sends Jim on "errands" that put his life at risk for Basie's personal gain. Jim also feels no loyalty to certain prisoners as he helps himself to extra portions of sweet potatoes or purloins the belongings of the recently dead. In times of survival, loyalties change or disappear altogether.

Death

Because Jim is on the brink of death nearly the whole time he's in the camp, he spends a lot of time thinking about it. He becomes fascinated by the soul and when it leaves the body. Several times Jim thinks he's already dead and is concerned that his soul hasn't properly left his body. When he sees former prisoners scavenging and attacking people, he thinks of them as an army of dead people starting World War III. He becomes concerned that he shouldn't be eating Spam because it shouldn't be used to feed dead people.

Jim eventually stops fearing death and begins to desire it because it would be an end to the uncertainties of war. He admires the Chinese for understanding death is always right around the corner and to avoid it or fear it is foolish.

Home

As soon as Jim is separated from his parents he begins what turns out to be an ever-broadening search for home. At first, he stays in abandoned houses in his neighborhood, then he moves to the docks with his beloved ships. When he is moved to a detention center, he is actually quite happy and he likes Lunghua camp even more than the detention center. When he is forced out of Lunghua, he makes every effort to return to Lunghua because it is his home.

Home is not so much a physical place for Jim as it is a place of stability and community. The physical conditions of Lunghua are deplorable, but Jim wants to go back there

because it's familiar, it's mostly unchanging, and his chores there give him purpose. But to get his chores done, Jim needs people to work with for, so community is very important in creating a home for Jim.



Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated in the third person and follows only Jim's story. The narrator tells Jim's story – even the horrific parts of it – in an emotionless, almost indifferent tone. When the narrator describes the most atrocious events with the same flat emotion as he does the more mundane, he demonstrates the shift in perspective prisoners had to undergo to survive the camps. Because the brutalities became a part of everyday life for the prisoners, the narrator portrays them that way.

While the characters may be quick to judge Jim, the narrator withholds all judgment until the very last sentence of the book when he describes Shanghai as a “terrible city.” Because the narrator refuses to appoint “bad guys” and “good guys,” he offers an honest point of view of the war that is as complex and difficult to understand as the war itself.

Setting

The setting of this novel is Shanghai during World War II, when the Japanese invaded China. Shanghai is presented as a very cosmopolitan, very wealthy city. The streets near the Bund are crowded with businessmen, partygoers, and peasants. At the time the novel begins, there is already a strong Japanese military force present in Shanghai and war is on everyone's minds.

Once the attacks begin on Shanghai, the setting of the novel shifts to the detention center and camps Jim is taken to on the outskirts of the city. After the camps close down, Jim spends a great deal of time in the fields between Nantao stadium and Lughua airfield, a distance of about a mile or so from each other.

Language and Meaning

The novel's prose is at once vivid, but not impassioned. Scenes are described in incredible detail, familiarizing the reader with the physical geography of Shanghai and its environs. The events of the novel are told matter-of-factly, without emotion or judgment, as if they were ordinary events. It is, in fact, this ordinary presentation of events that best shows the horrors of war because it conveys the senselessness and meaninglessness of so many of the deaths that occurred as a result. War is brutal for many reasons and this novel's language helps convey one of the reasons war is so brutal is because it targets so many innocent people. Readers may be thoroughly uncomfortable, even disgusted, by some of the passages in the novel, but none of it is gratuitous.

Structure

The novel is divided into four parts, with 42 chapters comprising those parts. Part I begins on the eve of the Pearl Harbor attack, when Jim and his parents attend a Christmas party, and ends when Jim and the other prisoners finally are dropped off at Lunghua camp. Part II skips past the three years Jim has spent at the camp and begins in 1945 when the Japanese are losing the war. It ends when Jim stays behind at Nantao stadium, instead of continuing with the other prisoners on their death march. Part III begins with Jim on his own for the first time since being interned at the camp and ends with his being reunited with Dr. Ransome and, shortly afterwards, his parents. Part IV summarizes the two months Jim has been back at home with parents and ends with his boarding a ship for England.



Quotes

In a real war, no one knew which side he was on, and there were no flags or commentators or winners. In a real war there were no enemies. (Chapter 1)

It disappointed Jim that none of his fellow prisoners was interested in the war. It would have helped to keep up their spirits, a task which Jim was finding more and more difficult. (Chapter 18)

In front of Jim was Lunghua Camp, his home and universe for the past three years, and the suffocating prison of nearly two thousand Allied nationals. (Chapter 20)

But Jim identified himself with these kamikaze pilots, and was always moved by the threadbare ceremonies that took place beside the runway. (Chapter 23)

He had formed his only close bond in Lunghua with Dr. Ransome, though he knew that in many ways the physician disapproved of him. (Chapter 25)

Yet, as he had known all along, the supply of food depended on the whim of the Japanese. His own feelings, his determination to survive, counted for nothing in the end. (Chapter 25)

Deliberately he thought of the curious pleasure the corpses in the hospital cemetery gave him, the guilty excitement of being alive at all. (Chapter 25)

The prospect of being killed excited him; after the uncertainties of the past week he welcomed any end. (Chapter 28)

Because he was alone he had been forced to do too many jobs, in return for favours that had rarely materialized. (Chapter 29)

He had been trying to keep the war alive, and with it the security he had known in the camp. Now it was time to rid himself of Lunghua and face up squarely to the present, however uncertain, the one rule that had sustained him through the years of war. (Chapter 30)

During the next days he had stayed close to Mr Maxted, despite the flies and the smell from the body of the dead architect. (Chapter 32)

The whole of Shanghai and the surrounding countryside was locked into a zone where there was neither war nor peace, a vacuum that would soon be filled by every warlord and disaffected general in China. (Chapter 37)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Jim gets a rare view of life and death during the war. Even before he is interned, he commonly sees corpses in the fields and water, left to rot, be robbed, or feasted upon by other creatures. What perspective on life do these images present?

Topic 2

Most adults in this novel either dislike Jim or are openly mean to him. Why do you think that is? Is there something about Jim that makes him unlikeable? Are their attitudes toward him a product of war, or does war bring out attitudes normally hidden under the veil of civility?

Topic 3

What do you think happened to Basie after he last sees Jim? Do you think he survived? If so, what sort of lifestyle might he lead after the war?

Topic 4

What opinions of the British does Jim develop during his time at the camp? The Japanese? The Americans?

Topic 5

Jim becomes fascinated with the idea of a soul and by what it means to be dead (and, thus, alive). What are some thoughts Jim has about death? Do they help him survive?

Topic 6

Describe Jim's relationship with Dr. Ransome, with Basie, and with Mr. Maxted. In what ways are these men similar to each other? In what ways are they different? How does each one of them save Jim's life?