Homesick: My Own Story Short Guide

Homesick: My Own Story by Jean Fritz

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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".

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".

Contents

Overview

Home and family play integral roles in forming a person's definition of self but often elude exact definition themselves.

What is "home," and what makes a "family"? Jean Guttery is born in China and grows up there, surrounded by her parents and other expatriate adults who still consider America their home. Jean has only her imagination and the letters from her grandmother in Pennsylvania upon which to base her image of "home."

As she dreams about the U.S., she almost forgets how much she cares about China.

Jean's feelings about China are mixed; she loves the countryside and people and speaks the language fluently, but she cannot stop wondering about America. Jean's mother believes in the axiom, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," but Jean refuses to sing the British national anthem in her British-run school. Her father finally points out that "God Save the King" and "America" have the same tune, enabling Jean to sing along without compromising her own beliefs. This episode presents one of many examples of divided loyalties. Complicating Jean's personal conflict is a historical one. Jean and her family are caught up in the Chinese revolution and, as missionaries, serve as hated political symbols of Western influence in China. The Chinese, too, are asserting their own ideas of "home."

Fritz's discussion of adoption, orphans, and family relationships raises further questions about home and roots: Does an adopted child ever really live at home? Does an orphan have a home?

What happens to home when parents divorce? David Hull, the brother of Jean's best friend Andrea, is an adopted child with an overwhelming desire to find out about his real parents. His embitterment and dissatisfaction teach Jean that the search for roots is really a search for oneself.

About the Author

Jean Guttery Fritz, the only child of American missionaries, was born on November 16, 1915, in Hankow, China.

The family lived in China until the mid1920s, when revolution made it too dangerous for foreigners to remain. Fritz kept a childhood journal in which she copied her favorite passages from books and poems and recorded her thoughts about life in China. This journal became an important source for Homesick, the autobiographical story of her years in China.

Fritz decided early in life to pursue a writing career. She studied English literature at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. After graduation, hoping to find an outlet for her writing skills, she enrolled in an advertising course at Columbia University in New York City. But she disliked the advertising business because it seemed dishonest, and in 1939 she went to work for the Silver Burdett Company, textbook publishers.

Her career in publishing ended in 1941, when she married Michael Fritz and moved with him to San Francisco, where he had been recalled to military service after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. She gave birth to a son in 1943 and a daughter in 1947, wrote book reviews and teacher's manuals, and served as a ghostwriter. In 1953 the family moved to Dobbs Ferry, New York, and Fritz volunteered to work in the public library. She established a children's department and traded her volunteer job for a paid library position.

In the mid-1950s Fritz began to write stories and picture books for young children, focusing on her own experiences and those of her children. As she gained confidence in her ability to write for children, she began to draw upon her interest in historical fiction and biography. She based her first long piece of historical fiction, The Cabin Faced West, on a family anecdote about her grandmother's grandmother; she focused on a nineteenth-century boy's decision between a whaling career and a college education in I, Adam; and she portrayed a young boy forced to choose sides in the American Revolution in Early Thunder.

Fritz spent seven years collecting material for her adult history, Cast for a Revolution: Some American Friends and Enemies, 1728-1814(1972). The bizarre and amusing anecdotes she uncovered in the course of this research became the basis for a series of award-winning, popular biographies for young children written in celebration of the U.S. bicentennial, including And Then What Happened, Paul Revere? (1973), Why Don't you Get a Horse, Sam Adams? (1974), and What's the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?

(1976).

Fritz explains her interest in U.S. history as a "subconscious desire to find roots," a desire that first surfaced when, as a child living in China, she would hear American adults talking about home. Homesick, her tale of this childhood and the multi-faceted

concept of "home" that it fostered, won both the American Book Award and the Christopher Award in 1983, and was named a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book and a Newbery Honor Book.

Setting

In the preface to Homesick, Fritz remarks that "although this book takes place within two years—from October 1925 to September 1927—the events are drawn from the entire period of my childhood ... they are all, except in minor details, basically true." Family photographs accompany the text and make the story more personal and real. Since some knowledge of the historical period is helpful for an understanding of the book, Fritz also provides a brief section titled "Background of Chinese History, 1913-1927."

In the mid-nineteenth century, the British fought their way into China, opening it up for trade with western Europe. Along with the merchants came the missionaries, whose aim was to convert the "heathen" Chinese to Christianity. The Chinese believed that the missionaries' real goal was to extend the political power of foreign countries.

In 1900 the Chinese Boxer rebels declared war on foreigners, seizing embassies in Peking and Tainjin. British and French troops arrived, the empress and her court fled Peking, and several internal factions fought for control of the government. A constitutional monarchy was created, but bitter quarrels—many of them focusing on the issue of foreign influence in Chinese affairs—continued to rage between rival warlords.

By the 1920s, when Homesick takes place, two major factions—the Kuomintang and the Communists—had joined forces to reunify China and end the rule of the warlords. By 1927 troops reached Hankow, where Jean lived with her parents. But the delicate union between the Kuomintang and the Communists fell apart, and bloody civil war erupted again. Foreign residents were caught in the middle, and many, like Jean's family, left China. The narrative closes with Jean adapting to life on her grandmother's farm in Washington, Pennsylvania.

Social Sensitivity

Fritz handles discussions of orphans and adoption sensitively but openly.

David wants to know who his real parents are, "whether his father is a crook or what ... whether he was dead or alive." Jean sympathizes with this need but also considers David's quest "crazy." The Hulls appear to ignore the issue entirely. Readers might ask why the Hulls are insensitive to David's needs and why some adults think that an adopted child should not learn about his biological parents.

Jean is portrayed as a perceptive but supremely innocent child, far more innocent, it seems, than the average child of today. There are minor references to sex, death, and violence in the book, but the potentially disturbing nature of these scenes is offset by Jean's innocence, which serves as a filter. Fritz does not sensationalize the horrors of war, although she presents a touching description of Lin Nai-Nai's efforts to help her starving family.

Because Jean narrates the book, Fritz is able to treat many culturally and politically sensitive issues—such as the presumed right of American missionaries to impose their well-meaning but paternalistic presence on the Chinese— with the puzzled innocence of a child.

Literary Qualities

Homesick: My Own Story falls somewhere between autobiography and fiction. Many of the book's details, characters, and places are real, but Fritz compresses her thirteen-year experience in China into a two-year account, weaving the narrative recollections together with fictional threads. The autobiographical story has an episodic rather than a strictly linear plot, perhaps because Fritz based the book in part on journal entries from her childhood in China. In the same way that journal writing involves the exploration of thoughts and feelings rather than the simple recording of daily events, Homesick offers more than a chronological accumulation of incidents in Fritz's life. Rather than focusing on chronology, the story highlights the insights, emotions, and relationships that shape Fritz's personality and values. The title of the book, Homesick, reflects its thematic concern, implying that the primary focus of the story is not what Fritz did for thirteen years in China, but rather what she felt. Her tone throughout the story is light-hearted and often humorous; through lively dialogue and description she creates a fluid, informative account of her childhood experience.

Themes and Characters

The events of Homesick are viewed through the eyes of Jean Guttery, who is twelve years old when the action begins. Independent, thoughtful, imaginative, and willing to stand up for what she believes, Jean gradually learns to respect opposing points of view.

Andrea Hull, the daughter of another missionary, is Jean's best friend. A few years older and far more sophisticated than Jean, she understands hair styles, popular dances, fashion, and boys. Jean admires and even envies Andrea's worldliness. The Hulls have an adopted son, David, who longs to discover his real parents.

Jean's father, Arthur, works as a missionary for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). A quiet, caring person, he sends his family away from Hankow when the fighting becomes dangerous but stays behind to help care for the victims of war. A natural storyteller, he delights in reciting tales of the dangers he has survived in "narrow squeaks." The main concern of Jean's mother, Myrtle, is that Jean be a "good girl." A somewhat distant though beloved parent, Myrtle surprises Jean by suddenly giving birth to a baby girl, an event that everyone else seems to have been expecting. When the infant dies, Jean's mother spends months recuperating from the physical and emotional blow.

Lin Nai-Nai is Jean's Chinese nurse.

She teaches Jean embroidery, and Jean teaches her English. Something of a rebel, Lin Nai-Nai has run away from her husband because she did not want to be a second wife. Lin Nai-Nai's own parents now refuse to see her, even when she risks her life to bring them food during a siege. Jean comes to realize that she loves Lin Nai-Nai even though the nurse sometimes angers or irritates her—Just as, upon reflection, she realizes that she has grown to love China.

Images of home and roots fill the episodes in this book, developing ideas about what it means to be a foreigner and what it means to belong. Jean's own journey of self-discovery complements this theme. Over the course of two years, Jean learns to accept and understand people and places that differ from her expectations—even America. Although Jean loves her grandmother, aunts, and cousins, not everything else about America is perfect. Her new teacher is worse than her teacher in China, and there is no getting around the hated "Palmer method" of writing. But Jean learns to laugh, to be herself, and to adapt. She learns that "home" is more than just a particular place.

Topics for Discussion

1. Jean's mother annoys Jean by always reminding her to "be good." What do you think she means by this? Why do you think it annoys Jean so much? Do you think Jean is "good"?

2. Jean is homesick for a place she has never seen. How can this be? What does "home" mean?

3. Even though Jean has never been to America, she has very definite ideas about what America will be like. How well do her ideas hold up to the reality of Washington, Pennsylvania?

4. David Hull is adopted. Jean thinks her parents should adopt Lee, an orphan girl who visits the family at Christmas. How does the idea of adoption complement the theme of finding one's roots? Why are roots so important?

5. Jean's favorite name is "Marjorie."

She hates the choice of "Miriam" for her baby sister. Why are names so important in this story? How do names help the author develop her themes?

6. Lin Nai-Nai and Yang Sze-Fu are the Gutterys' Chinese servants. What is their relationship with their foreign employers?

7. When Jean plays hooky from school at the beginning of the book, she meets a little Chinese boy and makes friends.

This boy appears in the street, yelling insults, when Jean leaves Hankow at the end of the book. Why do you think Fritz included this episode?

8. Compare the characterizations of young Jean and her best friend Andrea Hull.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and report on the historical setting for Homesick.

2. Fritz explains in her preface that Homesick is part fiction and part autobiography. Using what you know about novels and biographies, separate the two ways of writing as they apply to this book.

3. Fritz spends most of the book "homesick" for America, but by the end of the story the reader begins to suspect that she will soon be homesick for China. What aspects of Fritz's narrative make this suspicion grow?

4. Write a paper exploring some of the unique cultural aspects of China that are mentioned in Homesick. Examples might include Lin Nai-Nai's bound feet, the wide-eyed boats on the Yangtze, and Yang Sze-Fu's long fingernails.

5. In 1985 Jean Fritz wrote about her return to China in China Homecoming.

How does this sequel continue and develop the themes of Homesick?

For Further Reference

Ammon, Richard. "Profile: Jean Fritz."

Language Arts 60 (March 1983): 365369. An overview of Fritz's life and work, concentrating primarily on the series of brief biographies of the founding fathers and Homesick.

Fritz, Jean. "Acceptance Speech: Regina Medal Recipient." Catholic Library World 52 (July/August 1985): 21-25.

Background for the writing of Homesick.

Michener, James A. "China Childhood."

New York Times Book Review (November 14, 1982): 41, 57. A laudatory review by Fritz's first editor at Macmillan. He notes the book's episodic narrative structure and sensitive use of children's language.

Paterson, Katherine. "An American Childhood in China." Washington Post Book World (November 7, 1982): 1314. A laudatory review of Homesick by another writer born in China.

Related Titles

After Fritz arrived in the U.S., she discovered that she was homesick for China: "China was not just part of me; I was part of China.... I had been born here, lived here, and like the Chinese themselves, I had watched the river rise and fall, seen the moon come and go."

Fifty-five years after leaving China as a young girl, Fritz returned with her husband. China Homecoming describes this journey and her search for her roots in China. Unlike Homesick, China Homecoming does not combine the methods of fiction and nonfiction. It is a straightforward narrative about China today and Fritz's personal attempt to meld the past with the present.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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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

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