

Homesick Study Guide

Homesick by Guy Vanderhaeghe

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Plot Summary

Homesick is author Jean Fritz's story of her childhood growing up in China in a town called Hankow. While Jean adopts a first-person perspective and includes mostly real-life details from her life, some parts of Homesick are fictionalized in order to add dramatic interest.

Jean starts the story as a ten-year-old girl in the town of Hankow. Her mother and father work for the YMCA doing relief work. She attends a British school there and hates her teacher, Miss Williams, along with a couple of the other students. Her most favorite of her servants is Lin Nai-Nai, a spirited Chinese woman who looks after her as her nanny. In general, Jean feels culturally conflicted, the product of two cultures but not belonging to either one, and she longs for a long-promised trip to America in a couple of years.

Jean's best friend is Andrea Hull, also a daughter in a YMCA family. One Christmas, the Hulls and Jean's family share responsibilities for an orphan named Millie who was invited to partake in the holidays. Mopey Millie tries to run out of Jean's home during hide-and-seek, leading Jean to feel rejected.

The Hulls move away to Shanghai, and Jean's family will be spending their vacation in the mountain town of Kuling as opposed to a coastal city they always vacation in, causing Jean to throw a tantrum. While in Kuling, Jean's mother falls ill from phlebitis in her legs and must endure an extended stay in the hospital. While there, Jean's mother gives birth to a baby girl. Jean is delighted, but joy turns to agony when the prematurely-born baby dies only a few months after being born. The baby is never spoken of again by the mother.

During Jean's time in China (the early to mid 1920s), Communists, Nationalists, and a variety of warlords were vying for supremacy, which eventually led to war and revolution. The nearby town of Wuchang comes under siege by Communists, and Jean's father helps with relief efforts for the sick and wounded there. Lin Nai-Nai's family lives in Wuchang, and she insists on traveling there after the fighting stops. Lin Nai-Nai is rejected and disowned by her family, stemming from her running away from her husband after he chose a second wife.

Soon, Hankow is a dangerous place to live for foreigners, and the family decides they must flee to America. They travel by boat to Shanghai, and then by another boat, the President Taft, to San Francisco, California. From there, the family travels many weeks by car across the country to Washington, Pennsylvania, where they have a joyous reunion with family, including Grandma. The story ends with Jean adapting to life on the Pennsylvania farm, finding a new friend at school by the name of Donald, and finally finding a sense of belonging and identity.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Jean, the author, starts the story as a ten-year-old girl living in a city called Hankow in China. She was American, and felt she was living on the wrong side of the world and that she should be in America with her grandmother. Hankow was next to the Yangtze River, and Jean noted that she loved certain aspects of the energy and activity on the river.

Jean attended a British school where the schoolchildren daily sang "God Save the King". Jean, her cultural identity further confused, refused to sing the song after awhile. Her teacher, Miss Williams, noticed and Jean had to confess she didn't want to sing the song as an American who did not pledge allegiance to the British king. At recess, a stout boy named Ian Forbes confronted Jean and demanded she say "God save the king". Ian twisted Jean's arm until she burst into tears, but she would not say it.

Jean's mother was an English teacher, and her father was the director of the local YMCA. When they were away, Jean's house felt lonely. Jean's best friend was an eleven-year-old girl named Andrea, but she lived in a rural part of the area and Jean did not see her often. Jean's constant companion was a nanny, or amah, named Lin Nai-Nai. Jean taught her English in exchange for Lin teaching her embroidery.

Lin Nai-Nai did not come from the servant class, like other servants, but instead had run away from her husband when he had taken a second wife, which Lin could not tolerate. Lin had been the victim of a traditional Chinese upbringing, including foot binding, but she had modern ideals.

Jean's cook was named Yang Sze-Fu. He was a proud man who did what he wanted, including smoke in the kitchen. He drew his pinkie fingernails out two inches longer than everybody else's to show he was above menial labor that would involve his hands.

The day after Ian twisted her arm, fearful of his bullying, Jean did not go to school. She ventured into Hankow. The city at that time was divided into several "concessions", or sections, according to a country who had come in, conquered it, and divided it, including Great Britain and France. Jean wandered into the British concession, where no Chinese people were allowed except for "coolies", or unskilled laborers. She was chased off by a British policeman and traveled next to the Mud Flats, a place near the river. There, she marveled at the building of a ship (a junk). She crawled into the boat and carved her initials into a plank with a pen knife.

While eating lunch, Jean encountered a very young boy who declared that she was a "foreign devil". Jean gave him part of her orange to befriend him and curb his hostility. She next wandered around to shops around town.



Returning home, Jean was shocked to see that Miss Williams stopped by to inform her parents of Jean's absence from school. Jean cried and told her mother the story of bully Ian. Her mother declared that she will have to sing "God Save the King". But her father simply sat at the piano and started singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee," the American anthem sung to the same melody as "God Save the King". There was Jean's answer: she could sing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" quietly while everyone was singing "God Save the King".



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Jean was unhappy with her name and wished she had been named Marjorie, as it sounded more American to her, and she dreamed of doing things in America she couldn't do in China. Jean asked her mother to give her a new name as a Christmas present, but Mom dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Jean felt that "goodness" (as in, being a good girl) did not come naturally to her. In letters to her Grandma, Jean confessed that sometimes she didn't even try to be good.

One day, Jean went to Andrea Hulls house. Like Jean's family, they were in China because of the YMCA. But unlike Jean's family, the Hulls stressed being "free and natural". This meant often walking around in their home entirely nude. The Hulls were also very frank to their children on "taboo" topics like sex. Jean thought such freedom would make a household happy, but in fact Andrea's parents fought often. Jean traveled to the hulls in a rickshaw piloted by a coolie. Jean felt bad for the coolies, as their miserable living standards and life of hard labor led to a very shortened average life span.

When Jean arrived at the house, the Hulls were arguing as usual. Andrea thought the best thing for the family would be to have a new baby, but instead the Hulls were hosting an orphan for the holidays named Millie. Jean's mother thought it a nice idea that Millie would split time between Jean's family and the Hulls.

While sleeping over, Jean was approached by David, the eldest brother and the only adopted sibling. David begged Jean to ask Millie if she would sneak into the orphanage's office when she got back to the orphanage and look up David's true parents. David was agonized over his biological identity, as the Hulls never told him and didn't think it was important. Jean agreed.

Walking around town the next day, Jean noticed that insults like "foreign devils" were being heaped on them (as white girls) with unusual intensity and frequency. At this time, the Communist were close to their Chinese revolution. Jean spent the next weeks preparing for Christmas, including buying Millie (whom she liked to call Lee, because it sounded better) a red pencil box. On Christmas Day, the household was quite merry (Lee still hadn't come), and Jean received presents like blue stationery paper and a skipping rope.

The Hulls and Millie arrived for the Christmas celebration later in the day. Millie was downcast, and Jean wondered how anyone could be so mopey on Christmas. Millie opened her presents and said "Thank You" dutifully, and seemed to enjoy her sweater gift. Millie seemed excited to play a game of hide-and-seek, but it turned out that she was just using the opportunity to try to run away. The Hulls caught her outside, and Mr. Hull got angry and ordered all the Hulls into the car to drive home. Jean was crushed at

Millie's seeming rejection of her. That night, Mom told stories of her own childhood in America, but even this could not cheer up Jean.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

The Chinese revolution continued to gain momentum, with everyone from students to coolies organizing labor strikes. Jean's father, as the head of the YMCA, strove to remain apolitical and just help people in need whatever the circumstances. Riots began to erupt across the city. Jean's father was part of the riot guard, so he would have to go out and help quell riots. Jean and her mother spent a very tense night one night in their home listening to screams and other sounds of violence outside. But Jean's father got home okay.

A few days later, Jean got word that Mr. Hull was transferring to the Shanghai YMCA, and the family was moving. Jean was sad, but Andrea Hull was happy because of her new fancy home in Shanghai. Jean looked forward to her summer vacation in the ocean town of Peitaiho, where she would be reunited with Andrea.

But Jean was shocked with the news from her father that they would not be going to Peitaiho that summer, but instead to Kuling. Jean's father felt he needed to be closer to Hankow because of the riots and violence, but Jean threw a fit, hating Kuling because it was a treacherous mountain town and because she wouldn't be with Andrea.

Jean's spirits improved when she learned that would be traveling to Kuling before school ended, meaning she would miss several days of school. The family traveled along the Yangtse River for a couple of days, and Jean loved the river travel. From the river they stayed in a town like Kiukiang for a day, then traveled by car across the plains to a place where they could take sedan chairs (piloted by coolies) up the mountain to Kuling. Jean dreaded the precarious and steep ride up the mountain.

Finally in Kuling, the family stayed with another YMCA family, the Jordans. She was thrilled with her room, and awed by the beauty of the mountains, including a place called Rattling Brook. Jean also befriended a cat named Kurry, which she took possession of. But things soon turned sour. Mother had to go away to the hospital, and Jean learned she had phlebitis in her legs, meaning she had to remain in the hospital for a long time. But Jean's sadness turned to joy when she learned that Mother had given birth to a new baby sister in the hospital. The parents had kept the pregnancy from her because Mother was having a difficult time and didn't want to worry Jean. Jean wanted the new baby to be called Marjorie, but the parents settled on Miriam.

Mother remained in the hospital, and father was often in Hankow on business, so Jean and her nanny Lin Nai-Nai spent many afternoons together having picnics and what not. Then, one day, devastating news arrived that Miriam had died in the hospital. She had been born premature and did not live. Jean felt wooden and numb, and did not feel like crying. Visiting her mother in the hospital, Jean did not dare mention Miriam for fear of making her mother go to pieces. Days later, Jean cried furiously in the lap of Lin Nai-

Nai. Miriam's funeral was held, and this caused Jean to cry in the arms of her father out of anger and grief.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Communist soldiers attacked Wuchang, a city very close to Hankow. Jean's family made a decision to get on a boat and get to a safer place; Hankow was just too dangerous. Mother, still ailing, was taken on a stretcher down to the river. They traveled downriver, and then wanted to travel on foot to the YMCA Dodge sedan that would take them away. But Communist coolies confronted them, surrounding them and demanding the incredible sum of fifty cents per bag to carry their luggage. Jean's father was angry, but he gave them the money. They traveled a small distance, then the coolies demanded two more dollars each to finish the job. Jean's father could not abide this, and almost came to blows with the coolies (each of whom had knives), before another set of coolies loyal to the family swooped in and saved the family, shepherding them to their car.

Jean learned that her British school had closed and her hated teacher, Miss Williams, had gone back to England, and she rejoiced. She asked her nanny Lin Nai-Nai if she was a Communist, and she replied that she was absolutely not a Communist, because Communists were attacking her home town of Wuchang and forcing it to surrender by cutting off food supplies and starving its people to death.

On the other hand, the cook, Yang Sze-Fu, became a Communist. Jean became paranoid that Yang Sze-Fu would be capable of slipping potassium poison into her food, and indeed he became very resentful of his job and hateful of foreigners. So she stopped eating much of her food, which worried Lin Nai-Nai. But when Jean saw Yang Sze-Fu feeding Kurry the cat some food, she figured he couldn't be so bad.

The siege of Wuchang continued, with Jean's father busy with YMCA relief efforts for the sick and wounded. Father revealed that they may not leave for America on schedule next April (in six months) due to the fighting, and Jean was upset and angry. On the thirty-first day of the siege, Jean began homeschooling lessons with her mother. Mother was a stern teacher, and Jean learned everything from Latin to arithmetic to the state capitals.

After forty days, the siege of Wuchang ended on October 10, 1926. YMCA relief efforts could now proceed at full force. Father was traumatized by the amount of dead bodies in the streets and similar horrors.

Lin Nai-Nai insisted on traveling with Father the next day, despite the devastation. When Lin Nai-Nai returned, she was in a sorry state and near tears. She told Jean that her father had closed the door in her face, and that her mother was very ill and her older brother died from a bomb. Her family had essentially disowned her (presumably for leaving her husband after he took a second wife).



That Christmas, Jean received a "steamer rug" from her father, a blanket one used on long ocean voyages. It was his way of telling Jean that their trip to America was a definite reality. Jean received a 1927 calendar from her grandmother, with instructions to cross off each calendar day to help the days go faster in anticipation of returning to America.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Jean was confused about the war raging in China. In the history books, usually wars seemed to involve a good guy and a bad guy. But the war in China featured multiple sides—local warlords, the Communist faction, the Nationalist faction—and it just seemed untidy and confusing.

Friends of the family, Mr. and Mrs. Hu, came to Jean's family to say goodbye and give them a yellow Chinese jar to remember them by. The Hus would be taking care of Lin Nai-Nai since her family didn't want her, and they also agreed to take care of Kurry the cat.

As the days went on, Jean's fears about a delayed trip to America were going away. The family would stay with the Hulls for six days prior to catching a ship out of Shanghai. The Hulls had since divorced, and Mr. Hull was staying in a separate apartment. Mr. Hull decided to stay in China indefinitely while his family left for America.

One day, Father came home and told Jean and Mother that women and children were being ordered out of Hankow due to the violence. They had to pack quickly, and Jean had a teary goodbye with Lin Nai-Nai. Jean and her nanny exchanged gifts, which they promised only to open after Jean got on her ship for America.

The family left Hankow via car, and stopped on the way to the boat to pick up the Gale family, friends of theirs. Mrs. Gale insisted on bringing her two domesticated monkeys, and both Jean and Mother hated the filthy animals. They arrived at the dock and got a look at the ship that would take Jean and Mother to Shanghai (Father would stay behind temporarily). While on the dock, Jean happened to see the young boy (now older) she had befriended years ago by offering an orange. Now the boy, caught up in Communist fervor, yelled "foreign devil" at the Americans.

Jean and Mother spent several days aboard the ship. Jean spent the time playing games with American friends of hers, Margaret, Isobel, and Nancy. Finally they arrived to Shanghai, and Jean met Andrea Hull. She seemed much different, having embraced American fashion and saying American phrases like "And how!" after everything. Jean learned that the Hulls would be accompanying them on the ship to America. The ship was called the President Taft.

Jean and Mother spent about a week at the Hulls. Jean got her own bathroom and was in heaven soaking in the luxuriousness. Jean then tried her own American fashion by donning silk stockings instead of woolen socks. After six days, Father arrived to much relief (having stayed behind in Hankow). They all boarded the boat the next day to set sail for America.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

In total, it took twenty-eight days to travel from Shanghai, China to San Francisco, USA. Andrea and Jean did some people watching, categorizing people according to their qualities or activities. They did not notice anyone else their own age. Andrea lamented that they would not be able to flirt with boys. By contrast, Jean wasn't quite old enough to be interested in boys. Andrea further revealed that she missed her father badly and was very sad about him staying behind in Shanghai.

Jean herself had a strange "in-between" feeling, between countries and between cultures. A big moment for her was the ship's crossing of the international date line, when the day changes. She knew that crossing meant she was in a different "day" than Lin Nai-Nai, but the same day as her Grandma in America.

Jean and Andrea spent the days pigging out on catered food, playing shuffleboard, and watching movies in the evening. After about three weeks, the President Taft landed in the Hawaiian islands. Jean felt she was still not in America, as Hawaii was not a state (at that time), and that she would only truly be in America once she stepped foot in California.

Finally, the ship crossed under the Golden Gate Bridge and landed in San Francisco. Jean wore her finest clothes for the occasion, and she recited a poem about her "native land," feeling every bit the explorer as Columbus. Getting off the boat, Jean was amazed at how much trouble it was to actually step foot in America. Officials made sure they were truly American citizens, they inspected every piece of luggage, and they made sure no one was sick with something that could cause an epidemic.

Andrea and the Hulls left for Los Angeles, while Jean and her family took the sedan cross-country to Washington, Pennsylvania. It took them about three weeks to make the trip (road conditions being what they were in the mid 1920s). At one point, Father took a shortcut that led to a bridge with a "CONDEMNED: DO NOT PASS" warning in front of it. Father took a look at the bridge, moved the sign aside, and decided to cross the bridge. They survived, and Father was happy that his adventurous spirit paid off, but both Jean and Mother felt he risked their lives for nothing.

In the Ozark Mountains, the car got a flat tire, and while Father fixed it, Jean and Mother pranced into the surrounding meadow to collect wild flowers. It was Jean's favorite part of the trip.

By mid-June, 1927, the family was crossing West Virginia. They exchanged an excited phone call with Grandma, who was expecting them. Finally, they arrived in Pennsylvania, and were greeted at the family farm by Grandma, Grandpa, and Aunt

Margaret. Grandma exclaimed "Welcome home!" and Jean needed just that phrase to realize she was truly back home.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

With great excitement, Jean explored the family farm, including the grape arbor, the water pump (though the farm had since installed running water), the vegetable garden, the rhubarb plot, and the dahlia beds. Jean also explored Grandpa's greenhouse and the chicken house. She met the rooster, named Josh, and then wondered why the chickens didn't have names. Aunt Margaret told Jean they didn't name the chickens because they didn't want to get too attached to them, seeing as they would be killed and eaten. Jean didn't put two and two together about actually eating the chickens, and she felt stupid.

Aunt Margaret gave Jean an old pair of roller skates from the attic, and Jean decided she would be zooming around in no time. Next up was the big "Welcome Back" feast, and many aunts and cousins from Mother's side of the family arrived to warm hugs, many kisses, and greetings. Jean befriended her similar-aged cousin, Charlotte, who introduced her to two neighbor girls, Ruth and Marie. Ruth and Marie were cruel and taunting about Jean, or "The China Girl" as they called her, asking if she ate strange things like rats and nests in China. They also asked her to speak Chinese—Jean took the opportunity to deliver insults to them—and the girls laughed at the funny-sounding language.

Charlotte and Jean spend the summer roller skating and having fun, but Jean is also invited to take part in the farm duties, such as shelling peas and keeping track of all the supplies, duties she embraces with relish, as they imparted to her a sense of belonging. Soon, it was time to start thinking about American school, and Jean was afraid the children would treat her like an alien from another planet like Ruth and Marie did. To help her prepare, Aunt Margaret taught Jean the Pledge of Allegiance, and they also went into town to buy Jean a brand new dress.

Jean expressed her dislike of her name to her Grandma, and her Grandma stated that Jean was a fine and strong Scottish name, and that it "got to the point" and Jean should be proud of it. Soon, Jean had her first day of eighth grade. Her teacher, Miss Crofts, was prim and cold, and children stared at Jean awkwardly, having heard she was the girl from China. A boy named Andrew whispered a racist rhyme in Jean's ear, calling Chinese people "Chinks" and "Chinamen," and Jean got up and yelled at the boy about how improper those names were. Miss Crofts told her to calm down and take her seat.

After reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, the children studied history, grammar, and mathematics. Finally they got to penmanship, and Jean perked up because she felt she had excellent penmanship with nice, straight lines. But Miss Crofts insisted she adopt the "Palmer method" of penmanship, which emphasized using one's arms rather than fingers or wrist. Jean hated the method, and vowed to never use it outside of school.



One boy in school, Donald Burch, sympathized with Jean's difficulties on the first day of school, and they became friends. Jean started to like boys at that point and thought she was falling in love with him.

Back at home, the family had a good laugh with Jean about the ridiculous-sounding nature of the Palmer method, and they had another good feast for dinner.



Characters

Jean Guttery

Jean is the author of *Homesick*, and her story is told in first-person perspective based upon the author's recollections of her childhood in China. Jean is ten years old at the start of the novel, and twelve years old by the close of the novel when she is back in America.

Jean is intelligent and incisive, but she still has a child's innocence and an ignorance about certain issues, especially the Communist revolution and the enormity of the historical events happening around her. Jean is impetuous and has a temper, and she often throws small tantrums when she does not get her way or she feels she is being ignored or deceived. She loves her father and mother dearly, and she also loves her nanny Lin Nai-Nai.

Jean feels culturally conflicted as a white American girl living in a somewhat rural part of China. She longs to return to her home country where she feels she belongs, though she does greatly enjoy the people, language, food, and other aspects of Chinese culture. She also expresses uncertainty about her name, wishing she was called Marjorie. This uncertainty reflects her search for self-identity. Marjorie is a very common name, and Jean wants to belong and not stand out.

Jean is not afraid to stand up to taunting children at school or at home, as when she insults (in Chinese) two children mocking her for her Chinese upbringing. She has a strong and stoic character, but she appropriately suffers bouts of extreme emotion, as when her sister Miriam died shortly after birth.

Andrea Hull

Andrea is Jean's best friend. Like Jean, she is the product of a YMCA family doing essentially missionary work overseas in China. Jean calls Andrea's family a "free" family, and in one of their peculiar behaviors, they regularly walk around the home nude as a family.

Andrea's parents fight often, which leads Andrea to thinking up ways of reuniting the family and ending the fighting, such as bringing a new baby into the family. Jean enjoys visiting the Hulls, as she is guaranteed to always learn and discover something interesting. The Hulls move to Shanghai when Mr. Hull gets a job transfer, and Andrea is thrilled with the prospect of living in a large city in a luxurious mansion-like home.

Mr. and Mrs. Hull eventually divorce, and Mr. Hull moves into his own apartment. Near the end of the narrative, Mr. Hull has decided to remain in China indefinitely, leaving his family to go on to America without him. Andrea is deeply affected by her father's decision. She misses him terribly and suffers from some abandonment issues.



While in Shanghai, Andrea is affected by the cosmopolitan nature of the city, and a desire to embrace American culture and fashion. She starts to wear several articles of clothing associated with the "flapper girl" of the American 1920s, and she adopts a catchphrase, "And how!" that was popular in America at the time. Andrea also becomes attracted to boys earlier than Jean does.

Jean's Father

Father is the director of the Hankow YMCA, and he is passionate about missionary and relief efforts in China. He shepherds his family out of the city when he realizes the violence of the Communist revolution is too great.

Jean's Mother

Mother is caring, insightful, and beloved. She suffers personal tragedy when the family's new baby girl, Miriam, dies only a few months after being born. Due in part to the pregnancy, Mother spends much of the book in ill health from phlebitis in her legs.

Millie

Millie is a sad orphan girl who visits Jean's family and the Hulls for Christmastime. Ill at ease among the families, Millie uses a game of hide-and-seek to try to escape the home.

David

David is the eldest child in the Hull family. He was adopted, and he is very anxious about uncovering his biological parents and learning more about his heritage.

Lin Nai-Nai

Lin Nai-Nai is Jean's beloved nanny. The product of a traditional Chinese upbringing, her feet are bound and her family has disowned her due to her running away from her husband after he chose a second wife.

Yang Sze-Fu

Yang Sze-Fu is Jean's family cook. He is a surly, proud man who eventually embraces Communist ideals and becomes resentful of his place in the servant class. Jean becomes convinced that he is poisoning her food.



Miriam

Miriam is Jean's new baby sister. Unfortunately, she was born premature and died a couple of months after the birth. The family is devastated by her death, and they hold a funeral in her honor.

Donald Burch

Donald is a boy in Jean's eighth grade class in America. He sympathizes with her difficulties adjusting, and they become fast friends.



Objects/Places

Hankow

Hankow is the town where Jean and her family live at the beginning of the book.

Shanghai

Shanghai is a large city in China where Andrea and the Hull family go to live after Mr. Hull is transferred. Andrea picks up several "Americanisms" while living there, including a flapper fashion sense.

Wuchang

Wuchang is a city close to Hankow that was besieged by Communist forces. Lin Nai-Nai's family lives there, and she becomes very worried about their safety. Jean's father leads YMCA relief efforts for victims of the siege.

YMCA

Jean's father and mother work for the YMCA, or Young Men's Christian Association. They help with relief and education efforts in China.

Communism

During the time period of the book, the Communists were rapidly gaining political control, culminating in a violent revolution.

The President Taft

The President Taft is the name of the ship that ferries Jean and many other Americans from Shanghai to San Francisco.

God Save the King

Jean dreads having to sing "God Save the King" during school, as she does not feel British and she does not want to honor the British king. Her father has the idea of Jean singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee" instead, as it has the same melody.



Ricksha

The ricksha (the modern spelling would probably be rickshaw) is a wheeled cart for transporting one or two people, powered by the running feet of a coolie, or unskilled laborer. Jean and her family often used rickshaws to get around.

Ozark Mountains

When the family car has a flat tire, Jean and her mother wander into the picturesque Ozark Mountains to pick wild flowers.

Palmer Method

In America, Jean is forced to learn the Palmer method of penmanship, in which the arm is made to do the work and the fingers and wrist are held immobile.

Social Sensitivity

The seemingly unavoidable, self-imposed isolation present among family members permeates *Homesick*; the characters' self-involvement and stubborn pride thwart almost all direct communication, empathy, and understanding. Set in the remote reaches of Saskatchewan, the fictional town of Connaught is as physically removed from the cities to the east as the family members — Alec Monkman, his daughter Vera Miller, and her son Daniel — are psychologically isolated from one another. Life, however, is not static and by the novel's end there is evidence of growth.

The year is 1959, decades before sociologists coined the terms "dysfunctional family" and "toxic parents," but Guy Vanderhaeghe's characters would fit nicely into contemporary group therapy — that is, if they could ever arrive at the self-awareness necessary to propel them to seek help. But this is 1959, and the characters are not self-examining. Instead, they spend their lives fruitlessly hoping for others to change.

Repressed hostility between father and daughter keeps the family's past ever present and serves to lock relationships in animosity. Change is possible through the new generation, represented here by Daniel, and through the intervention of outsiders. Daniel forges a relationship with Alec which Vera resents. Her own growth was fostered, years earlier, by her brief marriage to Daniel's father. Alec's survival since the death of his wife twenty years earlier has been due largely to his association with Stutz, a man with no family of his own. Stutz has come through as a spokesman for Alec when communication with Vera has ceased, and he serves as a parent figure to Daniel as Alec nears death.

Stutz also is the one who saved the mysterious brother Earl from a fire and he helps Vera by supplying the startup money for her restaurant venture.

But Stutz is not the only element making this business enterprise a possibility.

The invasion of Connaught by an American mining company is preceded by a Portuguese street-paving crew that gives a spark to Vera's business.

For Vanderhaeghe growth is dependent on the connections of the individual, the family, and the community.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

The bleakness of this family's life is reflected in the bleak countryside Vanderhaeghe describes. Movement in the characters' lives is the result of external control or natural consequences — a death, an influence exerted by another.

This fits the description of Canadians having a tradition of being managed by others.

The juxtaposition of past and present, and the shifting points of view distance readers from the characters; this is an effective and appropriate device because the characters themselves are not comfortable with intimacy.

Despite this overriding bleakness, *Homesick* is not without its comic moments. There are some fine episodes portraying Vera's experience as a theater employee, complete with an ostentatious uniform and colorful coworkers. Vanderhaeghe gives us a collection of "oddballs and misfits," reminiscent of characters from his collection of short stories, *Man Descending* (1982).

His first novel, *My Present Age* (1984), offered a lighter treatment of failing relationships. *Homesick* has been criticized for having two-dimensional characters, yet that is the appearance of repressed individuals. The plot element which brings the novel closest to a soap-opera formula is the well-kept secret of the whereabouts of Earl. It seems unlikely that Vera, with her drive to make her father look bad, would shy away from a confrontation on that point. But to compare the novel to a hackneyed television-movie plot, as one critic has, seems unfair; there is subtle complexity here, which largely remains unspoken. There is no easy resolution at the end, no real feeling of satisfaction. The surviving characters of *Homesick* still have their own work cut out for them. Perhaps they will benefit in the age of self-help, after all.



Themes

Cultural In-Betweenness

Jean spends much of the book in anguish over her "in-betweenness" status as an American living in China. She feels she is out of place in China, though she does enjoy several aspects of Chinese culture, and she particularly is fond of her Chinese nanny, Lin Nai-Nai. This is compounded by the fact that Jean attends a British-run school with mostly British students. In one early episode, Jean is forced to sing "God Save The King", a song which extols the virtues of the British monarch. As someone who was not a British citizen, Jean felt uncomfortable singing such a song and she refused to do so.

Jean's cultural turmoil was outwardly manifested in increasing xenophobia taking place in China during the tumultuous mid 1920s. Influenced by the Communists, more and more Chinese citizens became convinced that many of the country's ills were caused by foreign meddling and undue influence. They perceived foreigners as a dangerous and unnecessary element that could not be trusted. In essence, Jean's cultural struggle was resolved by the historical circumstances, in that the violence forced her family to leave the country for America.

Arriving in America, Jean finally felt like a true American when she arrived at her grandparents' farm in Pennsylvania and her Grandma exclaimed "Welcome home!" While American children teased her about her Chinese upbringing, Jean did not care, for she was "home" in several senses of the word, and she felt like she finally belonged some place.

Search for Identity

Strongly related to Jean's uncertainty about her culture is her search for personal identity. This journey manifested itself in several ways. Jean hated her name, indicating she was not comfortable in her own skin. She wished to assume the identity of "Marjorie", which she felt was a more interesting though more common name, a name that was typically American and that would not make her stand out. Jean became more comfortable with her name after her Grandma revealed that Jean was of Scottish origin, and that it was a good, short, and to the point name, similar to Grandma's own name, Isa.

Jean also attempted to forge an identity based upon the identities of her friends and family. When Andrea moved to Shanghai, she became more exposed to American influence, and she started to dress in silk stockings and other fashion accessories typical of the "flapper girl" of the 1920s. In comparison to Andrea, Jean felt embarrassed by her own wool socks. She wished to "grow up" by wearing silk stockings, though later she re-donned the wool socks because they were better suited for roller skating.



Jean also defined herself in relationship to her career ambitions. She wished to become a writer—a wish she fulfilled later in life—and so she did things she felt a writer would do. She longed to wear glasses, as she felt a writer always wore glasses. And she took much pride in her penmanship, feeling that proper penmanship was essential for any writer. When her American teacher tried to discourage her penmanship by teaching her the Palmer method, Jean objected, trying to hold on to her identity as a writer.

War Through a Child's Eyes

Much of the interest in *Homesick* lay in its first-hand account of the beginning of the Chinese Communist Revolution. This struggle began in 1926 and ended in 1949 when the Communists took control of China. As a ten-year-old child, Jean saw the war in a much different way than her parents or other adults.

At first, the war did not effect her much; it was an interesting bit of news that her father brought home. It seemed distant and somehow otherworldly, like it involved people and places that would never affect her. Jean experienced the xenophobia of native Chinese people, such as the boy who screamed "foreign devil!" at her, but she reacted with innocence and friendship, offering an orange to the boy and otherwise ignoring insults and stares.

The war soon escalated and began to affect Jean's everyday life. But Jean still did not have an appreciation of what the war really meant. It was confusing to her, because it did not seem to match the kind of wars she had read about in history books. Whereas the wars in the history books were about a good side and bad side with clearly-defined battles, the Communist Revolution was a confusing mess of various factions, with no side being obviously good or bad. Jean struggled to comprehend the enormity of the events taking place around her. When Wuchang was attacked, the Communist Revolution for Jean became "Lin Nai-Nai's War", because Lin Nai-Nai's family was among the families being attacked in the siege. Only later as an adult did Jean understand how large the war was and how many people it affected.



Themes/Characters

Homesick portrays the binding force of family ties, even in the face of enormous emotional pain. Vanderhaeghe's unsophisticated characters drag their emotional baggage with them throughout the novel, allowing repression and projection to prevent any kind of resolution. Three generations are each represented by a single living family member; although Vera's brother, Earl, whose whereabouts we do not know until near the novel's end, is conspicuously present by his absence.

None of these characters is especially likeable. All are lonely. Alec Monkman turned to alcoholism when he was unable to cope with his wife's death twenty years before the novel opens.

Instead of parenting his two children, Alec depended on them — Vera to become the homemaker and substitute mother to Earl, and Earl to accompany him on late-night drunken drives through the countryside. After Vera leaves home, Monkman finds another caretaker in Stutz, who continues to do much of Alec's emotional work throughout the novel.

Alec is connected to the memory of his dead wife until, at the end, after Vera and Daniel have left him, he finally hears the sound of his own voice.

Left on his own, with only sporadic, forbidden visits from his grandson Daniel, Alec suffers a stroke but stubbornly refuses to call for help. Scars on the floor of his house show that he shuffled around for at least three days using a kitchen chair as a walker. As the novel opens, he has a recurring dream of being trapped beneath the ice on a lake. Following his stroke, his single word to Daniel is "fro'en," and his only word to Vera at his deathbed is "Cold." Alec is a frozen man; he dies without fully connecting with anyone in life. Vera finally gives him all the warmth she has to give, but it is too late.

True reconciliation between Alec and Vera is impossible, as Vera shares her father's pride and self-righteousness.

Some critics have found Vera shrill and unsympathetic, and indeed she is prone to self-pity that alternates with self-congratulation. Her coping strategy is to flee unpleasant situations, and this often brings her opportunities.

Vera leaves home at age seventeen and gains a sense of self-importance in the army. She rebuffs the sexual advances of soldiers, vowing that they will never "take" her. Later, fleeing the advances of a coworker, Thomas, she is rescued by the man who becomes her husband and father of her child. The marriage is said to have been an idyllic two years, but the reader has no sense of the intimacy of the union. Fearing the delinquency of her son, Vera returns to her father's home after a seventeen-year absence. But when one of her father's drinking buddies makes sexual advances, Vera again leaves her father's house, only to be rescued by Stutz.



Vera has a history of inability to synthesize the episodes of her life. She marries a man who knows nothing of her roots, then returns to a family who never knew her husband. Her saving strength is perseverance. But her stoicism goes for naught. It is only at her father's deathbed that Vera refuses to quit on him. She endures, but while estranged from her father, Vera clings to the expectation that he will admit his wrongs.

Daniel brings some objectivity and insight into the family. He is its hope for the future, acting to bridge the gap between his mother and grandfather even though he cannot reunite them.

Daniel has the most self-awareness in the family, along with the clearest view of the others. Yet, finding no peers, he too remains a lone, isolated figure. He comes to realize that he loves his grandfather, but he never gets the chance to tell him.

The characters who are most sympathetic, and perhaps most interesting, are already dead. Martha, Alec's wife, and Stanley, Vera's husband, are only sketchily presented — a disappointment, as a developed sense of these two marriages would add depth to the surviving characters. And Earl, a timid boy, unleashes his anger toward his life and his father in a nearly fatal fire after which he lapses into madness. He lives on in an inscription on a downtown Connaught wall: "Forever and Beyond alone." Vera's abandonment of Earl is not fully brought to consciousness within her, and her self-absorption obscures a full-blown sense of guilt.



Style

Perspective

Jean Fritz writes in the first-person perspective. The reader experiences events and emotions through young Jean Guttery, who is ten years old at the beginning of the novel and twelve years old at the end. As a white American girl living in mainland China, Jean feels out of place and conflicted about her cultural identity, and the narrative often refers to these anxious feelings.

In the story, Jean appears to be transitioning from childhood to adulthood, a transition that is partly precipitated by the adult events she is suffering through (including the death of her baby sister and the violence of the Communist revolution). While a part of Jean simply wants to have fun and play childish games, another part of her is striving to establish an adult identity—in particular, she wishes to be a writer. Jean also becomes interested in boys by the end of the novel, focusing her attentions on a nice boy at her American school, Donald.

Writing through the eyes of a child, the author is able to frame events in certain specific ways. For example, Jean had no idea of the enormity of the military actions taking place around her. For Jean, the violence in Wuchang was "Lin Nai-Nai's War" because Lin Nai-Nai was the one person she knew who was affected by the conflict the most. Jean had little sense of the greater conflict raging across all of China.

Jean's journey throughout *Homesick* is one of identity. She feels uncertain and "homeless" at the beginning of the novel, and by the end, safe and sound with her family in Pennsylvania, she feels as if she has finally found her home.

Tone

Jean Fritz relays her younger self's childlike innocence and impetuosity. The narrator is often subject to extreme emotions we might associate with a child not quite mature enough to get a handle on her emotional life. For example, Jean hates her name and dreams of living in the United States as "Marjorie", roller skating and doing other typical American activities. The adult Jean Fritz does an admirable job of relaying such hate as a child might, with plenty of hyperbole and exclamation points.

Young Jean Guttery is also capable of throwing temper tantrums. When Jean is told that the family will be vacationing in Kuling, she throws a fit and yells at her father. But Jean can change emotions quite quickly. She becomes very afraid when her father is working for the YMCA during the worst of the Communist violence, and the reader is treated to that fear. At other times, Jean can be very joyous and exuberant, as when she picks wild flowers with her mother in the Ozark Mountains.



In general, while events have been somewhat fictionalized for dramatic interest, Jean Fritz presents her story as a true-to-life account that accurately reflects her younger self's emotional life during that time period. She holds little back, and freely shares her younger self's short temper and other shortcomings. Importantly, Jean grows during the course of the book, and the tone toward the end of the book is somewhat more mature and introspective than the tone at the beginning of the book.

Structure

Homesick proceeds in chronological order over seven chapters. The story begins in the mid 1920s with ten-year-old Jean Guttery living with her parents in Hankow, China. The story then follows various key events in Jean's young life—her friendship with Andrea Hull, the death of her baby sister, her mother's serious illness—and ends with the family fleeing China for America to escape increasing Communist violence and xenophobia.

Chapters are usually divided according to significant sequences. For example, chapter five details the family's flight from Hankow to Shanghai, while chapter six involves the family's long boat ride on the President Taft from Shanghai to San Francisco.

Appropriate to the book's status as a memoir or recollection of events, Jean Fritz has a somewhat loose approach to structure. She may proceed on a tangent—much like memories—only to come back to the main "plot" of the book. Throughout, Fritz interjects Young Jean's perspective on the events occurring, from war to Lin Nai-Nai's family to Yang Sze-Fu's strange behavior.

As part of the semi-fictionalizing of the narrative, the book skips large sections of time that might not have been particularly noteworthy or memorable in order to focus on important events that move the narrative forward.



Quotes

"The trouble with living on the wrong side of the world was that I didn't feel like a real American. For instance. I could never be president of the United States. I didn't want to be president; I wanted to be a writer. Still, why should there be a law saying that only a person born in the United States could be president? It was as if I wouldn't be American enough."

Chap. 1, p. 10

"I never saw anyone give money to a beggar. You couldn't, my father explained, or you'd be mobbed by beggars. They'd follow you everywhere; they'd never leave you alone. I had learned not to look at them when I passed and yet I saw. The running sores, the twisted legs, the mangled faces."

Chap. 1, p. 19

"I always thought I would feel more American if I'd been named Marjorie. I could picture a girl named Marjorie roller skating in America (I had never roller-skated). Or sled riding (there was neither snow nor hills in Hankow). Or being wild on Halloween (I had never celebrated Halloween)."

Chap. 2, p. 30

"Andrea and I were used to being called 'foreign devil.' We were used to insults. Coolies often spat directly in our path, but we had been taught to act as if we didn't see, as if nothing had happened."

Chap. 2, p. 42

"Once the revolution began in earnest in Hankow, it was impossible to ignore it. Every few days there was a strike of some sort. Student strikes. Worker strikes. Coolie strikes. There were demonstrations and marches and agitators haranguing about how foreigners ought to be kicked out of China and how poor people should take money from the rich."

Chap. 3, p. 53

"[...] Mrs. Jordan put her arms around me. I think she expected me to cry, but I didn't feel like crying. I felt numb. Wooden. Oh, I should have known, I told myself. It was too good to be true. I should have known."

Chap. 3, p. 74

"I felt my knees go weak and tremble. I was surprised, because I didn't know that people's knees really shook when they were scared. I had supposed that writers of books just said that in the same way as they made happy endings at the last minute. As I looked at my father's chin and at the men with their knives, I knew no one was going to give in. Only a writer could save us now, I thought."

Chap. 4, p. 80



"In history books war seemed to be a simple matter of two sides fighting, the right side against the wrong, so I didn't see how this Chinese war was ever going to make it into history. In the first place, there weren't just two sides."

Chap. 5, p. 100

"I moved away from the mirror because I knew what my mother was really thinking. Now she was hoping that I'd not only be good but that I'd turn pretty. I wanted to tell her to give up, but how could I? I was the only daughter she had."

Chap. 5, pp. 112-113

"I knew that Andrea had begun to like boys. She said everyone at the Shanghai American School had a crush on someone else and when your love was requited—well, that was the cat's. What I couldn't understand was how someone could be in love with John Gilbert and a kid in knickers at the same time."

Chap. 6, p. 125

"'Welcome home! Oh, welcome home!' my grandmother cried.

I hadn't known it but this was exactly what I'd wanted her to say. I needed to hear it said out loud. I was home."

Chap. 6, p. 138

"Well, I decided, the only thing a person could do about the Palmer method was to laugh at it. And listening to my grandmother telling it, making up bits as she went along about the imaginary Mr. Palmer who was so set on exercising the underside of children's forearms, I had to laugh again. We all laughed until we were laughed out."

Chap. 7, p. 158

Topics for Discussion

Describe the nature of the military conflict occurring in China in the early to mid 1920s.

Why did Jean feel uncertain and anxious about her cultural heritage?

Who is Yang Sze-Fu, and why does Jean become convinced that he is poisoning her food?

How does Andrea change after spending time in Shanghai?

Why does Lin Nai-Nai's gift to Jean bring Jean to tears while on the boat to Shanghai?

Describe Jean's emotional state while traveling via sedan chair to Kuling.

Why does Millie try to run away from Jean's home during Christmas celebrations?



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