

The House of Sixty Fathers Short Guide

The House of Sixty Fathers by Meindert DeJong

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Overview

Meindert DeJong is a good storyteller; in *The House of Sixty Fathers*, readers become anxious for the safety of Tien Pao and his pig. Suspense comes from dramatic moments, such as when the sampan is swept down the dangerously swollen river, but also from the details of Tien Pao's daily existence. Will he find food? Will he have to sacrifice his pet pig, *Glory-of-the-Republic*? DeJong makes the reader feel the same fear, the same determination, the same exaltation that Tien Pao feels. The boy never considers giving up; for him there is no other path but the one back to his parents. During the course of his adventures, Tien Pao must deal with loneliness and isolation, and he learns lessons about deprivation, loyalty, and true bravery—which is not rewarded with medals.

Although the setting is foreign to most American readers, Tien Pao feels familiar emotions. The loneliness that troubles him bothers characters in many of DeJong's other novels. DeJong himself experienced this problem as a child. The story feels true because Tien Pao has very human qualities. He is much like any other child who has a pet and who gets into trouble with his parents on occasion.

DeJong understands the chaos that war brings to village life because he was stationed in a small Chinese village during World War II, when he was a sergeant in the U.S. Air Force. His purpose in writing *The House of Sixty Fathers* is not to teach the reader a lesson about the horrors of war, but he includes images that show war at its worst: starving children with stick-thin limbs and bloated bellies, for example.

Readers are left to draw their own conclusions about war.

About the Author

Meindert DeJong was born on March 4, 1906, in a fishing village in Friesland, the Netherlands. Although he and his family moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, when DeJong was eight, many of his books are set in the Holland of his childhood with its dikes and canals.

DeJong had a difficult time in school in Michigan because he spoke no English at first. He and his brothers were placed in grade levels behind their ages, and they were ridiculed because of their Dutch accents. Although DeJong's older brother David had to drop out of school to work, he insisted that Meindert continue his education through college.

Poverty led DeJong to turn to writing, and a librarian in the small Iowa town where he was living on a farm led him to writing children's books. DeJong admits that he was not very good at farming, but the local librarian suggested that he write about the quirky goose who lived on his farm, which resulted in *The Big Goose and the Little White Duck* (1938), his first book. Its success led him to a full-time career as an author of books for children and young adults. He continued to publish for over thirty years.

Several of his books, including *The House of Sixty Fathers*, were illustrated by Maurice Sendak.

DeJong has won many awards for his writing, including the Newbery Medal for *The Wheel on the School*, the National Book Award for *Journey from Peppermint Street*, and the Children's Book Award of the Child Study Association of America for *The House of Sixty Fathers*, which was also a runner-up for the Newbery Medal. In addition to awards for individual books, DeJong won the International Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1962 for his contributions to children's literature.

Setting

The story takes place in China during World War II as Japan is invading. Tien Pao's home is a sampan, a flat-bottomed houseboat, in which he and his family escape on the river when the Japanese overtake his village, The-Corner-of-theMountains-Where-the-Rivers-Meet. The family goes to Hengyang, where the mother and father can find work at an American airbase while living in their sampan.

During Tien Pao's journey from enemy-occupied territory back to Hengyang, he spends a great deal of time in the Chinese countryside, guiding himself through the mountains by following the river. The mountainous terrain provides Tien Pao with places to rest and hide but not with food. It is a dangerous place for the boy and his pet pig because Japanese soldiers are also on their way to Hengyang.

The American airbase, full of friendly soldiers, and the nearby town of Hengyang, alive with desperate people fleeing the Japanese invaders, are the final places of importance in the book as Tien Pao completes his journey to freedom.

Social Sensitivity

The House of Sixty Fathers was not published until fifteen years after it was written because it was considered too realistic for children. But wars are real and children in war zones are not sheltered from them. DeJong does not spare the reader from unpleasant facts, nor does he focus on them unduly. He shows little children who are so hungry that they eat grass and even mud, and Tien Pao is aware that his pig could serve as food for these people: "If those children down the hill saw the little pig, they would fall on him and tear him to pieces.

They'd drink his warm blood."

DeJong handles the few scenes of actual battle in a similar way, focusing on Tien Pao's reaction to what he sees: "His skin went tight with horror, but he kept looking, he couldn't tear his eyes away."

More frightening to a child may be what Tien Pao cannot see as he lies under a rock waiting for the sounds of soldier's feet that may or may not come.

DeJong does not oversimplify the opposing forces in the war by making the Chinese too virtuous. But he depicts the Japanese only in terms of the horror they inspire in Tien Pao. Likewise, although he may portray the Americans too kindly, he shows them through the eyes of Tien Pao, who is somewhat awed by them. The American soldiers do some silly things, such as when one of them speaks to the Chinese boy: "'You...want . . .to. . .go. . .home. . .to your. . .mother?'

he said very slowly as if that would help Tien Pao understand." The Americans also employ cheap Chinese labor in order to build their airbase, so although they help the Chinese defend themselves against Japan, they are perhaps using the Chinese. This, however, is peripheral to the purpose of DeJong's story.

Literary Qualities

Simplicity is a virtue in DeJong's writing. He focuses on the story of Tien Pao's journey, avoiding all but the merest suggestion of subplots. For example, the reader does not learn much about Lieutenant Hamsun, except for what is important to Tien Pao. This does not mean, however, that the book is simplistic. DeJong writes so convincingly of Tien Pao's emotions and actions that the reader is caught up in the story's suspense. Because Tien Pao is such a well-developed character, the reader understands him and shares his hopes and fears.

Through the common literary theme of a journey, the main character learns about himself and his capabilities. The journey leads him not only back to his home, but also to knowledge about other people and about himself. Like Mark Twain's character Huck Finn, Tien Pao is wiser by the end of his journey.

DeJong uses understatement to create a strong sense of suspense. Instead of showing some of the most powerful scenes, he reports them indirectly. For example, "You remember the old crone who gave you that second bowl of rice this morning?" the guerrilla leader asks Tien Pao in chapter 5. "Well, word has just come to me—the Japanese burned her house, and she was in it." DeJong leaves the reader to imagine the details of the kind old woman's death. Similarly, DeJong never describes a Japanese soldier in detail. By not portraying the Japanese as ordinary humans, he creates a sense in the reader's mind that they might be monstrous. This makes the reader see the enemy in the same way that Tien Pao sees them; because he knows little about them, he imagines them to be very terrible.

By concentrating on very ordinary physical details such as a bowl of rice or the rocky ground, DeJong makes a foreign setting seem familiar to his readers.

Likewise, by portraying common emotions, he makes the story universal, so that any person can understand how Tien Pao feels.



Themes and Characters

Although the book has many characters, Tien Pao is the most important one.

A very real boy, Tien Pao plays games to amuse himself, talks to his pets, and proves resourceful and determined and perhaps a little bit selfish. One of his strongest traits is his unwillingness to give up, even when he is starving and alone. His constant companion is his pig, Glory-of-the-Republic, which he names to make it seem more human.

Taking responsibility for his pig helps Tien Pao not to dwell too much on his own fears.

Other characters remain in the background. DeJong tells little about Tien Pao's mother and father, for example, except that they are like other parents who must work in order to feed their families and that they become angry when their children do not obey them.

The American airman, Lieutenant Hamsun, plays a major role in the book, but because he is presented through the eyes of Tien Pao, who sees him as godlike, the American is far less real than another adult character, the guerrilla leader. Tien Pao thinks the American capable of doing no wrong, but he sees the guerrilla leader the way he sees other adults. He obeys the guerrilla but protests when the guerrilla wants to take his pig away from him.

Other characters who play minor roles include Yin, the wife of the guerrilla leader, and the old woman who gives Tien Pao two bowls of rice and is killed by the Japanese later the same day.

Here DeJong depicts the bravery and sacrifice that ordinary people are capable of during times of trouble. In sharp contrast to the old woman in the mountains who feeds Tien Pao, the crazy old woman in the town tries to steal Glory-of-the-Republic from him. The war is not presented as a simplistic fight between good and evil; not all of the Chinese people are good.

Personal bravery and sacrifice, loyalty to one's friends, the hardships war brings to ordinary people, fear, and terrible loneliness constitute the themes of the book. Perhaps the most important thing the reader learns from Tien Pao concerns not giving up, even when it seems impossible to succeed.



Topics for Discussion

1. Is it wrong for Tien Pao to take someone across the river when doing so goes against his father's instructions?

Why does he do so?

2. Many of the people in the book must, like Tien Pao and his parents, abandon their homes with only as many possessions as they can carry. If you were in this situation, what would you take with you?

3. Tien Pao sees children starving all around him, such as the ones who are eating grass and dirt. Should he have given them his pet pig to eat? Why or why not? Is a human life more important than the life of an animal?

4. Tien Pao is Chinese and he lives in the 1940s, yet his feelings are similar to those of American children today. Tell whether or not you agree with this statement and why.

5. The old woman who gives Tien Pao two bowls of rice dies that same day when the Japanese burn her hut. All of the guerrillas know that they are in the same danger, yet they continue to risk their lives. Why do they do so?

6. Consider whether the Americans are portrayed as being too good. How about the Japanese? Is DeJong fair to them, or do they seem to be too evil?

7. The "river god" whom Tien Pao ferries across the river turns out to be the same airman whom he saves. Does this seem too contrived?

8. What would have happened if Tien Pao had stayed in the house of sixty fathers and not found his parents? How would his life have changed?

9. Suppose that Lieutenant Hamsun or another American soldier had adopted Tien Pao and taken him to the U.S. Would his life be better than if he had returned to his parents' life of poverty? What would he gain? What would he lose?

10. Why does the doctor allow Tien Pao to sit by the roadside watching for his parents when none of the Americans think the boy will see his parents again?

11. Some critics consider the book's ending contrived because it is unrealistic to think that Tien Pao would ever find his family again. Tell why you do or do not agree with this judgment. How would you have ended the story?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find out more about the Japanese invasion of China during World War II.

How accurate is DeJong's portrayal of conditions in China during this time?

How important is this particular setting to the novel? Could it take place in another country?

2. When Tien Pao first sees an American, he thinks he is seeing a river god. Write about the attitudes the Chinese people in the novel have towards Americans. What roles do the American servicemen play in their lives?

3. Meindert DeJong often writes about long arduous journeys and the challenges these journeys present. What are the challenges that Tien Pao faces? How does he overcome these challenges?

How are these challenges similar to those found in your everyday life? How do you overcome them?

4. The House of Sixty Fathers was not published until fifteen years after it was written because it was considered too realistic and disturbing for young readers. Do you agree? Consider whether or not books for young readers should be about subjects that might be frightening.

5. The House of Sixty Fathers was a runner-up for the Newbery Medal. Find out about this award and discuss whether you think the novel meets the criteria for it.

Related Titles

The House of Sixty Fathers is the only one of DeJong's books not set in Holland or the American Midwest, but it shares themes with *The Singing Hill*, in which a little boy must cope with loneliness and fear when his brother and sister go to school, leaving him without companionship. A difficult journey—for a dog in *Hurry Home Candy* and for a Dutch boy in both *Far Out the Long Canal* and *Journey from Peppermint Street*—is a common theme in DeJong's work. Although Moonta, in *Far Out the Long Canal*, lives in a peaceful village, he faces perils when he must skate a long way on breaking ice. The dog Candy of *Hurry Home Candy* finds different sorts of difficulties as it tries to find a home, but like Tien Pao, it does not give up.

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Children's Literature Review. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976. The editors have collected excerpts from books and articles about DeJong's work in general and about each of his books.

Carpenter, Humphrey, and Mari Prichard, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. Contains a brief look at DeJong's life and writing.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale Research, 1971. Brief article focuses on DeJong's life.

Estes, Glenn E., ed. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 52. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Includes information on DeJong's background and a discussion of each of his books.

Fuller, Muriel, ed. *More Junior Authors*.

New York: Wilson, 1963. Contains a short autobiographical article that provides some clues about DeJong's personality.



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