A Long Way from Home Short Guide

A Long Way from Home by Maureen Crane Wartski

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Overview

A Boat to Nowhere had just won the Child Study Children's Book Committee Award of the Bank Street College of Education in 1980 when this sequel was published. Because of its even more controversial subject matter at a time when Americans were resentful of the burden of Vietnam War refugees, the Newbery prize committee decided to designate A Long Way from Home as an Honor Book (1980) rather than the first place winner.

As with A Boat to Nowhere, A Long Way from Home "deals honestly and courageously with problems," in this case the adjustment to life in America of the three young boat people who survived weeks of danger and starvation on the South China Seas. Whereas A Boat to Nowhere focused on others besides the orphaned loner Kien, this is fifteen-year-old Kien Ho's own story as he struggles for identity in a country whose language, customs, and people seem hostile to him. Wartski's exploration of teen-age motives and behaviors rings especially true, for her own sons —and the high school students to whom she taught English—were daily reminders of adolescence as she wrote the books. As problem realism, this book is effective, interesting, and relevant as a timely subject that warranted attention. Unfortunately, A Long Way from Home lacks the nobility, adventure, freshness, and subdued but passionate indignation of its distinguished predecessor.

About the Author

Maureen Ann Crane was born on January 25, 1940, in Ashiya, Japan, a beautiful community on the Inland Sea, to Albert Edwin Crane, a businessman, and Josephine Wagen Crane, a teacher from Geneva, Switzerland.

Although not with great clarity, Maureen remembers the sound of World War II bombs raining on nearby Kobe and Osaka; she was not evacuated to a war-free countryside, and these memories have fueled the strong antiwar stance that permeates all her work.

Because of the war's disruption and devastation, she was taught at home by her keenly intellectual Uncle Harry; she could recite Shakespeare's Julius Caesar at age five and had read literary classics in English and French by ten.

She was, in fact so advanced that, after formal elementary schooling at a convent school, she skipped seventh grade and completed her junior and senior high schooling at the Canadian Academy in Ashiya by seventeen. She regrets that she did not learn as a child to write Japanese, a language she spoke fluently. During the school years, what she really "wanted to do was write"; and at the young age of fourteen, she published a story in English for a London magazine. Her professional literary career was officially launched in 1957 when she became a summer freelance writer for the Kobe-based English Mainichi, one of Japan's best dailies.

She began university studies in 19581959 at the University of Redlands in California and received a B.A. in 1962 from Sophia University, a prestigious Jesuit school in Tokyo.

While at Sophia, she met Maximilian Wartski, who was an American serviceman born in Danzig, Germany (now Gdansk, Poland); they were married on June 1, 1962, and Maureen became a naturalized U.S. citizen. The couple lived in Bangkok, Thailand, where Maximilian was posted, from 1962 to 1966; their sons Bert and Mark were born there in 1963 and 1966. During these years Maureen, herself a Eurasian, grew to know and value even more deeply the people and culture of Indochina, where she traveled freely, briefly visiting even Vietnam. After 1966 the Wartskis made their home in Sharon, Massachusetts, where Maureen became a teacher of high school English (and occasionally history) in the Sharon public schools. She continued writing and teaching during the 1970s, using her experiences with young people—her sons and her students—to add realism to short stories, plays, and the four books for young readers that she wrote between 1979 and 1981.

Today she writes full time, creating books and stories for adult more than juvenile audiences. She also writes juvenile and adult plays, stories, and articles (some under the name M. A. Crane) for a variety of magazines, journals, and newspapers, and she values her young readers, whose "sensitivities and sensibilities have not become blunted, [and whose] experience has not been dulled." Most importantly, whether writing for youth or adult, Wartski always brings relevance, emotional honesty, and intensity to whatever she undertakes.

Setting

The story opens in a refugee camp in Hong Kong, six months after the three survivors have been rescued by an American ship. Kien, who became the head of the little family after Thay Van Chi died, now works at a low-paying job in order to take care of ailing Mai and bring pleasure to fun-loving younger "brother" Loc. Not described extensively, the camp nevertheless seems a bleak, tuberculosis-ridden place, and although they regret leaving friends there, the trio is happy when, after another five weeks, they connect with their sponsors in Bradley, California.

The central-inland town is pretty, the house "a palace" by Kien's standards, the big, fast car exciting, and the family welcoming. But adjusting to school is not easy, and as life becomes unbearable, Kien flees south to a small fishing community, Travor, California, supposedly "a friendly place" where he has read that Vietnamese have "settled down to fish and prosper." Travor, especially where and how the Vietnamese live, proves to be neither pretty nor hospitable, in spite of its seaside setting. Ironically, Kien finds that, although he has found his own Vietnamese people, he faces even more painfully surprising racial intolerance than in Bradley. The bag of Vietnamese sand provides a symbolic link between the survivors' old world and the new, but nature does not have the importance it did in A Boat to Nowhere. Because Kien's struggles are against human, not elemental enemies, readers may miss the gripping man-against nature descriptions that empowered the other story.

Social Sensitivity

Just as A Boat to Nowhere is a fictional transformation of collective Boat People experiences, so A Long Way from Home fictionalizes the plight of many Southeast Asians who thought that, after months on the sea and often years in refugee camps, they had finally found homes and a familiar, congenial way of life in America. Many Vietnamese, after all, had been fishermen before they fled; it was logical that they sought warm, seaside communities in Florida, Mississippi, and California, where they could form small Vietnamese enclaves and ply their accustomed trade. The complaint in Travor that Vietnamese fishermen were over-catching, underselling, and generally destroying the town's economic balance became an actual national outcry that, unfortunately, was not always resolved as amicably as in the fictional town because racial hatred was invariably fanned when jobs were seen to be threatened.

Since 1950, when the Truman administration had first sent advisors and financial support, America had spent ever increasing sums on the Vietnam War; by the mid-1970s the pinch of war was felt by citizens who found its cost too high—both in human and in economic terms. Unfortunately, the target of frustration was often the people America could not dominate—the Vietnamese; many simplistic Americans did not discriminate between communist and noncommunist Vietnamese; for them, all "gooks" were evil drains on American people and the economy.

Furthermore, after 1975, the U.S. government agreed to accept increasing numbers of refugees who required public support until they became selfsustaining.

A Long Way from Home 3525 Those who found economic subsistence at fishing seemed to be among the lucky ones. But, as this story shows, cultures did not always mix and tempers flared in the postwar climate of national resentment. Kien is reminded by Thay Van Chi in a dream that "We repay evil with good for good is always stronger." The boy uses that conviction to get Trevor's antagonists together and "as they grew to know one another they [began] to be friends," and eventually partners who agreed on ways to guarantee a livelihood for all. In reality, however, the problem of clashing cultures still foments today, all too often with neither side willing to take the first step toward reconciliation.

Wartski is clearly sympathetic towards the Vietnamese in this story, but her message extends to any struggle: Dialogue is the path to peaceful solutions, whether they be personal or political.

Literary Qualities

The villains are, indeed, a little too unrelievedly bad—like wicked giants that the questing hero must vanquish.

Sim Evans and especially Paul Orrin are central characters—not just briefly sketched characters like the Thai villagers or pirates of A Boat to Nowhere—and they would be more insidious if they were less stereotypical (Sim is redheaded, big, a racist power-broker athlete; Paul is rich, big, a racist power broker businessman). Unfortunately, female characters are also stereotypical and underdeveloped—adoring younger sisters or traditional mothers who cook, criticize, listen to problems, and plan parties; there are no female teachers or community leaders; brave Mai has little chance to display the grit she showed on the ocean, and Thuyet seems merely cranky, not strong. But as an adolescent Everyman, Kien is well drawn. Albeit a "foreigner," Kien is very like every teen-ager who has bouts of self-doubt among family and peers but also moments of self-confident shrewdness; flashes of cowardice and courage; dreams of exciting places and prospects; boredom with school routines but not favorite foods; and a dawning concern about who he is and where he is going. Again Wartski avoids any mention of sexuality, which is unusual in a modern story whose protagonist is nearly sixteen; in fact, Kien needs a female "equal" to modify his condescending attitude toward women —"Usually women wanted to feed him and take care of him." But Wartski's plot is fast and exciting—and her theme is sufficiently substantial—that romance, while perhaps desirable, is not necessary for the story to have "teen appeal."

The setting here—average, everyday America—seems almost bland compared to the exotic Vietnam jungle village and eloquently violent sea of A Boat to Nowhere. Nature is an actor only once—when a storm prefaces and then conveniently extinguishes the climactic fire. The bag of Vietnamese sand, that tangible bit of setting that links past to present, is also "deactivated" when it falls to the floor as Kien rejects both Thay Van Chi's symbol of the Old Life and the Olson's home, symbol of the New. However, just as thoughts of the family keep calling him back to Bradley, so memories and visions of the beloved teacher keep calling him back to his heritage, promises, and duty to follow in Thay's noble footsteps. The prose style is still short-sentence clear, but without the stirring variety of descriptive settings, the narrative passages (from Kien's limited omniscient point of view) sometimes become bland. The slangy dialogue is realistic, though (if sometimes choppy), and invectives like "Gook," "Slant-eye," and "Gook-loving freaks" add a note of hateful realism. Folk songs and food are still important cultural motifs, and the Seagull is a spiritual descendant of the sturdy Seabreeze.

Through Kien's maturing experiences in two environments of racial tension, Wartski consistently (although not as movingly) echoes the relevant, provocative theme of A Boat to Nowhere: that individual identity can flower fully only where it is informed by responsibility and love.

Themes and Characters

Since he lost his parents early in the Vietnam War, streetwise Kien had been fiercely independent, practicing survival skills that were habitually selfdirected. Not accustomed to family, he was slow to accept the emotional burdens of loving; but once he did, he became a dedicated "parent" to Mai and Loc and assumed total responsibility for their well being. When the trio comes to America, however, Kien's role is taken over by adults —who, for the best of reasons, free him to be a normal teen-ager: school rather than a job; friends his own age rather than just the company of younger siblings; responsibility to the family rather than only himself. But, as, in Vietnam, Kien hates school, finds many of his peers viciously intolerant, and resents having to be accountable to new parents— he who knows firsthand what "parenting" means! He convinces himself that Mai and Loc, who are adjusting well, do not need or want him; he discards the bag of precious Vietnamese sand that symbolizes his ties to the past; and he runs away. But after he encounters people easily as cruel and selfish as the villagers, pirates, or Outcast Islanders, this "stranger in a strange land" finally realizes that he cannot run away from himself or his responsibility to those whose lives he saved and promised to guide. Thus, Kien's continuing quest for who he is and where he belongs shapes a different kind of voyage this time and makes this story ultimately a "boat to home."

The Olsons, warm and welcoming sponsors in Bradley, give Kien his first glimpse of home. Steve Olson had been on the American freighter Camelot when the three half-dead children were plucked from the sea and had promised, "By heaven, I'll sponsor you myself." Kien rightly has respect for this strong, sensible "father," who alone can speak Vietnamese to the refugee children. Teen-age Mai, who had lost her own mother in the war many years earlier, learns to love and share feminine interests with her new mother, Diane; Loc enjoys Tad, a younger brother playmate who can laugh and romp with him. The home characters, while not fully developed in this story, provide models of stability and successful adjustment that contrast with Kien's restlessness and inability to fit into American life. And the only tolerable parts of school— where language, routines, and food are all foreign—are Kien's believably timid-yet-brave friend Bob (who is his size) and his understanding tutor, Mr. Hunter, both of whom are white Americans. In Travor, Kien finally finds his own kind in Huy Dao, the somewhat hot-headed leader of the small Vietnamese community, who had been a prosperous fisherman in his homeland; his wife Thuyet cooks good native food for Kien, and their young daughter Linh admires his bravery. Kien also makes friends with the would-be law student, Phat Dao, Huy's nephew, who is pushed by lawless elements in Travor into contemplating unaccustomed violence.

And Kien is saved at least once from bodily harm by Bill Ransome, a local businessman whose friendship with the Vietnamese causes him trouble.

But Kien soon learns that he cannot escape the tensions of Bradley by running to Travor. For like Sim Evans, the racist bully at Bradley High School, there are other hateful Americans who have convinced themselves that the Vietnamese are intruders who must be run out of town. Foremost among these anti-Asians is Paul Orrin, in one way or another "owner" of most of Travor's white fishermen. Orrin is unrelievedly malevolent and is ultimately thwarted only by Kien's threat of blackmail and loss of community status, not by a change of heart. His hatred of the Vietnamese settlers pushes nameless others into economic panic and civic mayhem until the once-idyllic fishing village becomes a tinder box of racial tensions.

Wartski makes no attempt to portray these characters as anything but villains: Orrin maintains his power through financial and physical domination of the community; Sim Evans' bullying capital is his stature as a football player. The Viets, on the other hand, are poor, small, seemingly powerless, making the conflict seem almost mythic rather than realistic and Kien seem doubly heroic.

Topics for Discussion

1. What was it about Kien's character that made him dislike school—both in Vietnam and in America—so much?

2. Was Diane right in reacting to Kien's after-school wanderings as she did? Why?

3. What could Diane Olson provide that had been missing but was especially important to Mai? What could Tad give that Loc needed?

4. Were the adults at Bradley High good models of behavior? Why or why not?

5. In what specific ways did Kien show his "street smarts?" Were they all heroic?

6. What special "hold" did Sim Evans have over Bob, the other students, and his own buddies at Bradley High?

Was the racism all his father's fault?

7. "We must repay evil with good, for good is stronger than evil. Evil can almost always be turned to good." Is this really true?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Travor's dilemma is based on fact.

Explore the effect that real-life Vietnamese refugees had on coastal fishing communities after they settled in America.

2. The restaurant in Travor would not serve Kien. Explore civil rights laws of the 1960s that address this kind of discrimination.

3. The Vietnamese fishermen in Travor over-caught and undersold their fish. Were they justified in undermining the local market conditions? Examine Vietnamese identity and customs that might have led to their doing this.

4. Paul Orrin's supporters acted like the Ku Klux Klan toward the Vietnamese. But Thay Van Chi's voice tells Kien that "men act evilly because they are afraid." Explore motivations that the KKK and Travor fishermen have in common.

5. "Mob psychology" is a frequent phenomenon. Explore its occurrence in this story. How and why it is activated? How and why is it deactivated?

Is it realistic?

A Long Wayfrom Home 6. Compare this story's treatment of the Vietnamese refugee experience with that in one of the stories below.

For Further Reference

Fiction Breckler, Rosemary K. Hoang Breaks the Lucky Teapot. Illustrated by Adrian Frankel. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992. This picture book reveals some of the traditions and superstitions that a Vietnamese boat child holds onto in America.

Paterson, Katherine. Park's Quest. New York: Lodestar Books, 1988. As an American boy uncovers the truth about his Vietnam-veteran father, he finds a surprising personal legacy of the Vietnam War.

Pettit, Jayne. My Name Is San Ho. New York: Scholastic, 1992. Lighthearted in this treatment of a Vietnamese boy's adjustment to American junior high school, this story nevertheless has serious undertones.

Surat, Michele Maria. Angel Child, Dragon Child. Illustrated by Vo-Dinh Mai. Milwaukee, WI: Raintree Publishers, 1983. This picture book shows a young Vietnamese family's adjustment to life and school in America during the year before the mother arrives.

Nonfiction Beidler, Philip D. Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation.

Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991. For more mature readers, this is a comprehensive look at America's Vietnam experience and legacy as it has been transformed into fiction, drama, and poetry. See Melling, below.

Dolan, Edward F. America after Vietnam: Legacies of a Hated War. New York: Franklin Watts, 1989. This recent perspective on the war's aftermath is well balanced and particularly rich in its magazine and newspaper sources.

Henkin, Alan B., and Liem Thanh Ngyuen. Between Two Cultures: The Vietnamese in America. Saratoga, CA: Century Twenty One Publishing, 1981. This careful profile of Vietnam ese immigrants, their historical, cultural, and social backgrounds, has excellent notes and bibliography up to 1981.

Kelly, Gail Paradise. From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977. Using interviews, government documents, and her personal observations of life in an American refugee camp, the author draws an interesting portrait of early Vietnamese refugees and their slow evolution from people in flight to people in residence. Outstanding notes and sources.

Melling, Philip H. Vietnam in American Literature. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990. This is a comprehensive study, from an interestingly British point of view.

Wilson, James C. Vietnam in Prose and Film. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1982.

For younger readers, this is a useful if dated source, and does include familiar films.

Related Titles

A Long Way from Home is the sequel to A Boat to Nowhere. The two books were published in the same year, and critics were at first tempted to treat the two books as if they were one story.

The perspective from the passage of time shows that the books are significantly different, sharing some characters but few themes in common. A Boat to Nowhere is the heroic tale of the efforts of a small band of Vietnamese to escape from the corruption and tyranny that has made life in their native land intolerable. The main characters overcome both natural and human obstacles, finding the best in themselves as they do, and they are eventually saved by the kindness of another human being. As the sequel, A Long Way from Home naturally enough describes what happens to the Vietnamese once they reach America, focusing on alltoo-real angry reactions to their presence and efforts to succeed in their new land.

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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

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