

CITY OF TRANQUIL LIGHT

by Bo Caldwell

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A Conversation with Bo Caldwell

It's been nearly ten years since your first novel, *The Distant Land of My Father*, was published. What took you so long?

That's a question I've asked myself. Part of the answer is that life intervened. I started the novel in 2002 and wrote perhaps eighty pages, and although I didn't like them much, I've come to accept that mediocre first drafts are often part of my process. In 2004, I was diagnosed with stage-one breast cancer (I'm now healthy and cancer free), so that fall and the first half of 2005 were given to chemo and radiation. It took another year for my head to clear enough to write fiction, and I returned to the novel in 2006 and finished it two years later. The other part of the answer is easy: I'm a slow writer, something I've made peace with.

City of Tranquil Light is based on the lives of your grandparents, who were missionaries in China and Taiwan. Where did you draw the line between their experiences and the fictional characters of Will and Katherine?

The biggest difference is that unlike my characters, my grandparents had five children. I chose not to deal with fictional children because they would complicate what felt like an already complex story. Also, my grandparents lived in five different cities in China and worked in Taiwan after the Communist takeover of China. I had my characters settle in one place so that I wouldn't have to keep rebuilding cities, and I chose to have my characters stay in the United States once they returned because I wanted to focus on what leaving China meant for them, on aging, and on their marriage. Finally, while my grandparents' lives were certainly the primary inspiration for the book, I was also inspired by the lives of other missionaries, and I incorporated parts of their stories as well as my

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grandparents'. The line between what really happened to any of these people and what I made up or exaggerated is already blurry, and, in my experience, will become more so as time passes.

China has obviously played a large role in both of your novels. What does the country mean to you?

China represents a connection to my childhood and to my family. It's where my grandparents lived most of their lives, and where my mom and her siblings grew up. Family dinners with my grandparents were always Chinese food, and I used to help my mom make *chiaoza*—steamed dumplings—when I was little. All my aunts and uncles knew how to make them. Everyone in my mom's family had at least a couple of pieces of Chinese furniture in their homes, and my grandparents had many Chinese items. So in a weird way, there's also a connection for me between China and home, although I've never been there.

In the book, you create a richly detailed vision of China in the early twentieth century. Can you tell us about your historical research into this period of Chinese history?

I'm not a fast researcher, but I'm thorough, and I learned much more than what appears in the novel. I started with historical books about China, mostly from the library and used bookstores, then read biographies and autobiographies of missionaries who'd served in China, many of whom my grandparents had known. These books presented history through a narrower lens; I saw how historical events had affected specific individuals and places, which made those events more real and immediate.

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How did you decide to tell the story from two different points in time?

Trial and error. The first draft was entirely in Will's voice, and early readers said the story needed more of Katherine, for which I am very grateful. Someone also mentioned the word "journal." At first I thought her journal might appear all in one section, but once I started writing it, I began interspersing it and enjoyed the dialogue that began to take shape. And I learned that rather than echoing or contradicting what Will said, Katherine could enlarge upon it and expand it, which appealed to me.

Will and Katherine's faith brings them together and gives their lives both challenges and purpose. Did writing about their love and faith have any impact on your own marriage and/or faith?

Writing about Katherine's decline made me value the present with my husband. We're both healthy and (relatively) young, and I hope we have lots of years ahead of us. But writing about Will watching Katherine's decline caused me to be more grateful for what we have now. And yes, the novel affected my faith strongly. When I started it in 2002, I tried to imagine my grandfather's faith and to portray it accurately, but when I returned to the novel in 2006, after chemo and radiation, I no longer wanted that distance. I came to believe that although it was riskier to write about my own faith and what was in my heart—instead of hiding behind my grandfather—it was also more worthwhile.



City of Tranquil Light tells the story of two extraordinary lives, each filled with hardship and joy. What did you learn in writing about those lives?

I learned about the cost of marriage, which I first saw with my parents. My mom and dad were married for fifty-six years, and when my dad passed away in 2000, I watched my mom lose him then begin her life without him. She was very brave, and although the way in which she did that was remarkable, it still broke my heart. When I read biographies of missionaries, I saw one spouse or the other go through the same thing: this devastating separation after decades of companionship. But I also saw them survive it, as has my mom, and go on to live good lives. If you marry and are fortunate enough to grow old together, one of you will lose the other. But people survive that, and they even thrive, despite that great loss. That inspires and encourages me.

Do you think you could endure the hardships your grandparents endured?

My gut response is no—I love the comforts of home—but we endure what we have to endure, don't we? I'm also not sure I could have stayed as long as they did, and remained so faithful to a calling. But I don't think my grandparents knew they could do those things, and although I haven't endured anything like they did, I've surprised myself by the ways I've gotten through some challenges in my life, and that's something that excites me: We don't know how we'll be in a crisis. We often respond in ways we never dreamed we would, or could—a fact that gives me hope.

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Glimpses Into City of Tranquil Light

On an afternoon in the spring of 2002, when I was visiting my mom in Los Angeles, I told her I was thinking about writing a novel based on her parents, who had been missionaries in China and Taiwan. My mom liked the idea, which made sense as it had been hers to begin with; for years she'd said that the story of her parents' lives would make a wonderful book. Over time I'd come to agree with her, and that day she said she thought she had some photographs from her parents. Expecting a couple of pictures of Grandpa and Grandma, I said that would be wonderful, and I followed her to the carved cedar chest in the entry of her home, the house I grew up in.

"The [photos] inspired me and moved me, and they told me about my grandparents' lives."

The cedar chest was where Mom kept relics from our childhoods—hers, Dad's, my brother's, and mine. Mom and I sat on the floor and she dug through old dolls, baby clothes, paintings, and embroidered linens, and finally pulled out thick, black pages from a photo album that I'd never seen. When she handed them to me, I found myself staring at dozens of photographs from the interior of north China in the early decades of the twentieth century.

They were snapshots, really, most of them very small—two inches by three inches—and all of course in black and white, some grayish, others sepia toned. Many weren't very clear, and in most of them it was difficult to tell exactly what I was looking at—what sort of gathering or occasion was being captured. They seemed to have been taken without much thought as to composition or occasion, which was exactly what made them magical: Their everydayness gave them a kind of intimacy that made me feel as though I was looking through one of those put-a-quarter-in-the-slot telescopes on a bridge or pier or highway lookout, at a place and time that was long gone.



I knew the photographs were a novelist's gold, and they certainly helped me in a practical sense; I saw the homes, buildings, city streets, and people I would be writing about. I was also struck by the crowds. In my research I'd read of how densely populated the cities in China were, and how foreigners, meaning Westerners, always drew a crowd; because they were such a novelty in the interior of China at that time, they had only to step onto the street to be observed and accompanied by a group, whatever they did and wherever they went. But I'd never imagined the intensity of the crowds I saw in the photographs, dozens and dozens of people staring into the camera, packed together at worship services and in the streets and markets.

The pictures did much more than educate me on a superficial level; they inspired me and moved me, and they told me about my grandparents' lives on a deeper level. I saw in people's expressions what my grandparents must have seen—their great need—and I saw joy as well. Somehow those two poles of emotion, need and joy, being so present in the photographs gave me a glimpse, though slight, of the give-and-take my grandparents had experienced. I understood that their lives had involved gifts as well as sacrifice, joy as well as sorrow, fulfillment as well as loss. In the photographs of my grandparents themselves, I saw their youth as they started out—they were just twenty-one when they went to China—and their determination.

As I pored over the photographs that afternoon and in the weeks and months (and yes, years) that followed, my grandparents' lives became more and more real to me, and as they did, the lives of my characters and their story began to take shape. Here are some of my favorites of those photographs, and some that inspired scenes or characters in the novel.

Behind the Novel



This is my grandfather, the basis for Will in the novel, during his early years in China. I was struck by how young he looked.

This photo told me a great deal about the primitive circumstances of my grandmother's nursing in China, which amazed me and increased my admiration for what she accomplished.



Westerners talked of how they became the focus of attention wherever they went. This photo showed me how strange the city must have seemed to my grandparents when they arrived—and how strange they must have seemed to its residents.



When my mom first showed me my grandparents' photos, I was amazed at the crowds. I kept saying, "I've never seen so many people!"

I love the joy in this couple's expressions, which helped me to envision the relationship between Will and Katherine and Chung Hao and Mo Yun.



Behind the Novel



This is my grandfather as I remember him. In the photograph I see his gentleness, which I gave to Will. My grandfather passed away in 1974, when I was nineteen. When I visited him in the hospital a month before his death, I wasn't sure he knew who I was. So I told him. He laughed. "I'd know you a mile away," he said. It was the last time I saw him.



Recommended Reading

Books have been my comfort and encouragement, companions, and friends. Here are some that keep me going.

Angela's Ashes, 'Tis, and Teacher Man

by Frank McCourt

The stories of this lovely man's life.

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

Pip's story of growing up, and the profound ways in which people can change.

The Writer on Her Work edited by Janet Sternburg

Eighteen women writers on their relationship with their work.

Good Poems edited by Garrison Keillor

A beautiful collection, moving and joyful and profound, that I read cover to cover, like a novel.

Meditations from a Movable Chair by Andre Dubus

Essays on writing, life, and faith.

The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro

The heartbreaking and painstakingly told story of an English butler.

The Collected Stories by Grace Paley

Short story gems by a master. "Wants" is my favorite.

Jack of Diamonds by Elizabeth Spencer

Beautiful stories by a beautiful writer.

Something to Declare by Julia Alvarez

Essays on leaving home, growing up, and writing.



Reading Group Questions

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1. *City of Tranquil Light* is framed at both ends by an elderly Will narrating from California. What does this structure lend to the novel? What is the effect of having key information early on about the story to follow—that Katherine predeceases Will, for example, and that they do not live out their lives in China—instead of learning it at the end?
2. Will and Katherine both note that they feel they are returning home, rather than leaving it, when they depart the United States for China for the very first time. What do you think makes them feel this way? Have you ever experienced a similar sensation? In what ways does the novel talk about home?
3. Edward and Will have a close bond; Katherine and Naomi do as well. What makes these connections so strong? Since we don't see the characters together that often, how are these ties shown? How do Edward, Will, Katherine, and Naomi lend support to one another?
4. Consider Chung Hao and Mo Yun, Will's first converts. Will and Katherine intend to help both of them, which they do. But how do Chung Hao and Mo Yun end up helping them? What about the rest of the people of Kuang P'ing Ch'eng? Are Will and Katherine surprised to be the beneficiaries of this assistance? How are the themes of giving and debt dealt with?
5. In what ways are the American missionaries a modernizing force? How do they alter the ways of the people of Kuang P'ing Ch'eng? Is it always for the better?
6. How does Lily's death test Will and Katherine's faith? What enables them to recover? Do you believe that they do fully recover? Do they ever give in to despair entirely?

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7. What were your initial impressions of Hsiao Lao? What does his treatment of Will as a prisoner indicate about his character? What do you think of the assistance he gives to Will and Katherine later on? By the end of the novel, in what ways has he changed, and in what ways has he remained the same?
8. How are cultural differences portrayed? Certainly many of the Chinese people Will and Katherine encounter do things that would be considered odd—or outright wrong—in the West. Do you think the novel passes judgment on these differences? Do Will and Katherine? Does the novel help you to understand why things were the way they were in China at this time?
9. What role does fate play? Do Will and Katherine believe that in some sense, their destinies have already been laid out for them? What lends support to that idea?
10. What is it that ultimately pushes Will and Katherine to leave China? They consider it their home. How do they deal with the transition?
11. When Katherine passes away, Will finds himself distraught and asks, “What had been the point of all my years of believing if my trust faltered when I needed it most?” What do you think? Has Will’s faith failed him? How is he able to find solace?
12. Upon their final departure for the United States, Will notes, “We had tried to dress up for our journey, but I saw how shabby we looked, and how bereft, and what a contrast our appearances were to the rich lives we had led in Kuang P’ing Ch’eng.” Would you agree that Will and Katherine led rich lives, despite their poverty? Were their lives ultimately happy ones, in spite of the sadness and many trials they faced?
13. Does Will and Katherine’s faith change in the course of the novel? In what ways?