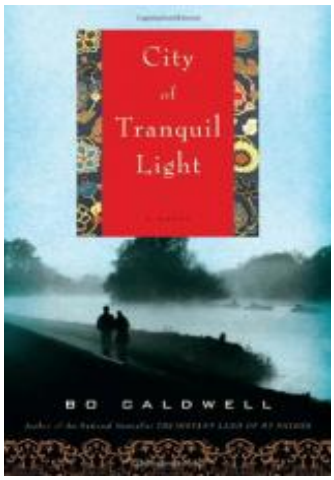
City of Tranquil Light

by Bo Caldwell



About the Book

Bo Caldwell?s 2001 debut novel, THE DISTANT LAND OF MY FATHER, set in historic China and based on the story of her uncle, was a critical and commercial success --- a national bestseller that was loved by critics, booksellers, and readers in equal measure. In 2002 Caldwell turned to the story of her maternal grandparents who were missionaries in China in the early 1900s. For years her mother had urged her to write about them and when she dove into the research she found their lives full of conflict, danger, and heartbreak, as well as joy and fulfillment. But life, in the form of a cancer diagnosis, kept her from her writing desk until 2006. When she returned, she completed CITY OF TRANQUIL LIGHT (Henry Holt and Companympany), a searing love story of a man and a woman, their God, and the country they jointly loved and a deeply researched and page-turning portrait of a country in utter turmoil.

At the center of the novel are Will and Katherine, two Mennonite missionaries from the heartland who have come to China because they feel called by God to serve the poor and spread the Good News. But this is more than a missionary story; it is really the portrait of a marriage set against the backdrop of a radically shifting nation that is plunging into revolution.

A novel based on her grandparents wasn?t Caldwell?s idea. ?I?m embarrassed to say that before I had dismissed my grandparents? lives as too dull and simplistic. But as I reread my grandfather?s memoir and began to ask my mom about my grandparents, I learned how wrong I?d been.? As she began to see her grandparents as her mother had seen them, and to read the biographies and autobiographies of other American missionaries in China, Caldwell found similar stories. ?I saw a pattern emerge in the later lives of many of these men and women. Most eventually returned to the United States, usually to be near their children (now grown) and grandchildren, but also because of illness or frailty. I was moved by the contrast between their lives in China and their later lives in the U.S. After enduring decades of war, famine, illness, personal danger, and great hostility toward their work, these people settled safely in the suburbs where they walked in rose gardens and played with their grandchildren and lived out their days. I was struck by the sacrifice that must have been involved in leaving the people and work that had been at the center of their lives, even with the

reward of the comforts of modern life. I also began to feel that missionaries often get a bad rap in fiction. While there were certainly those who exploited the people they had come to serve, there were also many who poured out their lives for strangers and for their faith. And I wanted to tell their story.?

That story is one of marriage, of leaving one home and finding another, and of faith. ?When I began the novel, I tried to understand my grandfather?s faith and to present it accurately,? says Caldwell. ?I tried to see the world through his eyes.? Once Caldwell returned to writing, she returned as a different person. The combination of sobriety and a serious illness had affected her faith deeply, and she was no longer writing about her grandparents? faith. She was writing about her own.

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Discussion Guide

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?

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, 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?

Author Bio

Bo Caldwell?s short fiction has been published in *Ploughshares*, *Story*, *Epoch*, and other literary journals. Born in Oklahoma City in 1955, she grew up in Los Angeles and attended Stanford University, where she later held a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Creative Writing and a Jones Lectureship in Creative Writing. She has received a fellowship in literature from the National Endowment for the Arts, an Artist Fellowship from the Arts Council of Santa Clara County, and the Joseph Henry Jackson Award from the San Francisco Foundation. Her personal essays have appeared in *O Magazine*, the *Washington Post Magazine*, and *America Magazine*. Her first novel, THE DISTANT LAND OF MY FATHER, was one of the *Los Angeles Times*? Best Books of 2001 and was selected for community reading programs in Pasadena, Santa Clara County, and Claremont. She lives in Northern California with her husband, the writer Ron Hansen.

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