4-5-2009

Interview with Bo Caldwell—Author of "The Distant Land of My Father," a Shanghai Novel

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April 5, 2009 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | 1 comment

Preface to the Interview (by Jeff Wasserstrom):

When I was working on Global Shanghai, 1850-2010, I thought I was keeping up with the fiction as well as non-fiction that was being published about the city—at least things coming out in English and Chinese. Somehow, though, Bo Caldwell’s excellent 2001 Shanghai novel, The Distant Land of My Father, passed me by initially. I didn’t learn of it until the Pasadena Public Library invited me to give a public lecture on Shanghai’s past to provide background for an upcoming author’s visit. This would be part of their “One City, One Story” program, they said, for which the selected title was a writer’s first novel, which included scenes set in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s and Pasadena during that same time period.

I agreed to do the lecture, though I was nervous immediately after accepting the invitation, since my talk was supposed to build up excitement for a visit by Caldwell that would come soon afterwards, and I was worried that the novel wouldn’t engage me or wouldn’t appropriately capture the feel of a time and place I’d spent a long time studying. This had been just what had happened the last time I’d read a recent work of fiction set in Old Shanghai, Kazuo Ishiguro’s When We Were Orphans. Though I’d liked his Remains of the Day a great deal, I’d found Orphans, especially its surreal ending, disappointing, somehow off. Fortunately, my response to Distant Land was totally different: I found it absorbing, liking the matter of fact, memoir-like narrative tone and feeling that it did an excellent job at evoking the setting.

I was unable to attend Caldwell’s talk in Pasadena, but if I’d been there, I’d have asked questions like the following—which she has now been good enough to answer via e-mail:

The Interview

JW: Have you been to Shanghai?

BC: No, I’ve never been to Shanghai or to any part of China, though I would love to go someday — but I’d like to go as a tourist, not for work. A few things contributed to my decision not to go.

First off, the information that was available was incredibly rich and plentiful. When I started writing the novel, I decided to do my homework before I thought about if and when I would go. I didn’t know anything about Shanghai or about China’s history, so I started with history books about Shanghai and then found (thanks to libraries’ computer catalogues) a wealth of memoirs by people who had lived in Shanghai during some of the time I was writing about. Memoirs are gold for a novelist, because that’s where people talk about their daily lives — what they ate, where they ate, the parties they went to, their homes, their friends, all those vivid details. I would guess that researching 1930s Shanghai in particular would be like researching Paris or New York during that time — a lot of people wrote about their experiences. So the information I found (at libraries and used bookstores — this was pre-Google) made me wonder if I could write the novel without going to the city.

The other part of that decision was that as I learned about Shanghai, I saw how dramatically the city had changed since the period I was dealing with. In fact, it seems to be one of the fastest changing cities in the world. I came to believe that seeing the modern city would actually hinder me as a novelist; I’d have to take the city apart in my imagination.

JW: Did you read a lot of memoirs to help create the memoir feel of the novel?

BC: I read a lot of memoirs in general, and personal essays. I’m sort of a sucker for a first-person narrative, fiction or nonfiction. It really draws me in, or it can. I think it’s also overused and wrongly
used (though I’m on thin ice here, as the novel I’m finishing right now is once again first person). The advantages of first person are immediacy and intimacy; the disadvantages are its limitations and, in my opinion, it can sometimes feel gimmicky.

Anyway, yes, I read a lot of memoirs, and, as I said above, the memoirs that dealt with the time and place of the novel were especially valuable. I also had, thanks to my dad, a couple dozen old Life magazines from around 1930 to 1960 or so. He picked them up at garage sales because he enjoyed them, and he loaned them to me for research. They were very handy, especially the ads in terms of brand names and products.

JW: Did you read novels that were set in Shanghai?

BC: No, I’m very careful about reading fiction that is similar in any way to what I’m working on. It would just be too easy to accidentally copy another writer’s work, either in terms of phrasing or content or style – there are all kinds of potholes on that road. So I don’t do it – with one exception. I did read Empire of the Sun, but I did so in a researcher frame of mind – I was taking notes and really paying attention to detail more than story or character or writing. I don’t listen to fiction either (audio books) because I feel like I can accidentally pick stuff up.

JW: Can you talk about what you’re working on now?

Distant Land is the first thing I’ve written that didn’t take place here and now. The restraints of another time and place were very good for me as a writer, so after I finished Distant Land, I started a novel set in London in 1953, which I thought was a really interesting period of time – the city was still recovering, and my parents had spent some time there, so I thought my mom could be a resource about particulars. But I couldn’t get anywhere with it, and one day after working for several hours and getting nowhere, it was as though something inside me said, Go back to China.

My maternal grandparents were missionaries in China. They were both from Mennonite families and went over to China in 1906, then spent much of their lives there, and later in Taiwan. For much of my writing life, my mom has said what a wonderful story her parents’ lives would make, and I just didn’t hear it. I’m embarrassed to say that I thought missionaries’ lives were probably dull.

Far from it. I read a memoir that my grandfather wrote for our family, and I decided to write a novel from the point of view of an older missionary looking back on his life. It takes place in the interior of China, which, in 1906, was like stepping into another century. The research has been difficult (not quite so many memoirs!), but interesting. And it’s the book I’ve wanted to write. It seems to me that missionaries get a bad rap in fiction. While it’s true that there certainly is a basis for the stereotypical insensitive type who wants only to turn heathens into Westerners, there have been many good people who have done much good work. And their stories interested me. So this novel takes place in China from 1906 until around 1934, another really fascinating period that includes the end of the monarchy, revolution, warlords, and civil war.

JW: Are there any books or films dealing with Chinese themes that you’ve read or seen in recent years that have made a particularly strong impression on you?

BC: In terms of film, I enjoyed The White Countess and Lust Caution very much, and was excited to see “my Shanghai” – the Shanghai of the 1930s and 1940s that I’d studied so much. Though I hadn’t been there, I recognized streets and buildings. I also loved The Painted Veil. I didn’t know the country as well (the south of China), but I found the story really powerful. In terms of books, I’ve read a lot of missionary biographies and autobiographies, many of them out-of-print.

JW: What was the most interesting part of the research you did for Distant Land?

BC: Distant Land is based on the life of my mom’s eldest brother. Much of the novel follows his life, and at some point during the research I began to find books that mentioned him by name. That was pretty exciting, and it was encouraging, like an invisible pat on the back.
But there was something else I found really moving, and that propelled the book. In the memoirs I read, several people talked about not leaving during the Japanese invasion or before the Communist takeover. They said how foolish they must seem in retrospect, given everything that happened. But they said they just couldn't leave; they never thought that the things that did happen would, and they could not bear to leave the place they loved. I found that very powerful; it taught me a lot about what place means to us, and how strong our ties can be to where we live.