
Pro Rege

Volume 39 | Number 1

Article 8

September 2010

City of Tranquil Light (Book Review)

James C. Schaap

Dordt College

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2010) "City of Tranquil Light (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*:

Vol. 39: No. 1, 44 - 45.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol39/iss1/8

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own attitudes and actions as well as in the culture around them.

All of the above would be of little use if the authors stopped at this point. A positive feature of *Living at the Crossroads* is its consistent focus on a faithful, relevant witness in our time. The authors provide examples of a variety of Christians who are attempting to be faithful witnesses in the difficult contexts of contemporary culture. Christ-followers who take their faith seriously will find it easy to relate to examples presented. A pressing question pervades each example: “[H]ow can a Christian remain faithful to the biblical story while living in a culture that has largely been shaped by a different story?” (132)

The tension of living as an alien within a culture shaped by a vision of and for life that is antithetical to the gospel powerfully confronts the reader. The authors consider a variety of responses to that tension—both faithful and unfaithful. In considering the contours of a faithful response, Goheen and Bartholomew emphasize the necessity of the Christian witness being communal and merciful as well as tolerant and suffering. Their assessment and counsel is especially convincing since they work to root their vision of a faithful witness in the specifics of the biblical text.

The final chapter leads the reader into critical areas of contemporary life. What are the challenges and

what is the shape of faithfulness in business, politics, sports and competition, creativity and art, scholarship and education? Rather than offering simple “how-to” solutions, Bartholomew and Goheen offer provocative examples and raise crucial issues. The authors leave the reader with a passionate vision for biblical faithfulness rather than simplistic formulas. The pastoral postscript provides a wonderful conclusion to the book. Here the authors remind their readers that God’s people are not called to “build the kingdom of God”—only Christ can do that. Rather, rooted in Christ, directed by Scripture, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Christians are simply called to faithful witness—individually and communally. Believers may rest in the assurance that God is faithful to his promises in Christ.

In summary *Living at the Crossroads* is a powerful call to living out of a biblical worldview. Accessible to mature high school students, college students and Church members who read and reflect on the shape of discipleship, the book is concise and clear while leading the reader into a deepened understanding of the forces that have shaped and are at work in Western culture. Is *Living at the Crossroads* worth adding to the long list of books exploring Christian worldview? Absolutely! Christians who are serious about bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ in our time will find the book enlightening, informative, and challenging.

Caldwell, Bo. *City of Tranquil Light*. Henry Holt & Co., September 28, 2010. Hardcover, 304 pages. ISBN: 978-0805092285. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, Professor of English, Dordt College, in his blog: <http://siouxlander.blogspot.com/2010/07/city-of-tranquil-light.html>

One of the loveliest moments in Bo Caldwell’s new novel, *City of Tranquil Light*, occurs when Will and Katharine Kiehn, early 20th-century Mennonite missionaries in China, observe the Moon Festival, a celebration of harvest and end of summer, with their Chinese friends. Katharine narrates the story, through her diaries.

“The people see the moon’s round shape as representing the family circle, and they gather with their relations to stare up at the full moon together,” she writes, then, sort of “western-ly,” apologizes. “This perhaps sounds silly, but it isn’t; it’s beautiful, and it is my favorite night of the year.”

She goes on to describe why:

Red paper lanterns hung from the towers of the city wall and from houses and shops on every street, as if the city were dressed up for the celebration. Chung Hao and Mo Yun and Will and I hung our own red lanterns in our courtyard then sat together outside and admired the moon, which truly was a marvel: white and perfectly round, and so big it seemed to

be right above us and shining only for Kuant p’ing Ch’eng, as if our city was the moon’s favorite place on earth.

Together, they recite poems about the moon and eat holiday “moon cakes,” she describes as looking and tasting just beautiful. “It was a magical night,” she says.

It’s a beautiful passage of a beautiful novel, not only because the event is narrated so simply but respectfully, but because what Katharine’s appreciation of the holiday says about the Kiehns is itself an indication of why this new novel succeeds as fully as it does. Missionaries, these days, even among Christians, don’t always receive good press. Culturally, anthropologists tend to see them in the same way that most native peoples have for centuries—the first somewhat subtle wave of Westernization. The worst of them come to the field believing in their divine calling to raise primitives up to the blessings of their own cultural way of life, a christianized version of “the white man’s burden.”

What this warm passage illustrates about the Kiehns is their heartfelt willingness to immerse themselves totally in the Chinese culture around them, and that characteristic makes them disarmingly admirable and selfless. They are, quite simply, wonderful people, radiant Christians whose actions speak the very core of the gospel of love. They've come to China, remarkably, to serve.

I couldn't help but be amazed at this novel because it offers the readers heroic characters one simply doesn't meet in much of contemporary fiction. *City of Tranquil Light* is, without a doubt, a love story—Katharine and Will meet on the way to the field, fall in love with each other's qualities, then spend the rest of their professional lives giving everything for each other and the people they serve. It is a love triangle—as almost all love stories are—but it's a love triangle of a wholly different character, for none other than God almighty is the third partner, and he's not an antagonist even though they don't always understand his ways. Nonetheless, they know him to be a constant presence, someone before whom these lovers struggle throughout their lives to find their place, someone in whom they belong.

The novel is not a simple romance, in any sense of the word. Terrible things happen in this novel because on the field where they serve, terrible things do happen. Drought kills off multitudes, mad lawlessness frequently rules, and China's early-20th-century struggles take their tolls as well. Will and Katharine suffer in ways few do. Nothing comparable would have happened to them had they stayed in the rural Midwestern world they each left, even though both would have suffered the raw blight of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. It would have been impossible for them to describe the horrors they experienced to the church groups they visited, like all missionaries, while on leave.

And yet—this is not a novel published by so-called “Christian” publishers—what lasts, what's there beginning to end, is their respectful love for each other and their love of God. It's an amazing novel, a moving novel, even a kind of testimony. It's the kind of novel—hard as it is to believe these days—that builds faith.

There's an old writing rule I've started to think applies to the Christian life as well as good writing—“show, don't tell.” Sometimes I think the whole believing world would be better off if we all took to heart that admonition because there's so much talking in the Christian world today, so much arguing, so much pontificating, so much proselytizing. Unending cacophony, all meant so well: Me and Jesus. Here's where he led me. Here's how he holds me in his hand. Wonderful savior—isn't he?

What makes the Kiehns, as believers, such memorable believing characters is that what we *see* of them is so much more than what we *hear* of them. Will preaches constantly throughout the novel, but what he does for the people he comes to love is the gripping story. The Chinese know very well what the Kiehns are because they identify the Kiehns “by their love.” The Kiehns become friends with the Chinese; they become family by sitting out on the porch on the night

of Moon Festival, eating moon cakes, drinking tea, admiring the shape of the heavenly body above them—and by falling in love with the ritual, the traditions—and suffering together with them through the tribulations of the people.

But what makes the novel work so well is not simply the loving, moral character of Will and Katharine Kiehn. What makes the novel soar is the slowly developing conviction we feel in the constancy of their voices. Both are reminiscing throughout, Will using Katharine's journals to highlight his own reminiscence. Their voices harmonize as if they were singing because they are.

I couldn't help but think of Marilyn Robinson's *Gilead* when I read this novel, in part because in both we find flawed but warm Christian characters, a rarity today in fiction. *Gilead's* achievement arises, I believe, from the simple, convincing voice of its very human narrator. Just a chapter or two into that novel, and you feel as if you aren't reading a book—you're listening to an old man tell a story he wants passionately to communicate to his son. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* succeeds in the same way, as does, years ago, *Huck Finn*. Great novels create unforgettably human voices.

You'll hear them here too in *City of Tranquil Light*. Whether it's Katharine's or Will's, the voices are convincing because Bo Caldwell has given them so much humanity that it's difficult to believe they are only fictional—and, in fact, in total they aren't. Caldwell says she pulls much of the story from a journal of her grandfather, a missionary to China. She says she went to that old journal because she wanted to understand his faith. If she hasn't yet, I hope she rests assured that many readers will. (The novel will be released in October.)

Not long ago in South Dakota, I asked a priest who was head man at Roman Catholic mission, which has been in on the reservation for far more than a century, how it was that Christian missions of all kinds have such a spotty record among the continent's Native people. There are, of course, many reasons for such failures, but he looked into my eyes and shook his head. “For so many years, we didn't listen,” he said. I thought that answer wise as well as prophetic.

Will and Katharine Kiehn listen, and that they do makes them wonderful missionaries, vivid characters, and memorable believers. And all of that makes Bo Caldwell's new novel a blessing, pure and simple.