It Is Just That Your House Is So Far Away
by Steve Noyes

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

It Is Just That Your House Is So Far Away is a love story with a difference, for it is one in which cultural differences play a huge part. The story begins in 1997, not long before Hong Kong was handed over to China. The main character is Jeff Mott, a 37-year-old from Victoria, BC. Divorced, and father of eight-year-old Melissa, Jeff is at loose ends and jobless again. Invited by his friend Mark to stay with him for a while, Jeff arrives in Beijing and finds it “like stepping onto another planet” (11). Mark has worked there for four years but speaks no Chinese and associates only with other expatriates. Jeff is determined to live differently; he wants to learn to speak Chinese and to meet and get to know Chinese people, to get below the surface of tourist attractions to the real China.

He stays with Mark for two weeks, does a little travelling, and then accepts a position teaching English at the San Tiao College, north of Beijing. Before long he meets Wang Bian Fu and the two become friends, and eventually lovers. But Chinese tradition and Jeff’s limited language skills become barriers to a happy relationship, Jeff is upset by the way the couple is looked down upon when they go out together because he is a foreigner, and by the way his every move is governed by what is acceptable to the Chinese government and Chinese society. For example, he is criticized by officials for not meeting the standards set for foreigners by wearing his hair too long and not tucking in his shirt. Security guards at the hotel where he lives constantly take down information of who he is with, presumably to pass it on to the police, and when he speaks in public people are occasionally planted in the audience to ask him controversial questions about Tibet.

When he questions Bian Fu about her family or her past, she accuses him of being rude. He also finds it hard to accept the way her every move is apparently governed by her parents. “You don’t understand,” she frequently tells him. “I am a daughter . . . I listen and obey” (48). Eventually he asks her to marry him, and she accepts, but after some time he learns that she has been deceiving him. He has to decide whether to forgive her for lying and remain in China or to return to Canada to resume more responsibility for his daughter.

I enjoyed the story, especially the descriptive details of the Chinese cities: the jam-packed buses; the crowded back alleys where two bicycles can barely pass; Tian An Men Square where Jeff sees “red rice paper balloons floating above the temple with its upswept eaves, the McDonald’s on the far corner” (53); and the small courtyards where laundry is drying and old men play chess, with over all the “strong smells of fried meat, garlic, rotting garbage” (27).

I found that the middle of the story dragged somewhat. The uncertainty and indecision of the couple almost becomes irritating. It seems that Jeff must commit to Bian Fu totally before she will commit to him. They are at an impasse, but at some point I just wanted them to make up their minds.

I liked the book’s title, which is taken from a quotation by Master Kung (Confucius) near the end of the book – “It is not that I do not love you, it is just that your house is so far away” (280). This seems to refer to either Jeff or Bian Fu and their difficulties in crossing the cultural divide. “You love me, not understand me” (214) Bian Fu says to Jeff, and that holds true for her, too.
Like his main character, author Steve Noyes lives in Victoria, but he is originally from Winnipeg. He is best known for his six books of poetry and short fiction. *It Is Just That Your House Is So Far Away* is his first novel. He has worked at a wide variety of occupations and has travelled widely in China, giving his novel a feeling of authenticity. Indeed, some of Jeff’s experiences read as if the author may have experienced these himself as a foreigner reaching across a cultural divide. 

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is *Sarah: A New Beginning*, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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