

May 08 SUMMARY – DON QUIXOTE IN CHINA by Barrett

Judie Davita, lately returned from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and China, lead the group through the ups and downs of Don Quixote in China by Dean Barrett. Seven members of the club were in attendance and new members, Paula and Sam Betty. Welcome to you both.

Judie started out the discussion with a question; did we feel the book was frivolous? I'd say quite a number of us did. Several members mentioned that he seemed to loose track of where he was going and ramble around. At times you could scan ahead and find where he picked up the thread again. Sharon felt is it was generally best to keep reading over a period of time as picking up the thread was difficult after an absence from the book.

The group was amused by the author's self-acknowledgment that he was not as accomplished as Paul Theroux and was jealous of his talent. Keith asked why Don Quixote for the title. The group agreed they felt that the author was using writing a book as an excuse for the trips and was most likely working under contract for an agent. This might have been why he chose the cheapest accommodations and modes of travel possible, and why he was in China during the hottest time of the year.

Dan and Judie found several points of humor in the book, with Judie especially liking his descriptions of Men's Healthful Briefs and the benefits of peppermint mouth wash for a variety of functions. Dan describes Mr. Barrett's style as comedy meets travel writing, and found his description of the women he met entertaining.

There was usually something about his journey that brought meaning to each of us, whether we finished the book or not.

Sharon, who enjoys train travel, found these parts of his journey interesting. Having heard Willie's stories about the hard vs. soft sleeper accommodations on the long distance trains in China, it really helped me to understand the differences between the two levels of service and what he was experiencing. Barb appreciated that Mr. Barrett had included a map so that we could orient ourselves in China during the book.

The authors' descriptions of the remote villages, the train journeys, the rustic guesthouses, the less than appetizing food and his guide sleeping in the room with him were strange to those in our group who had traveled in China. At times, I felt he made his journey harder than it needed to be. That being said, even his ability to speak Mandarin did not help him out of difficult situations when he traveled into the country and remote villages. Group members who have been to

China before mentioned that the cities were generally very modern and that verbal communication in English was difficult even in the big cities.

Judie said she had picked the book because she hoped it would prepare her for her upcoming trip to China. Phylliss asked if it had and Judie said yes for the remote villages of Thailand but not for the China she experienced. Judie's China was within a small group with a Chinese guide. They were mainly in the larger cities in western style accommodations and where she had hoped to see the traffic of motorbikes, cars were ubiquitous. She felt she had little interaction with the true Chinese, which was very unlike her experiences in Thailand, and Vietnam. What she did find was that if she could write a word in English, the Chinese could read the English word, but might not be able to recognize the spoken word.

Phylliss brought up that when she and Keith had visited a Chinese elementary school, how important education was even in the remotest villages. Judie mentioned the portion of the book where villages of high achieving students were honored with a visit from government officials; the student received an award and the village, a special arch announcing the achievement. The group pondered the difference of priorities in the US as shown by the length of the school year and emphasis on sports and celebrities.

The best thing about books such as Mr. Barretts' is that they generally lead to fantastic discussions. After all, that is why I believe we come to this book club; our love of travel and what it shows us about ourselves and the world at large.

THANK YOU JUDIE for a fascinating discussion.

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