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The Examination: A Novel (Sunburst Book)



Synopsis

Fifteen-year-old Hong and his older brother Chen face famine, flood, pirates, and jealous rivals on their journey through fifteenth century China as Chen pursues his calling as a scholar and Hong becomes involved with a secret society known as the White Lotus.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In a starred review, PW said that this novel "excels as both fiction and history, telling a moving tale of fraternal love and courage as it reveals a wealth of insights into the traditions and politics of medieval China." Ages 12-up. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Grade 6-10-In Imperial China, recruitment for public office was effected through a series of competitive examinations. In this story, which takes place during the late Ming Dynasty (late 16th to early 17th-century C.E.), young Lao Chen journeys from his hometown to the capital of his province for the provincial exams, then to Beijing for the nationals. An aloof, brilliant, yet impractical scholar, Chen is intent more on testing his book knowledge and literary finesse than on gaining political power. He is accompanied by his younger brother and self-appointed guardian, Hong, who is practical and worldly wise. The two traverse a nation in decline, replete with peasant rebellions, secret societies, armies on the move, and vivid characters from all levels of society. As one brother crowns his achievements with a government post, the other secures his position in a secret society dedicated to bringing down that government. The contrast between the two siblings and their activities is skillfully realized in a well-developed plot. The handling of the examinations, which could

have been deadly, is lyrical and interesting. Hong and Chen are both full blooded, as are most of the minor characters. The portrait of China at this point in history is largely accurate, marred only by a few inconsequential anachronisms. A unique and absorbing novel. John Philbrook, San Francisco Public Library Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Boring and hard to read. After ten pages I give up. I brought it only for my kids school work.

Definitely not the best book I've ever read. Not even mediocre. The plot started out okay, but then went in a completely different direction. The characters were not "alive", the description of the "set" was...okay...but what really bothered me was the plotline. It was as if the author didn't have a cohesive plan other than the very beginning and the very end, and then shoved in as many disjointed and confusing action scenes he possibly could. After reading it I immediately gave it away. Don't waste your money.

This was the absolute worst book ever. I disliked it entirely through. Do not buy this unless you are into Chinese history!!!

Adventure drives the plot of this book. History and culture of China enrich the experience of this book. But the real force and draw is the humanity of the book. Brothers, each with his own kind of intelligence, each able to learn and to grow from what he learns from the other. This book explores what it means to endure in the pragmatic and demanding world. The scholar is valued, but he who finds the way and learns how to deal with people, how to discover his personal strengths is also valuable. These brothers foil each other as they learn from each other. The book explores what it takes to achieve your goals. It examines the meanings of loyalty and love. It teaches the reader what "home" is. I loved every word.

The Examination, written by Malcolm Bosse, is a gripping adventure novel with two main characters, brothers, with two different ambitions. The story is set in the Ming Dynasty, sometime after the rule of the great emperor of Yangle, but "his successors had grown weak, until now the whole country was again facing disaster"(Bosse 89). Lao Hong, 15, the younger brother, is "born under the sign of the Tiger...People declared that in every respect young Hong was true to his birth sign"(1). Hong is reckless, loyal, hot-tempered, compassionate, and with little respect for authority. Throughout the

book, Hong showed all these personalities. Lao Chen, 17, the older brother, was born under the sign of the ox, which made him "patient and stubborn, with a gift for language"(1). His language is very advanced and sophisticated. Chen often uses poetry to try to prove a point in an argument. They live in a poor village in Sichuan. Their mother has died before the book starts, and their father has become a drunk and a gambler. In the beginning, Hong, knowing his family is poor and that order to take Chen to the examinations in order to be a scholar, fights with crickets and wins a match, earning them a sizeable sum of silver. Chen has already placed first in the county examinations, and received the rank "Flowering Talent". Before they set out on their journey, many villagers entrust them with important letters that will prove to be pivotal to the story. They set out for their trip, to Chendu, the provincial capital, knowing well that they may never return to their village. They walk steadily for two weeks, and they meet a man one night during their stay at a barn, who tells them that a famine wiped out his whole family. This exposes to the brothers the horrors of the countryside. While walking one day, they notice locusts, and Chen fears that they might migrate to their village, killing everyone. Hong tries to comfort Chen, but he continues to think about Daiyun, a girl back home. They finally reach Chengdu, and while they were waiting to take the exam, Chen notices that he is young for someone who is taking a provincial exam. Most men have been trying for a long time. They meet a man in his thirties in their lodgings, Shen Ding. Chen goes to the examination compound and takes it with great confidence, even though at first, he feels, in his cell, that he is trapped. He always finishes first with everything written perfect. On the last day, Shen Ding tells Chen to bribe the grader, but out of respect for Confucius and suspicion, Chen does not. Later he learns that all those who bribed were banned permanently. In the meantime, Hong has delivered a letter written by his schoolmaster to Ye Pan, a barber. The barber reveals that he is a member of a secret society called the "White Lotus". That society is trying to restore the Mandate of Heaven that they believe, the Ming emperor has already lost. Hong is both mystified and scared. He however, wants to join it if his brother succeeds. Chen finds out that he placed fifth--a recommended man. He is invited to a huge banquet, and Hong is initiated on the same night. They next head out for Chongqing, next to the great Chang Jiang. They use a junk to get to their next destination--Wuhan. On the boat they meet this old merchant, Lin Shi. He tells them about the fearsomeness of the Chang Jiang. His wife drowned in it fifteen years ago. They quickly become acquainted, and to Hong, Lin Shi seems more like a father figure to him than a friend. A great foreshadowing is presented when Hong sees nothing but calm water, he says "The danger is a hoax...for them (captain) its like riding a donkey down the road.'... Chen shook his head "I don't trust it" (140). After passing two of the three gorges without any problem, Hong begins to let his guard

down. Lin Shi was suddenly caught by a rock and hurled into the water. Hong has only seen his mother die before Lin died. Hong, "having seen the old man swept away, he couldn't bear the idea of death." They boarded another ship to Suzhou, to deliver an important letter entrusted to Chen. On the way, however, pirates intercept them. Chen is sent to the pirates' boss, due to his high ranking, and Hong is separated from his brother. Hong had just enough time to hide his valuables (Letters, and White Lotus emblems). The pirates eventually find them and demand to know the meanings of its contents. Hong refuses to tell them. They first beat him, and later, they torture him by using the "Thousand Cuts". They cut every part of his body, but before they could finish, he yells out the number "fifteen" signaling that a Lotus member needs help. A young boy, Yao, saves him. They take back the valuables but in the process, Yao is caught and presumably killed. Hong meets up with the army after days of wandering, and he sees General Ma, the great general in which one of his letters is addressed to. General Ma likes Hong and they go witness a battle together. They trap the pirate boss, and they handed prisoners over, which includes Chen. Hong is relieved, and they continue their journey. They reached Suzhou, and Chen delivered the letter to Meng Dafu, an inventor. They immediately become friends. Chen becomes infatuated with his daughter. Meng is extremely protective of her, however, and they meet secretly. One day, as Chen discusses the possibilities of meeting privately, the daughter runs away from him in fear and tells his dad that Chen has "grabbed her from behind and insulted her" and Chen and Hong is forced to leave for their final destination--Beijing. They use the Grand Canal on their way, but Chen takes a detour to Qufu, burial place of Confucius. They then use the flooded countryside to walk to Beijing. They notice more peasants suffering. After arriving, Hong immediately goes to the Imperial palace to meet the "Red Horseman". He tells Hong that the letter Yi Pan gave him was just a fake one to test his faith. Hong is proven loyal and assigned with the task arranging a rendezvous point where a hated government official could be killed. When Chen takes his exam, "Nothing came to mind for any of the questions. Unaccountably, his thoughts returned to the mother and daughter starving to death in a village where two desperate men lurked with pitchforks. Had so much experience on the road incapacitated him for the exacting work of scholarship and composition?"(261). This whole experience has shaken his beliefs. He decides to write his essay about the suffering of the people, instead of the tradition way. He was ranked second. For the second part of the essay, taking place inside the palace, Hong once again wrote an essay about his personal experience, but this time he tore it up. He wrote an essay instead about the mandate of heaven, and the celestial harmony that comes with it. This time, Chen was first. Many job offers came along, and Chen was selected as the Vice Secretary of Rites at Qufu. Hong wanted to go south and join the army. The two brothers go

their separate ways. The author, Malcolm Bosse, was an American author. His novels often have Asian settings, he researches extensively and uses his own experiences. He graduated from Yale and passed away in 2002. The perspective of the book is one of an outsider. He understands the Chinese culture very well and presents it in a good way. He stated in the title page that he uses the Wade-Giles system of transliterations instead of the more widely used pinyin. Some words were different. The emperor was called Yung Lo instead of Yungle. And the first place finisher was called Hui Yuan instead of Zhangyuan. Bosse uses many Chinese phrases throughout the story. For example, gege for big brother. The whole story was an example of the author's thesis. Chen was just a poor boy from a poor village who went on to become number one in the whole nation. He gained experience that money could not buy, and even with money, like those sons of officials who did not have to write a much to get into the exam, they failed. Bribery, no matter how corrupt the system in China was, did not work. Effort and perseverance worked. The good forces always prevail. The pirates almost had their way of torturing Hong, but he managed to escape and come back with the army and destroyed their garrison. And even after Chen was captured and returned, "the golden wings on his cap still shined in the clear sunlight, a deep contrast to the rest of the torn and battered cap" (194). It shows how pure Chen is compared to the pirates, and how nothing can harm his intellectual achievement. The empire is filled with poor, starving people, as evidenced throughout their voyage. Poor merchants on ships, poor soldiers, poor farmers barely scraping by. The two brothers are working towards two different goals. Chen is testing to become a scholar, working for the government, and Hong is a member of the White Lotus, a sect bent on destroying the current government. Most of the other books available are about the grandiose achievements of the emperors when they were young, but this book is unique. It talks about two ordinary brothers achieving extraordinary things. Not much daily life was documented during that time, and all this events could very well have happened. This enthralling novel captures the heart and soul of the Chinese Imperial Examinations. It was intended to give everybody a fair chance at achieving great things. The readers feel as if they had traveled alongside the Lao brothers, meeting a diverse range of people, and getting a feel for the state of the Ming Dynasty. The details are exquisite, down to the description of the junks. The imagery creates a clear picture of the scene and it stays there.

Bosse doesn't always say in his book exactly how his characters are feeling. At first, this gives the novel, although entertaining, a slightly historical feel. However, as you travel with the brothers, (I felt like I'd been all over China at the close of the book!), you come to really see inside of them, and the contrasts, similarities, and interaction between the two brothers really pulls you in. You come to care

for each of them through the other's eyes, so that when they separate, you know what each of them is feeling-- because you are feeling it yourself. More impressive than Bosse's research were his plot twists and the flow and freshness of the brothers' experiences on their journey. And its reality. The thing I like about this book is that it's not just about a young man taking a test, it's about ambition, it's about pirates and secret societies, it's about love and friendship and loss and fear, missing home and finding home, conflicts of ethics and religion, and uncertainty about the future. Three cheers for Bosse! I hope he keeps writing :)

"The Examination" by Malcolm Bosse has its good points along with its bad. This is a historical fiction book set in the medieval China, the Ming dynasty to be exact. He tells the tale of Lao Chen, an expiring scholar and young prodigy, who traverses the empire to take the strenuous civil service examinations. Chen is accompanied by his young brother Hong, his complete opposite. Chen is the smart type and Hong is more into adventure and military. If you are really into Chinese culture, this would be a good book for you. It explains very well the atmosphere there and how amazingly hard the Examinations are. The author is really detailed in his writing. In the beginning I found it was very interesting but by the time I made it to the middle I started to get bored. But stick with it the author comes out with a good ending and did a good job of summing up the book. To rate this book out of from 1 to 10, I would give it a 7. I thought this book was very interesting but I thought it was really missing some things to hold my interests.

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