

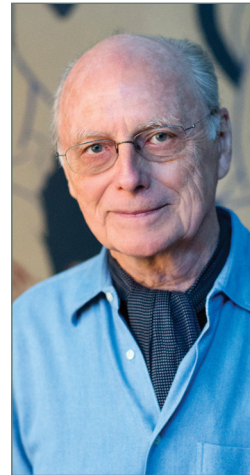
JAMES McMULLAN

on writing the memoir

LEAVING CHINA

Deep in a closet, I found a long-forgotten box of letters my mother and father had written to each other during World War II. At the time the letters were written, my mother and I were in Canada and my father was in a British army unit operating behind enemy lines, teaching Chinese guerrilla troops how to blow up bridges and railroad tracks. The letters in the box were a jumbled mess, but I was so hungry to find out what my father's life had been like in the jungles of China that I tackled the job of sorting the letters and reading them in order. Because my mother and I had moved around so much, from place to place and country to country, my memory of the war years was a confused muddle. The letters, besides giving me a picture of my father's work in the guerrilla schools, helped me make a time line of when things had happened, when my mother and I moved to particular places, and when I started at particular schools.

Reading and thinking about the letters was like time travel. For the weeks that I was going through them I felt as if I were back living in China, India, and Canada. I remembered the sights, sounds, and smells of Cheefoo; being caned for losing my umbrella at the boarding school in Darjeeling; seeing a killer whale in the bay off Salt Spring Island that was so close I could have touched it. I began to recognize and accept how much my boyhood self is a large part of who I am today, and how much his anxieties and enthusiasms are the underground river always bubbling up in the tone of what I draw and paint.



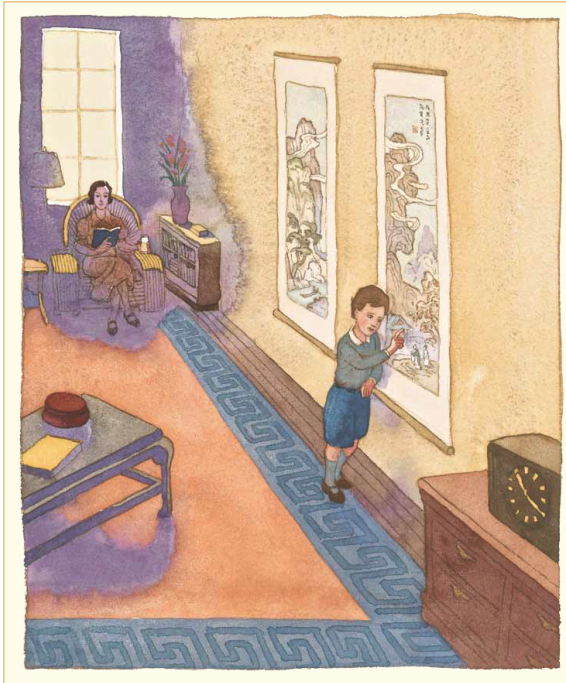
JAMES McMULLAN's work has appeared in the pages of virtually every American magazine, on the posters for seventy Lincoln Center theater productions, and in a bestselling series of picture books written with his wife, Kate McMullan (*I Stink!, I'm Dirty!*). He was an early member of the famed Pushpin Studios and the developer of the High-Focus Drawing Program at the School of Visual Arts. His posters can be found at Triton Gallery in New York City.

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AUTHOR INSIGHTS

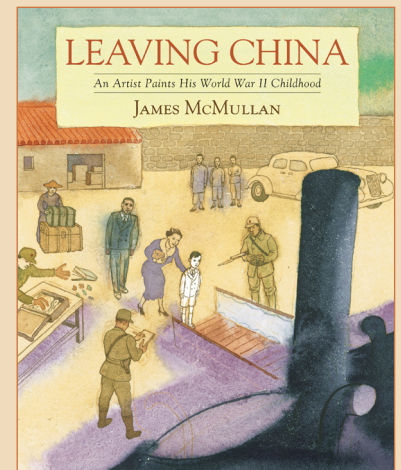
I wanted to tell the story of my beginnings in China and my experiences during the war—to see it as a history with a beginning, a middle, and an end. I saw the work as a series of those incidents that I remembered particularly strongly, and that created the basic arc of the story. As I started to write, these dramatic moments hung together like beads on a string; they made sense even without explaining the details of the spaces between them. I wrote about these moments in my wartime life in a straightforward way, trusting that the accompanying art would express more of the emotions that I felt at the time.



As my style model for the illustrations, I decided to use Chinese scroll paintings. These are tall, vertical paintings where the figures are relatively small in relationship to the background and the point of view suggests observing the scene from a hill or some other high point. This positioning puts the emphasis on figures as part of a larger world, rather than being “up-close and personal.” I liked the idea that composing pictures in this way made them less modern and realistic and more dreamlike. I wanted viewers to feel that they were vicariously experiencing memories in the emotional way that a child looks back on a birthday party or on the sight of a frightening clown at the circus.

When I am working well, a painting will tell me what it needs next. I have never felt this sense of discovering things as I paint more strongly than I did when doing the illustrations for *Leaving China*. The images seemed to arise out of my subconscious, in some ways echoing the Chinese scroll paintings in our Cheefoo house but evolving into a style I had never used before. It turned out that the box of letters was like a magic lantern; the genie inside inspired me to see how my past was the most powerful fuel for my art.

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