

LEAVING CHINA

An Artist Paints His World War II Childhood

JAMES McMULLAN

BOOK TALK:

In a unique memoir comprising more than fifty watercolor paintings and accompanying text, award-winning artist and *New York Times* bestselling author James McMullan explores how his early childhood in China and wartime journeys with his mother influenced his whole life, especially his artwork.

“ 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.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JAMES McMULLAN is an award-winning illustrator whose work has appeared in a variety of books for adults and young readers. He has been internationally recognized for his seventy posters for Lincoln Center Theater. McMullan received the *New York Times* Best Illustrated Book award in 2002 for the picture book *I Stink!* and was also awarded with the Society of Illustrators' prestigious Hamilton King Award.

“ Hypnotic . . . Presented to the reader with the lilt and lyricism of a fairy tale. *Leaving China* is a picture and prose poem, exotic and deeply personal.” — Jules Feiffer

LEAVING CHINA EDUCATOR GUIDE

Unit 1: Memoirs / Visual Story Telling / Literary Genres

Unit 2: Social Studies / World War II / Primary Source Materials

Unit 3: Finding Yourself / Societal Gender Roles

Each unit includes questions and activities aligned with Common Core Standards, Specific Common Core Performance Objectives, and a group activity for grades 6–10.

Unit 1: Memoirs / Visual Story Telling / Literary Genres

Memoirs are a specific genre of book writing, made of the author’s remembrances. They may describe public events or private thoughts and feelings. A memoir may not reflect all that happened; rather, it is a record of how the author remembers a time or a collection of events. In *Leaving China*, James McMullan chose to present his memoir in illustrations, using visual storytelling as well as text. He writes about his life, and he also uses his art to describe and portray his memories of growing up. Each chapter has the text on the left and the corresponding illustration on the right and together they tell his story.

Common Core Standard Grade	Reading History/Social Studies	Writing	Reading Informational Text
6	RH.6-8.5, RH.6-8.6, RH.6-8.7	W.6.3.a-e, 6.4, 6.5	RI.6.1
7	RH.6-8.5, RH.6-8.6, RH.6-8.7	W.7.3.a-e, 7.4, 7.5	RI.7.1
8	RH.6-8.5, RH.6-8.6, RH.6-8.7	W.8.3.a-e, 8.4, 8.5	TI.8.1, RI.8.3
9-10	RH.9-10.4, RH.9-10.5	W.10.3.a-e, 9-10.4, 9-10.5	RI.9-10.1, RI.9-10.3

SPECIFIC COMMON CORE PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES



- Describe how a text presents information (sequentially, comparatively, casually).
- Identify aspects that reveal an author’s point of view or purpose (loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).
- Integrate visual information with other information in print and digital texts.
- Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events. Support analysis of what the text says explicitly and implies.
- With some support and guidance from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach; introduce a topic, organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions, including formatting, graphics.

1. Write your own definition of what a memoir is and explain whether or not this book meets that definition. Give examples.
 - a. Using *Leaving China* as a model, write your own short memoir vignette. Pick one experience that you have had, preferably a memory from childhood, if you can. You may choose your point of view, what you will include and what you will leave out, what your thoughts and feelings were, and how and where this experience fits into your current life story. Next, draw a picture or use a personal photograph or an illustration to represent that same scene. Include things that help show your feelings as well as the event.
 - b. When you have finished this exercise, look again at some of the specific vignettes in *Leaving China*. Do you have a deeper appreciation of what the author/illustrator has done in using both illustrations and words? Describe your experience of combining written and visual storytelling.
2. How would you define “visual storytelling” and “visual literacy”? Today many stories (and information) come to us visually, rather than through text. Give several examples and discuss in a paragraph how visual stories have elements similar to and different from written stories.
3. Create your own timeline about a period in your life. Include pictures, photos, letters, cards, or anything that presents part of your story. When finished, discuss how difficult it was remembering and representing those memories. Analyze your work in comparison to the author’s story in the *Leaving China*. Refer to the primary sources found at www.algonquinyoungreaders.com/leaving-china-gallery.

4. Compare and contrast the format of this book with the text and illustration of a graphic novel. How are they the same? How are they different?
5. Compare and contrast the formats of memoir and biography. Do they differ in point of view, in information that is presented and in how that information is presented?
6. Sharing his childhood during the war, the author shows the confusion and upheaval that affect his family and school life. Analyze how his point of view is reflected in his art and text.
7. Research other famous memoirs and compare and contrast them with this one. What is unique about this memoir?
8. Why did the author choose to tell his story? What do you think his goal was in writing this memoir? Use the supplemental information the author has provided to add to your explanation.
9. Visual literacy is an important aspect of this memoir. How do the illustrations convey feelings and impressions?

GROUP ACTIVITY:

It is said that “a picture tells a thousand words.” Choose one illustration from the book that you especially like. What does this painting tell you? What are some of the elements that tell its story visually? Does the painting tell us something that the accompanying words do not? Do you feel a certain emotion looking at the painting?

Unit 2: Social Studies / World War II / Primary Source Materials

Leaving China is set in several different countries, spanning the time before World War II through the end of the war. It gives James McMullan’s recollections of his life during that time and in those places. The reader experiences the author’s thoughts and feelings with the war as a backdrop. The author also has provided some of the original letters and photos that helped him put his life into an order for his own understanding in supplemental materials available: www.algonquinyoungreaders.com/leaving-china-gallery. Viewing these rich primary resources is a very special aspect of studying this memoir.

Common Core Standard Grade	Reading History/Social Studies	Writing
6	RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.3, RH.6-8.5, RH.6-8.7, RH.6-8.8	W.6.2
7	RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.3, RH.6-8.5, RH.6-8.7, RH.6-8.8	W.7.2
8	RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.3, RH.6-8.5, RH.6-8.7, RH.6-8.8	W.8.2
9-10	RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.4, RH.9-10.5, RH.9-10.9	W.9-10.2

SPECIFIC COMMON CORE PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES



- Cite specific textual evidence of primary and secondary sources; determine the central ideas or information of a primary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop.
- Describe how a text presents information.
- Integrate visual information, distinguish between fact, opinions, and reasoned judgment.
- Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his position from that of others; analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points.
- Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

1. One of the foremost features of the author’s memories is all of the exotic places he lived with his family—Cheefoo, China; Vancouver and Salt Spring Island, Canada; Darjeeling, India—and the ones he passed through—Shanghai, New York, Bombay, and Chunking. Instead of relating joyful memories, McMullan reflects on the abrupt changes, confusion, and loneliness he often felt during his childhood. Describe how the author and his parents coped with the separations and changes of location in their lives brought about by World War II.
2. What was the war experience that most stood out for you in this book? Describe it in your own words. How did the corresponding illustration further enhance or describe the memory?
3. How a child experiences the world is different from how an adult experiences it. What events or places from McMullan’s childhood memories stand out to you? Which of his impressions stuck with you? Explain why and how they affected you.
4. Define what primary sources and secondary sources are. You have the opportunity to use both types with this book. In the supplemental materials found at www.algonquinyoungreaders.com/leaving-china-gallery the author has provided many primary source materials that can be used to further study the time period and his parents’ attempts to help him adapt to so many changes. Pick one, and discuss how the author chose to use it in the book. As you read and see the sources, how does your knowledge of the story change? Does your impression of the author and his experience change? If so, how?
5. Write your own vignette based on a letter or one of the primary source materials provided. Write it as if you were the author and this was a letter from your parents.
6. Find a piece of primary source material from places that the author and his family lived in or went through in his memoir. Make a copy of the map that is on the endpapers of the book and attach the material you find to the country it represents.
7. What stands out as you read the McMullan family’s letters? Is the father’s point of view mirrored in the son’s? How does the author communicate his feelings through his illustrations and text?
8. When you look at the actual pictures of the family, describe in your own words what the images say to you.
9. Talk about the military presence in the author’s life. What was his impression of the soldiers and officers, and of his father as an officer? Did he appear interested in the military? Support your suppositions with examples from any sources available.
10. If your class has created a unique timeline in the Group Activity below that you would like to share, create a PowerPoint presentation or share it in some other media.

GROUP ACTIVITY:

Find additional primary or secondary source material that shows other events happening at the time covered in the book. Seeing a more complete picture of events that were happening at the time McMullan writes about may help explain the feelings and events he chose to include in his memoir. Does looking at a more complete picture of this time period, through the additional source materials, change your understanding of McMullan’s life and his memory of it?

Unit 3: Finding Yourself / Societal Gender Roles

Many of the memories shared by James McMullan deal with his view of himself and with the expectations his family had for him. McMullan is candid about his artistic, introspective nature and how he felt different from others in his classes at school as a result. How he coped with the expectations for boys in the English boarding school system, what he became despite those expectations, and how he sees himself create a powerful story of someone who didn’t fit into the “strong little man” role but found his own creative and artistic way regardless.

Common Core Standard Grade	Reading Literature	Reading Informational Text	Reading History/ Social Studies
6	RL.6.4, RL.6.6	RI.6.3, RI.6.7	RH.6-8.3, RH.6.8.7, RH.6-8.8
7	RL.7.9	RI.7-5, RI.7.6, RI.7.7	RH.6-8.3, RH.6.8.7, RH.6-8.8
8	RL.8.3, RL.8.4	RI.8.6, RI.8.7	RH.6-8.3, RH.6.8.7, RH.6-8.8
9-10	RL.9-10.4	RI.9-10.4	RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.6

SPECIFIC COMMON CORE PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES



- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze both the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone and how the language evokes a sense of time and place.
- Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text.
- Analyze how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text.
- Integrate information presented in different media or formats, visually as well as in words, to develop a coherent understanding of a topic.
- Analyze the structure an author uses to organize a text. Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his position from that of others.

1. Much of the early part of *Leaving China* is about James McMullan’s grandparents and parents and how they came to live in China. Using the opening pages as well as the additional primary source materials available at www.algonquinyoungreaders.com/leaving-china-gallery, look at the details the author chose to incorporate in the memoir as well as those he chose not to include. Write about his choices, and how they appear in his narrative, both in the text and the art.
2. Failing at sports while in a private boarding school in Vancouver was difficult for McMullan. He also felt he did not measure up in his parents’ eyes. Share some passages and illustrations that show McMullan’s discomfort with both his parents’ and society’s expectations of him.
3. Compare and contrast *Leaving China* and George Orwell’s essay “Such, Such Were the Joys.” This essay is about Orwell’s remembrances of British boarding school when he was about the same age as James McMullan in *Leaving China*. Discuss the similarities and differences you find.
4. If you could add a sound track to the illustrations in the book and could capture the feelings portrayed there, what music would you pick and why? Create that playlist.
5. Find a passage where the author describes his attraction to art and his feelings about expressing life visually. Compare these with his descriptions of sports and gymnastics. What does this tell you about the nature of the author? What are key words and phrases?
6. Many of the illustrations used in the book show James McMullan standing alone; there may be others around him, but no one is touching him: he is solitary. What feelings does this evoke? Is this isolation also reflected in his text? Give examples.
7. The author describes himself as a “sissy kid” that others made fun of (page 58). He also describes himself as having a “timid, introspective personality” (page 62). How do you see him? List some of the qualities you see in him, and use specific passages to support your view.
8. Find passages throughout the book that show his attitudes and feelings about his own personality. Who were positive role models for him? Who helped him accept himself? Who encouraged him?
9. McMullan’s descriptions of his father’s love of music, clothing, and the “smart set” social life fill many pages. His father’s military career and his mild guilt for not being more like his Christian missionary parents were also highlighted. What do you think the author’s feelings were toward his father? What words and phrases show what McMullan thought about his father? Did he show a closeness with his father? Give specific examples from the text.
10. McMullan’s relationship with his mother was also complex and charged with many emotions. Watching his mother prepare flower arrangements, as well as drinking and socializing while his father was away, led to conflicting feelings. Give specific examples of illustrations and written passages that express his thoughts and feelings about his mother.

11. There are several passages and illustrations that show young Jimmie experiencing art: looking at the Chinese scrolls in the family home in Cheefoo (page 44); in Salt Spring Island, where he saw the Russian painter doing a landscape (page 66); and when he was drawing superheroes for his friends (page 92). Describe these experiences in your own words. Contrast them with his sports and school descriptions in the book. What conclusions can you draw from your observations?



GROUP ACTIVITY:

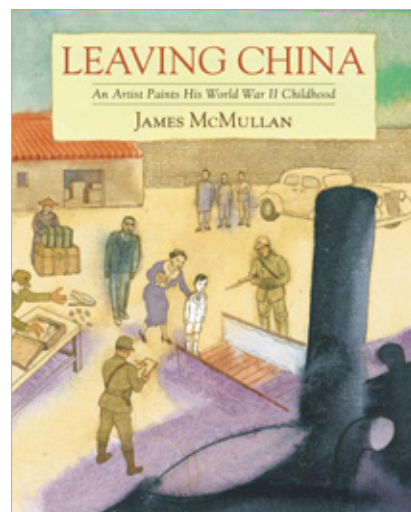
Research the roles and expectations for boys in the 1930s and 1940s, in English upper class culture, Chinese culture, Canadian culture, and British Colonial culture. Compare and contrast the many cultures that the author experienced as a young man. How do they compare to expectations in our culture today?

PRAISE FOR *Leaving China*

“Evocative and sensitive . . . The paintings bring significant emotional and cultural context to this story of a young artist’s struggle for self-acceptance.”
—*The New York Times*

“James McMullan’s book is so hauntingly evocative that it made me nostalgic for a time and a place I never experienced.”
—Gene Luen Yang, author of *American Born Chinese*, *Boxers*, and *Saints*

★ “A fascinating, seamless portrait of a young life and the wartime world that will have appeal not only to young readers but to adults as well.” —*Booklist*, starred review



MARCH
YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION
Ages 12 and up, grades 7 and up
\$19.95 hardcover
128 pages, 7½" x 9"
55 full-color illustrations
ISBN: 978-1-61620-255-2
E-Book ISBN: 978-1-61620-401-3

This guide was written by JoAnn Jonas, MLIS librarian, teacher/educator, youth materials specialist, and book reviewer.