

Berkeley to Beijing: The Journey of a Young Activist

Karen Boutilier Kendall

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“My childhood was different from most.” Those are the first words in *Berkeley to Beijing*, the coming-of-age story of Karen Boutilier Kendall, and, as we learn, they are very true words. Born in 1960 in Berkeley, California, Karen was the oldest child of activist parents. Her minister father worked for the United Farm Workers and a large part of Karen’s early childhood was spent making picket signs and watching her parents organize protests.

When Karen was six her family moved to Washington, DC where her father joined Ted Kennedy’s presidential campaign and bright and precocious Karen participated by passing out leaflets, standing in picket lines and working at the campaign headquarters. When she was ten, Karen became active in a political campaign of her own choosing: the George McGovern’s presidential campaign. It was during this time that she met Shirley MacLaine, who was also supporting McGovern. Karen made a significant impression on MacLaine and in 1973, she was invited to be the youngest member of the First Women’s Friendship Delegation to China. Karen spent several weeks with the movie star and 10 other women touring China and learning about the culture and history of this mysterious country.

There are two distinctive layers to this remarkable story. The first is a simple telling of one woman’s remembrances of childhood. Boutilier Kendall captures the love she felt for her family alongside her childhood traumas with grace and honesty. Though her life was extraordinary, readers will empathize with the loneliness and anxiety that she felt in her youth. The second layer of the book is a firsthand account of the social and political climate of the 1960’s and 1970’s.

Karen Boutilier grew up in the center of the civil rights era, the anti-Vietnam War spectacle and the National Organization for Women’s equal rights push. Her recollections of childhood paint a picture that is clear and vivid and allows the reader to look at important moments in history through the wide-open eyes of a child. For example, she writes of trying to drive home during the riots that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I screamed and jumped when a man smashed our front window with a bat. Our eyes met and I had to look away. The intensity of his hatred was boring a hole through my eyes. Dad said to just stay calm. No one was there to hurt us. I thought Dad might want to tell that to the man with the bat.”

Anyone with an interest in modern American history will find this book fascinating. The reader will feel as though they have traveled with Ms. Boutilier Kendall from Berkeley to Beijing, and will learn a little bit about the world, and maybe even their own place in it, as a result.

CATHERINE REED-THURESON (June 23, 2011)

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