

My First Revolution

Winthrop Knowlton

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Few seventeen-year-olds have the chance to stand at

the cusp of history, but the author belongs to this select group. Knowlton brings a youthful eye-tempered by maturity-to this memoir of traveling through China in the summer of 1948, a tumultuous time in the country's history.

Having graduated from a prestigious prep school, Knowlton and his roommate, Jim, embark upon a yearlong trip around the world before attending Harvard and Yale, respectively, in the fall of 1949. The majority of their journey takes place in China, where the boys' travels from Nanking to Shanghai and into western China are soon followed by Mao Zedong's Communist forces seeking to wrest control away from the Nationalists. Knowlton skillfully interweaves his observations as a young and often lonely American boy in a strange country with the perspective he has gained over the decades. While the young Knowlton is somewhat awed by China and by the American expatriates he meets, the older Knowlton is aware that the China of his memory is a lost dream.

This book is also fascinating for the author's keen sense of what the American family was like in the late 1940s, which contrasts dramatically with the chaos of China. Though Knowlton grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth, he is vaguely aware of the tensions that hide within his family. He tries to reconcile his understanding of his kin with what he knows of Jim's missionary family; the two could hardly be more different. Knowlton's memories of this period in his life are rife with his desire to understand his world as a man and not a boy. He is unapologetic for his immaturity when he says, "Did I want to go to China? I was interested in girls and debutante parties and the Brooklyn Dodgers." However, over the course of the book he moves away from his own self-involved interests to focus on those of the people around him.

Part personal catharsis, part memoir, this book is an extraordinary comparison of life on two sides of the world in 1948.

JOHANNA MASSÉ (March / April 2002)

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