



Heaven Lake

John Dalton

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Winner of the 2004 Barnes and Noble Discover Award. Heaven Lake is about many things: China, God, passion, friendship, travel, even the reckless smuggling of hashish. But above all, this extraordinary debut is about the mysteries of love.

Vincent Saunders has graduated from college, left his small hometown in Illinois, and arrived in Taiwan as a Christian volunteer. After opening a ministry house, he meets a wealthy Taiwanese businessman, Mr. Gwa, who tells Vincent that on his far travels to western China he has discovered a beautiful young woman living near the famous landmark Heaven Lake. Elegant, regal, clever, she works as a lowly clerk in the local railway station. Gwa wishes to marry her, but is thwarted by the political conflict between China and Taiwan. In exchange for a sum of money, will Vincent travel to China on Gwa's behalf, take part in a counterfeit marriage, and bring her back to Taiwan for Gwa to marry legitimately? Vincent, largely innocent about the ways of the world, and believing that marriage is a sacrament, says no. Gwa is furious.

Soon though, everything Vincent understands about himself and his vocation in Taiwan changes. Supplementing his income from his sparsely attended Bible study classes, he teaches English to a group of enthusiastic schoolgirls—and it is his tender, complicated friendship with a student that forces him to abandon the ministry house and sends Vincent on a path toward spiritual reckoning. It also causes him to reconsider Gwa's extraordinary proposition.

What follows is not just an exhilarating –sometimes harrowing-- journey to a remote city in China, but an exploration of love, passion, loneliness, and the nature of faith. John Dalton's exquisite narrative arcs across China as gracefully as it plumbs the human heart, announcing a major new talent.

Heaven Lake Details

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Author : John Dalton

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From Reader Review Heaven Lake for online ebook

Stacie says

John Dalton's first novel places the reader with a young missionary in modern day Taiwan. Vincent traveled halfway around the world from the Midwest to Taiwan to teach English and spread the word of God. But his goal is harshly detoured when he indulges in a sexual affair with one of his teenage students. The affair forces him to take an offer from a wealthy businessman to go to Mainland China to retrieve the man's future wife. What unfolds is a travel adventure into the depths of a curious country and an even deeper adventure into Vincent's own relationship (or lack thereof) with his faith.

Heaven Lake causes the reader to constantly feel sorry for poor Vincent because of the predicaments he finds himself in. But this pity gives way to relief and pride in the young man because of his eventual shedding of guilt and acceptance of life without strict Christian guidelines. And the realism of the character – his ability to make mistakes (constantly) in love and in cultural misconceptions – is easy to relate to. His growth is apparent by the end of the novel.

At one of Vincent's most enlightened moments, while he's visiting Heaven Lake after his long and tumultuous journey through China, he contemplates a "lifetime of partial answers and shady intuitions," a life without believing in Jesus. He came to the realization that "you could navigate your life without knowing" all of life's answers. He concludes, "You could sometimes love the mystery as devoutly as the believers loved their gods." This is a breakthrough for Vincent, who essentially viewed everything in life through the context of Christianity. Instead of focusing on what would happen in the afterlife, he learned to live his life.

Jeffrey May says

Heavenly Writing

I read "Heaven Lake" at least ten years ago and was recently puzzled to find that I hadn't left a review. What's not so surprising however is that the novel has remained on my bookshelf and I knew exactly where to find it. Prized possessions are like that. After revisiting the first paragraph, I can see why I kept it. Few novels rate a second read and fewer still a third. "Heaven Lake" easily deserves a second read. Dalton's writing appears to hold up well over time.

"Heaven Lake" is a superb novel told in exquisite and compelling prose that at times seems effortless, description and perception blended into an intimate portrayal of the young missionary Vincent whose discoveries in China easily become the reader's discoveries. I can highly recommend joining Vincent in his journey across mainland China.

Ellyn says

A novel that tells the story of Vincent, a recent college graduate who travels to Taiwan to be a Christian volunteer and English teacher. Initially Vincent is a little bit self-righteous (and annoying!), but before long, everything that he understands about himself and the world changes as he forms a complicated relationship

with a high school girl whom he teaches. Forced to leave Taiwan in scandal, Vincent accepts an offer from a local businessman who wishes to marry a woman living in the desert in Northwest China. In exchange for money, Vincent will travel to the woman's hometown, participate in a counterfeit marriage, and bring the woman back to the businessman so that he can marry her legitimately. Most of the book is about this journey. It's a coming-of-age tale in many ways as Vincent comes to know himself and his faith in entirely new ways throughout the course of his time in Asia. The characters were richly drawn. A very enjoyable book!

Laura Aguirre says

Books which detail a journey are one my favorite because it inspires me to travel or make me feel as if I was traveling. The sights which Vincent visits are so uncommonly mentioned and so well described that it leaves one intrigued. Dalton is also great at creating a personality for its characters since I could really well imagine a lot of the subjects existing in real life. Alec in particular reminded me of an ex who was an avid traveler and had the same demeanor. And Gloria seemed to fit so well into the description of an ex roommate that I was amused. The book is a realistic account of all the things that could go wrong when one is young and comes from a very small town into a new culture. Heaven Lake might not seek to tarnish the reputation of religious teachers but to serve as a reminder of the mistakes people make and the repercussions.

David Wen says

Excellent story with a few plot twists and vivid imagery of the locales the book takes you through. Initially I thought it was a "Christian" story but was ultimately pleasantly surprised. As the story develops, what you think is inevitable never happens and the events keep you hooked throughout the process. Recommended

Kate says

A few pages into this book, I was so happy it was long. What a great feeling to know you're diving into a long reading journey, gripped by the voice and circumstances.

This book is a coming-of-age saga, a travelogue, and a redemption. At times it's quite bleak--which makes the ending even better.

What's best about it, though, is the writing style. I love the way John Dalton turns a phrase over in his hand like a jewel that catches the light.

Ron Charles says

Americans didn't invent youthful naiveté, of course, but they patented it quickly. The recipe is built right into the country's founding myths, and our canon is dominated by stories of young men striding into the world, only to find it a more complicated and compromising place than they'd anticipated.

John Dalton's thoughtful debut novel, "Heaven Lake," is a worthy descendent of that tradition. His pious

young hero, Vincent Saunders, heads off to Taiwan in 1989 to convert the Asian peasants living in darkness.

His family members, soybean farmers in the Midwest, find Vincent's fervor both noble and a little extravagant. "Why the Orientals?" one uncle asks while lending him money for the two-year mission. "Aren't there congregations all over southern Illinois looking for help?" But Vincent suspects he's meant for something grander than his sparse, dawdling hometown can accommodate. He thinks he "might have the ability to see deeply into other people's lives and offer them love and wisdom they might not even have known they were seeking."

The success of "Heaven Lake" depends largely on these braided strands of sympathy and mockery drawn through the story. Too much of one and Dalton would call his objectivity into question; too much of the other and Vincent's satire-riddled body would be tossed on the heap of semiautobiographical protagonists who show up in debut novels as target practice for authors' self-hatred.

Yes, Vincent is something of a country bumpkin, "a shrewd youth," as Nathaniel Hawthorne smirked in his own treatment of this theme almost 200 years ago. He's the kind of prude who says, "I'm not the prude you think I am," thereby confirming his prudery. But if a lifetime of fervent prayer and moral discipline hasn't made him especially worldly, it has made him especially confident, which is what he needs to fly halfway around the world to open a Bible school in Touliao, a small town 20 miles from Taipei.

His first shock is discovering that Touliao is, in fact, larger and more developed than the town he left behind in Illinois. The "peasants" don't immediately see how much they need him or the light of Christ. And what's worse, he's desperately lonely. But reassured by his minister back in Taipei, Vincent begins teaching English to those willing to endure a little Bible instruction in the process. He counsels his landlord's crippled son and leads him into the comfort of the Gospels. And with the glorious example of his own purity, he tries to shame his drug-addled roommate into reformation.

None of these programs goes as planned, but the real crisis stems from an outlandishly forward young woman in his English class.

Back home, Vincent had been what Dalton calls "that rarest of things: a sexually fulfilled virgin." But in Taiwan, after months of physical and social isolation, Vincent finds the standard he upheld through college far more difficult to maintain. He knows there's no excuse - as a teacher, a Christian, and an adult - for accepting a student's persistent advances, but once he does, the rigid structure of his faith sags and snaps.

Suddenly, in the light of this sexual initiation, the straight and narrow columns into which Vincent accounted saints and sinners seem irrelevant. "He had to wonder if that talent for faith was worth anything at all, if it did nothing but lead you down a series of ever-narrowing pathways until the only real choice was collapse or more believing - fervent belief, belief of a hounded, even manic design that stormed against any contrary opinion." Having fallen into the worst cliché about lecherous missionaries, he's forced to admit, "It's a grayer, more complicated world than I ever imagined."

Just as he considers this for the first time, he's thrown out of his mission in disgrace. The plot drops so smoothly into greater and greater complexity that we barely register the shifts till Vincent is thoroughly entangled in a bizarre arrangement of commerce and desire. Discouraged and penniless, he agrees to help a wealthy Taiwanese businessman acquire a bride from China.

"Heaven Lake" never rushes, but it pulls us along with that mixture of anticipation and dread inspired by being lost in a strange place. As the story moves thousands of miles across the mainland and into the labyrinth of this scheme, Dalton demonstrates his remarkable skill at portraying the culture that Vincent finds so captivating and baffling. Old stereotypes about "inscrutable Orientals" fade into a far broader sense of inscrutable adulthood in which everything is indefinite and half glimpsed.

It's a far more nuanced treatment than "Lost in Translation," the widely praised film that showed the Japanese as unfathomably alien and soulless. Vincent finds the Asians endlessly puzzling, but his surprise always forces him to reevaluate himself and evolve from his own naiveté, rather than sink into the kind of smug depression that Bill Murray captured so well.

Of course, missionaries rarely come off looking good in fiction (or history), but this novel isn't so much anti-Christian as anti-piety. With just the right touch of wit, Dalton analyzes the complex interaction of devotion and vanity, naiveté and spirituality. It's as though he's recorded the shattering of faith with a high-speed camera that allows him to play back the collapse for us, frame by frame in a captivating series of images.

The modest hope and humanity that Vincent finally clings to might look flimsy next to the shiny armor he used to wear, but in fact they're more durable and ultimately more transcendent than all his old rules. This is a story as sensitive to the complexities and beauties of China as to the territory of the human heart.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0406/p1...>

Madeline says

OMG this read was hours of my life I will never get back. It had potential - this provincial young 'jesus teacher' goes to Taiwan to do good; ends up in the wrong crowd - all fine and good except the misadventure never ever ends and so much of it could've been cut out. Get to the point!!

John Benson says

I am in Taiwan right now where part of this book takes place. The main character is a volunteer missionary to Taiwan and arrives as a true believer, but as events transpire in the book, he loses his faith and ends up on a long trip to far western China to pick up a bride for a Taiwanese businessman. Too many of the events in the early part of the book didn't seem to ring true for me. As a child of missionaries, I found the missionary part a bit off, and the events that caused him to lose faith and head to China as being somewhat implausible. Still, once he was traveling in China and waiting to marry a woman in western China, somehow the book seemed to ring more true. I found, in the end, that I liked the book and the main character as he became more of a true and kind "Christian" after he had given up on his faith. Brings out Taiwan and China well in the early 1990s and Vincent is a sympathetic character.

Barry Martin Vass says

When he graduates from Southern Illinois University, the last thing Vincent Saunders wants to do is go back home to work for the rest of his life. In preparation for this he has taken a number of courses in Mandarin Chinese, and, with the massacre at Tiananmen Square now some four months old, he volunteers for a two-year stint in the Overseas Christian Fellowship. With his language skills, he is first sent to Taipei, Taiwan, for more training, and then on to the town of Touliao to open a ministry, begin Bible studies, and teach rudimentary English. Things go well for a while, but he finds the crushing loneliness hard to bear. Innocently, he begins an ill-advised affair with a young, precocious schoolgirl. With disastrous results. Forced to resign the ministry, he accepts a proposition an unscrupulous Chinese businessman, Mr. Gwa, has made to him weeks ago, and which he refused at the time: go to Mainland China, marry a beautiful girl he

has met in his travels, and then bring her back to Hong Kong for Gwa to marry. This is an intriguing story of failure and atonement, and Author John Dalton resolutely puts his twenty-four-year-old protagonist through the wringer as he travels through the murk of Communist society to the far northwest desert province of Xinjiang. This is probably unlike anything else you've read; as a comparison, Heaven Lake is somewhat reminiscent of the films of David Lean, particularly Lawrence of Arabia and Doctor Zhivago, where the main characters are always larger than life, enduring against a harsh, alien backdrop. Great entertainment!

Lake Oz Fic Chick says

Heaven Lake tells the story of an unworldly American missionary who arrives in Taiwan to teach English and Bible-study classes, only to find himself publicly shamed and on an improbable journey across Mainland China to marry a woman he has never met. This novel, Dalton's first, was chosen by the Chicago Tribune, Pages Magazine, Publishers Weekly, and PopMatters.com as one of the Best Books of 2004. It was also given First Place for Fiction in the Barnes and Noble "Discover Great New Writers" Awards. Past first place winners in this competition include *Girl With A Pearl Earring*, *Snow Falling On Cedars*, *Death of Vishnu*, and *The Giant's House*. Heaven Lake, with its touching story of spiritual growth, would make a good novel for book clubs, and the new paperback version of Heaven Lake contains a Reading Group Guide.

Karen says

Thank you Bobbi and Jane for recommending this novel! I had many different emotions while reading it. At first I didn't know if I was going to make it through because I didn't really like Vincent. But as I stuck with it, he grew on me, because of the changes in him; by the end of the story I thought he was great and caring and a wonderful friend, etc. The descriptions of his travels through Mainland China were spectacular. I felt like I was right there on those terrible train and bus rides with Vincent, feeling every ache and pain of sitting on the wooden bench for hours, smelling all the dirty workmen, all the senses were involved in reading those chapters. And the difference in the cultures and Vincent's ignorance or innocence when dealing with any of the Chinese characters in the book sometimes was heart-rending and very well done by the author. But I have to say, it sure doesn't make me want to travel to China anytime soon!!

I can't believe this is John Dalton's first novel. He seems like such a seasoned writer. I will look his future work for sure.

Karen Germain says

This book unfolded in an unexpected way. I don't mean that it was particularly shocking or surprising, more that it was a different book than I expected it to be, in a good way.

The book is about a young Christian who tried to head a ministry in Taiwan during the early 1990s. He arrives in a foreign country with all of the best intentions, but soon realizes his own naivete. The book is about his own transformation and faith, which is influenced by the people that he meets and a series of events that shape his life.

I liked the main character, Vincent. I liked that he wasn't at all perfect and was just open to the possibilities that came his way. He was conflicted. He was exactly the type of person that you would want to know in real life. I wanted to give him a hug, after all of the crap he went through!

Rachel says

There was no character growth or spiritual development in the main characters--so what was the point of the book? To show that Christians sin like everyone else? To show that mission work is done by flawed people? Fine, We know that. However, I do not want to hear ("see" in the case of the written word) the foul language, the detailed descriptions of lovemaking, assists in the purchase of women for prostitution or, perhaps worst of all, the flippant attitude to all things Christian or missionwork oriented. At the very least, the main character should come to recognize his faults and sin and attempt to serve God in a way that would be pleasing to Him and helpful to the people of the town where he works. Otherwise what was the point of all he endured and brought upon himself? Mission work has received a bad name in the world because of characters such as the one in this book--shame on you John Dalton for not lifting him out of the gutter .

Shelley Rossi says

My hubby recommended this to me quite some time ago and I finally just got around to reading it while on vacation in Hawaii. He was right; it's a great read. It's almost like a combination of travel journal and soap opera. At first, I thought the book was going to be a boring account of a righteous American on a mission to convert the Chinese to christianity, but in the end it was a fascinating account of the main character's life abroad, Chinese culture, and the need to question conventional wisdom. All of this is wrapped up with a little love story and some amazing descriptions of mainland China geography. I was entertained, yet felt like I gained a greater knowledge of Chinese history and culture.

Bryan Schmidt says

Although the book has its moments, I was disappointed with its inaccuracies. It definitely captures the Asian culture in which it is set. The characters and world are quite vivid. It's obvious the author has experienced the culture and done his research. But the main character is represented as a fairly conservative missionary type, and his transformation from saint to sinner seems very cliché. It's perhaps the view a Liberal would take of a conservative Christian -- always questioning the sincerity and integrity of the person without really understanding who they are. But it does not accurately represent the real such people I know and have experienced my whole life. Thus,I had trouble buying it. I also thought the story's paced waned in the middle. The end left me empty because of the character issues above. Still, the prose is well written.

Jane says

Thanks to Bobbi who recommended this book to me, lent it to me, and waited patiently before asking for it back, at which point I finally read it! I can see, Bobbi, why you said that you still cannot get the story out of your mind. The novel combines a virtual trip to China with a fascinating look at a young man's coming of age. The trip to China begins in Taiwan, where Vincent, a Presbyterian mission worker, falls prey to the

charms of a predatory Chinese student. For the rest of the novel, as he renounces his mission work and undertakes a clearly illegal and foolhardy task for a Taiwanese businessman and suffers all the consequences of his decision to do so, Vincent redeems himself in what is a truly Christian way despite the fact that he no longer considers himself a mission worker. As Vincent travels across mainland China to its western edge, Dalton deliberately shows the varied towns and landscapes and enables the reader to feel the discomfort of the hard seats of the trains, the confusion of the train stations and bus depots, and the lonely sensation of being the sole Caucasian person in the midst of many who regard one with scorn or pity. Dalton is a skilled travel writer, and the Chinese tourist industry should give him an award. Vincent's epiphany comes when he visits Heaven Lake, a site in western China where tourists can spend the night in a Kazakh yurt and take in the incredible beauty of the area. (I googled the place, and yes, it is just as Dalton describes it, spectacular.) Vincent's kindness to so many, some of whom mistreat him, is epitomized in his calm conversations with the Christian believer Mr. Liang, whose home in Taiwan Vincent had used as a ministry house and which he continues live in while teaching English classes. Early on in the novel, I was disgusted with Vincent; by the end of the novel he had become a hero to me. Like Bobbi, I probably won't be able to get this novel out of my mind. Unlike Child's 61 Hours, it will stand the test of time. John Dalton's site says he's working on a second novel while teaching at Washington University on St. Louis. I hope he will be publishing it soon.

Sophie says

I friend of mine recommended this book because I am traveling to China, and enjoy novels that transport the reader to a new and different culture. I really loved this book. It's a finely crafted, beautifully written coming of age story about a young post-college American missionary who learns the very hard way that he's on the wrong path for himself. It's only partly about faith - it's also part romance, part adventure novel, but mostly a story about youthful mistakes in an effort to find oneself, even when you're not looking to do that. The descriptions of Taiwan and China are vivid, and John Dalton is a gifted author, with a subtle writing style and an ability to delve deeply into human nature without telegraphing his intent.

Ellen Young says

What a sublime book. A young and earnest "Jesus teacher" from small town Illinois comes to Taiwan to gain converts for the church. Exceedingly lonely even with the Bible to comfort him, he gets involved with a precocious teenage girl, unable to resist taking her to bed, after which he's beaten by her brother and disgraced in the eyes of the town. So he leaves for mainland China to marry by proxy a beautiful woman in the far north and bring her back across the border to marry, for real, a wealthy man who's paying him for this task. Things go wrong, of course.

This is a beautiful book, full of feeling, and full of restraint also. The author has great control of his subject, and clearly knows a lot about China, as well as the human heart.

Keith says

probably the worst book i've read in a few years. horrible writing. wordy. trite. no appealing characters. promising storyline turned far-fetched. lotta holes. pathetic.

on a positive note, this book was so bad that it inspired me. several reputable names gave this book good

reviews (chicago tribune, san francisco chronicle, nytimes review). i can do much better than this.
