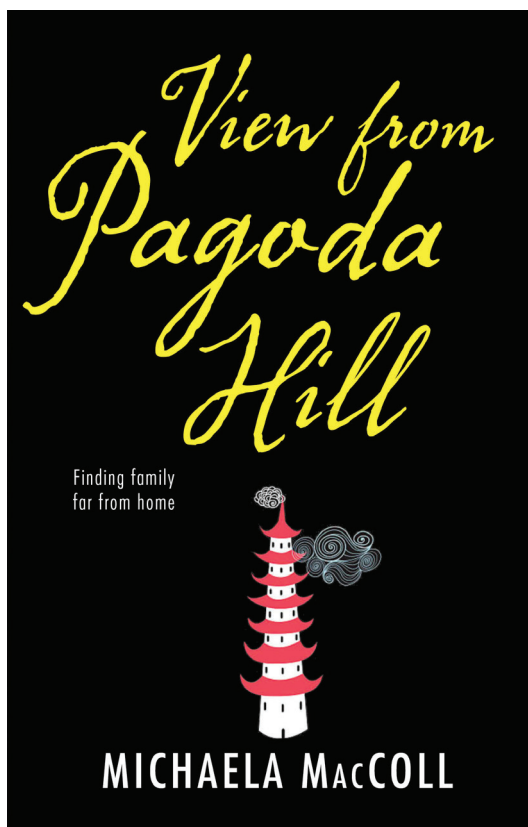


View from Pagoda Hill

Finding family far from home

MICHAELA MACCOLL

An Educator's Guide with Common Core State Standard (CCSS) Correlations



ABOUT THE BOOK

In *View from Pagoda Hill*, Michaela MacColl takes a piece of her family's past and weaves a beautiful story about a young girl named Ning struggling to find a place for herself. Born in China, Ning lives with her mother and their faithful servant, Number One Boy. Ning is happy but isolated, and she wishes she understood more about her mother and her mother's decisions. When Ning turns twelve, her mother announces she has "other plans" for Ning. Suddenly, Ning's life changes dramatically—she meets her American father for the first time, leaves her mother and her beloved Number One Boy behind, and boards a ship for a new life—and a new family—in New York.

MacColl describes the challenges Ning, now Neenah, faces as she tries to assimilate to a new home and family while covertly trying to hold on to her Chinese identity. This fictionalized account of MacColl's own great-great-grandmother's journey is a moving depiction of a young girl who ultimately discovers that sharing her true self—her Chinese culture—makes her feel at home in America.

PRAISE FOR *VIEW FROM PAGODA HILL*

★ “MacColl tells the heartbreaking story of a young girl immigrating to a new land and adjusting to different customs. Loosely based on the life of the author’s great-great-grand-mother, MacColl’s novel will bring tears to readers’ eyes as they travel in Ning’s shoes, seeing the perspective of someone who faces biases and racism on a daily basis. A movingly empathetic tale for readers about prejudice, and the pressure to fit in with scrutinizing societies.” —*School Library Journal*

“An intriguing tale.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

At the beginning of the book, Ning sneaks out of her house to peek in at her old friend, Hui, who is having a betrothal party. Why wasn’t Ning invited to the party? How did Hui’s family treat Ning?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

Describe the relationship between Ning and Number One Boy. Describe the relationship between Ning and her mother. How are these two relationships different?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3)

Mama said Ning’s father “is a ghost,” which “Number One Boy explained [meant] he was alive but must not be spoken of.” What does Ning know about her father? (17)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

Who is Madame Wu? Why does she come to see Ning and her mother? What happens during her visit? Why does she call Ning a “yellowfish?” (42)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

Mama takes Ning to Longhua Pagoda to “introduce Ning to her ancestors.” How did they travel to the temple? What did Ning learn about her father on the trip? (52)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

Ning’s mother receives a telegram, but she locks it in a strongbox where Ning can’t read it. How does Ning discover what the telegram says? How does Ning feel about the contents of the telegram?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2)

When Ning leaves her house early in the morning to meet her father’s ship, she does so without her mother’s permission. Describe Ning’s journey to the docks. What happens when she meets her father, George Hamill, for the first time?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

When Ning's father comes to visit Mama and Ning at their home, he learns he has a daughter. Why do you think Mama kept her pregnancy a secret from him?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2)

Ning's mother has decided to send her to America with her father. Does Ning want to go? How does she feel about leaving Number One Boy behind?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3)

Who is Mrs. Grand? Why does her father introduce Ning as "Neenah" to Mrs. Grand on board the ship? What surprising news does Ning's father give her?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

While on board, Ning reads an American newspaper. What does the newspaper say about Chinese immigrants? How does Ning feel about America after reading the article?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

The long journey to America was not easy for Ning. Why was it so difficult? What did Ning see as the ship pulled into New York Harbor? Was Ning's idea of what America would be like accurate?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

In New York City, Mrs. Grand hands Ning off to Mr. Stemple, who hurries her off to first catch a riverboat to Albany, then a train to Baldwinsville. Along the way, Ning is quiet, but she doesn't stop thinking. What is she concerned about? How does she compare Baldwinsville to Shanghai?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2 & 5.1)

On the last leg of the trip, Ning approaches Hillside Farm in a horse-drawn wagon driven by a local man, Joe Arthur. What are Ning's first impressions of the house, the barn, and the surrounding fields?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

Ning's initial meeting with her grandparents doesn't go smoothly. Her step-grandmother Sarah's first words upon seeing her are "Erastus, she's Chinese," but her grandfather smiles at her and tries to make her comfortable. Ning introduces herself as "Neenah Hamill" to them. Why does she decide to accept the Americanized version of her name? How does Erastus make her feel welcome?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1 & 5.3)

Where does Neenah meet Letty van der Smith? While at first Neenah thinks, "*Maybe we can be friends,*" she changes her mind not long afterward. Why? (243)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

As Neenah settles into life on the farm, she picks apples with her grandfather, bakes with Sarah, and does chores like grooming the horses and cleaning the chicken coop. What is her relationship with Erastus like? How is Neenah's relationship with Sarah changing?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3)

Sarah and Erastus finally hear from Neenah's father, George. What does his letter say? What does Erastus think of George's plans for Neenah?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

On her first day of school, Sarah tells Neenah "to be like the others," and Neenah tries to be polite to her classmates and obedient to her teacher. The school day, unfortunately, begins badly and, by lunchtime, Neenah has had enough. What happens in the classroom and in the schoolyard? What does Neenah do? (284)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1 and 5.2)

After running off from school, Neenah gets lost. As she walks down a road, she glimpses a cemetery up ahead and finds the grave of Erastus's mother. What does she say to her great-grandmother? Why does she tidy the gravesite and leave purple flowers on her grandmother's grave? Who finds her and brings her home?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

After Neenah returns home, Sarah confronts her about what happened at school. They argue, and Neenah says, "Send me away! You don't want me here. No one wants me anywhere." In that moment, Neenah believes what she is saying, but soon afterward she changes her mind about Sarah—and even about her mother in China. Why does Neenah begin to believe that she is loved by her mother and Sarah? (305)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1 and 5.3)

What are some of the things Neenah discovers in George's formerly locked room? What does she tell Sarah about George's treasures?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

Why are Sarah and Erastus so proud of Neenah after she insists on handling the school-teacher, Mr. Chapman, herself?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

In a corner of the parlor, Neenah "made a small altar with items raided from her father's room." What did Neenah place in her shrine? (331)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1)

Letty is coming to visit, and Neenah is reluctant to see her: "I don't see why I have to spend the afternoon with her. We don't like each other." But Sarah insists that Neenah give Letty another chance. What happens during their visit? What do they come to understand about each other? (331)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1 & 5.3)

In the epilogue, Erastus has a big surprise for Neenah. What is it? After she sees the surprise, Neenah hugs Erastus and Sarah and thinks, “This was a family. . . . Her family.” How did Neenah’s feelings about moving to America change, and how did Sarah’s feelings about China change? (347)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2)

At the end of the book, Neenah is writing a letter to someone. Who is she writing to? How have her feelings about that person changed over the course of the book?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2)

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

“Number One Boy has a proverb to fit every occasion.” So does Ning’s Mama: “Be patient in one moment of anger and avoid a hundred days of sorrow.” Look through the book for some of the proverbs that Number One Boy, Ning/Neenah, and Sarah use. Why do you think cultures develop proverbs? Think of some of the proverbs you know. Share a proverb from the book or a proverb you know with the class. (16, 28)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1 & SL.5.1A)

Mama plays mahjong, a game played with tiles that feature Chinese characters and symbols. When it is time to leave for America, Ning takes “the luckiest one of all, the red dragon” to spite her mother for sending Ning away. But later, the tile brings Ning/Neenah comfort and, ultimately, she places it prominently in Erastus and Sarah’s home. What do you think the dragon tile represents to Ning/Neenah? See if you can learn more about how the game of mahjong is played. (134)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2 & SL.5.1)

Food plays a major role in cultures all around the world. In the first part of the book, some of Ning’s favorite foods include lion’s head soup, wheat noodles with spicy Szechuan peppers, and *tang yuan* dumplings. Later in America, Neenah is introduced to hotcakes, apple pie, and hermit cookies. These foods tell part of Ning/Neenah’s story. What foods would tell part of your story? Think of a few foods that mean something special to you or that you eat only on special occasions or holidays. Write a paragraph about how food can connect us to family and friends.

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1)

There are several strong female characters in the book: Mama, Ning/Neenah, Sarah—even Eva Rushbridger. But there is another character who inspires Ning to be brave—the Pirate Queen. Who was the Pirate Queen, Ching Shih? Why did Ning look up to her so much? (192) (206)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.7 & RL.5.2)

Throughout the book, Ning challenges people’s assumptions about China, but she also has a lot to learn about America. For example, whistling is an insult in China, but it’s not in America. Visiting the graves of your ancestors is common in China, less so in America. Ning bows to show respect in China, but she is expected to curtsy in America. “In China if you’re rich, you

let people know it,” but Sarah explains to Ning that it’s “very bad manners to talk about money” in America. In China, only the Emperor wears yellow and burping is considered a compliment. What are some other cultural differences explored in the book? What are some other differences between the way Ning lived in China and how she is expected to live in America? (237).

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1 & 5.2)

Part one of the story takes place in Shanghai in 1878. Where is Shanghai? In part two, Ning/ Neenah arrives in America—New York City to be exact. While on the ship, Ning “placed one finger unerringly on Shanghai and traced the route they had taken: the Huang Po River, the China Sea, the Pacific Ocean, then the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean Sea, and finally the Atlantic Ocean.” Look at a map and trace Ning’s route yourself. How far is Shanghai from New York City? How long was Ning’s trip in 1878? How long would it take today? (162–3)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.7 and RL.5.1)

Mama’s feet are referred to as “lotus blossoms,” but she refused to allow Ning’s feet to be treated in the same way. In the author’s note at the back of the book, the author explains more about foot-binding. How long was foot-binding a tradition in China? How did it affect Ning’s mother’s mobility? What led to the end of foot-binding in China? You can see a picture of Ning’s mother and father on page 352.

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.9 and RL.5.1)

Think about the clothes in this story—from Ning’s tunic and pants to Mama’s “black silk overcoat embroidered with red poppies.” How are Ning’s clothes in China different from her clothes in America? What modifications does Ning make to her American clothes to make them more comfortable? Do you think clothes serve more than a utilitarian purpose? Why or why not? (35)

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1 & SL.5.4)

EXTRA CREDIT

In the book Ning remarks, “Girls aren’t worth educating. Everyone knows that.” Sarah vehemently disagrees with her and explains how important it is for girls to go to school. Sarah goes on to explain that her “particular interest was getting women the right to vote. And not just wealthy women, but all women.” In fact, an important rally for women’s rights in the US took place not too far from Baldwinsville in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848, and the first women’s suffrage amendment was introduced to Congress in 1878. Explore the role of the Finger Lakes region in the women’s suffrage movement and find out more about the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution.

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.7 & SL.5.4)

Several times in the book, Ning is exposed to anti-Chinese sentiment—at the docks when she first meets her father, in the schoolyard when Billy and his friends taunt her, and even on the rat poison packaging in Sarah’s pantry. In the epilogue, the author relays the historical ways

Chinese people were discriminated against in America, including the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Unfortunately, anti-Asian racism continues in the world today. As a class, discuss America's immigration and anti-Asian issues yesterday and today. What has changed? What has not? What can your students do to help put a stop to these incidents and behavior?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.5.4)

In the book, Ning notices many things that are different in America—from the hundreds of gaslights in New York City to the wooden sidewalks in Baldwinsville. She is impressed with the indoor plumbing in the farmhouse, and she sees the painted barns of New York as a sign of prosperity. But Ning also acknowledges that with thousands of years of history, China's influence on world culture and knowledge is vast. In the book, Ning shares a bit about China's contributions in fields from silk work and ceramics to canal building and medicine. Research one of China's contributions to the world and share your information with the class.

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.7 & SL.5.4)

READING LIST—HISTORICAL FICTION

Freedom's Price by Michaela MacColl and Rosemary Nichols

The Green Glass Sea by Ellen Klages

The Hired Girl by Laura Amy Schlitz

Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhà Lai

The Lost Ones by Michaela MacColl

One Crazy Summer by Rita Williams-Garcia

Rory's Promise by Michaela MacColl and Rosemary Nichols

Guide written by Jane Becker