

# Heaven Lake: A Novel

by John Dalton

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## About the Book

**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 Vincent to abandon the ministry house and sends him 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.

John Dalton was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, the youngest of seven children. Upon graduation from college, he received a plane ticket to travel around the world, and so began an enduring interest in travel and foreign culture. During the late 1980s he lived in Taiwan for several years and traveled in Mainland China and other Asian countries. He attended the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop in the early 1990s and was awarded two fellowships at the Fine Arts

Work Center in Provincetown as well as a James Michener/Paul Engle Award for his novel-in-progress, *Heaven Lake*. He presently lives with his wife in North Carolina.

## Discussion Guide

- 1. *Heaven Lake*** is part American-abroad story set in Taiwan and China, part harrowing travel adventure filled with mystery and intrigue, part spiritual odyssey, and, ultimately, a surprising love story. Discuss the ways in which the novel succeeds or fails on each of these levels.
2. Inspired by missionary zeal, Vincent Saunders travels seven thousand miles from home in Illinois in hopes of spreading the word of Christ to the residents of the Taiwanese town of Touliao. What is the reader to make of his harsh and judgmental first impressions, views that Vincent himself admits are "uncharitable" and "graceless to the core"? What kind of temperament do you think it takes to be a successful missionary in a foreign land? Does Vincent seem well suited to his volunteer assignment? What are your first impressions of Vincent? How do they change as the novel unfolds?
3. What are your first impressions of the Scotsman, Alec, and how do these impressions change over the course of the novel? Are there times when Vincent misperceives both Alec and the boy, Shao-fei? Could it be that Alec, for all his hash smoking and raucous behavior, is in significant ways a more moral person than Vincent?
4. *"I don't understand why you took me there. I'm a Jesus teacher. It's one of the first things I told you about myself,"* Vincent says to Gwa when the businessman brings him to a Touliao massage parlor/whorehouse. What do we learn about both men from that initial unpleasant encounter? Why does Vincent accept Gwa's money? How does the author use that scene to establish the power balance between Gwa and Vincent?
5. What do you think of the Reverend Phillips' recommendation that Gloria reside at the ministry house with Vincent for convenience but that the two present themselves as brother and sister to avoid gossip? What is the reader to make of Vincent's realization that it was not the lying that concerned him, *"but rather how the perception of them as brother and sister would yoke them together in people's minds. A certain brotherly affection would be expected of him. Already he felt the squeeze of family obligation"*? How does Vincent react to Gloria's enthusiasm for calligraphy and door-to-door canvassing? And why isn't he pleased to have a partner as zealous, or more zealous, than he?
6. When Vincent finds himself teaching English to 42 teenage girls at the Ming-da Academy, he is clearly caught off guard when one of the girls boldly flirts with him and inquires about her chances of becoming his girlfriend. How might he have better handled the situation? Do you think his delayed and flustered response encouraged Trudy? Does Vincent's isolation in Touliao, his aloneness, play a role in his dealings with Trudy? Does it influence the way he views the entire class?
7. Even though Trudy is clearly a willing sex partner, today in America an affair between a 16-year-old student and her 24-year-old teacher would not only lead to scandal but might result in criminal charges. How do you judge Vincent's behavior with Trudy? Is there something innocent about their involvement? Does your knowledge that he is still technically a virgin when they begin seeing each other change your expectations for his conduct? How do you judge his behavior with his ex-girlfriend from home, Carrie Ann? What do both of these relationships tell us about the kind of

person Vincent is?

**8.** At one point in their affair, Vincent asks Trudy if she thinks the things they are doing are wrong. Discuss the irony of this Jesus teacher seeking spiritual guidance from the teenager he is having sex with. Vincent finds himself conducting Bible study classes, *"fully aware that the pulse of his convictions, his private faith, had grown dangerously shallow, nearly unreadable."* Talk about the crisis of faith Vincent is undergoing.

**9.** How does the beating that Trudy's brother administers fit Vincent's need for retribution? Why does he call Gwa, whom he neither likes nor trusts, in hopes of reviving Gwa's bizarre plan to have him journey to mainland China to marry a woman and bring her back to Taiwan for him? Why does Alec, when Vincent confides the details of his affair with Trudy, confess that he likes the new Vincent, the beat-up Vincent, better? Do you agree or disagree? Why? When Vincent starts to compose his letter to Reverend Phillips to explain his hasty departure, he is reminded of how often he has resorted to lies and how ugly this habit has become. Partly as an experiment to see if he is still capable of knowing and telling the truth, he tries to write it out for Phillips. How does this new accounting of what happened change your opinion of Vincent?

**10.** One of the attractions of reading a book about travels in exotic locales is the opportunity to take an armchair voyage to places one would like to visit. Did Vincent's travels throughout China increase your desire to see the country? Why or why not? Did the descriptions of the hardships and indignities he suffered dampen any enthusiasm you might have had?

**11.** Discuss the rapture and exultation that Vincent discovers at Heaven Lake and what he means when he realizes suddenly: *"Everything is a miracle, a mystery. Everything is god; What the long journey to Urumchi and then to Heaven Lake had shown him, was that you could navigate your life without knowing. You could sometimes love the mystery as devoutly as the believers loved their gods."*

**12.** When Kai-ling changes her mind and decides not to go through with the phony marriage, Gwa tells Vincent to marry the younger sister instead and bring her back with him. Why does Jia-ling go along with this strange arrangement? When Jia-ling and Gwa disappear together, Vincent is obsessed with unraveling the mystery. Why? As you were reading the novel, did you share his fears that Jia-ling had been kidnapped or sold into prostitution? What did you think when you learned that Gwa already had a wife and child? How does the author manage to convey the slow and subtle changes in Vincent's feelings for Jia-ling and hers for him?

**13.** When Trudy's brother returns to beat him up again, what does Vincent's decision to fight back say about his coming to terms with his transgressions?

**14.** Is Vincent a significantly different person by the end of the novel? Throughout the book he has struggled against loneliness and desire. Has he overcome these powerful inner forces or will they always remain ungovernable? How has his view of God and missionary work changed by the final chapters? How is this reflected in the phone conversation with Mr. Liang that ends the novel?

## Author Bio

John Dalton was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, the youngest of seven children. Upon graduation from college, he received a plane ticket to travel around the world, and so began an enduring interest in travel and foreign culture. During the late 1980s he lived in Taiwan for several years and traveled in Mainland China and other Asian countries. He attended the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop in the early 1990s and was awarded two fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown as well as a James Michener/Paul Engle Award for his novel-in-progress, **Heaven Lake**. He presently lives with his wife in North Carolina.

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