



Tulku

Peter Dickinson

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An attack in the dark, screams, burning huts...

Thirteen-year-old Theodore crouches under the trees. His father's Mission has been destroyed. His father is dead. Theodore is on his own, fleeing the Chinese rebels of the Boxer uprising.

Then Mrs Jones appears. A botanist, Mrs Jones is a feisty, aging, good-hearted woman who has an amazing (and eye-opening) vocabulary and who adopts Theodore into her band of travellers. Fleeing bandits, the group enters Tibet, where they meet the old Lama who rules a monastery. But when the Lama says they have been drawn to him by destiny, and insists that Theodore, Mrs Jones, and her young Chinese courier Lung hold the clue to the birth of the long-awaited Tulku, or reincarnated spiritual master, there seems to be no escape...

Tulku Details

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William Leight says

This is a rather unusual book, a late-Victorian boy's own adventure of an American boy and a British woman trying to survive in darkest China, but with a few twists that the book would certainly not have had were it written in 1893. For one thing, although the dangers are all non-white -- roving bands of Boxers, backcountry bandits, theocratic Tibetans -- our heroic band of three is half non-white as well: Theodore's father was an American missionary, but his mother was a Chinese convert, and he spends much of the book passing for a Chinese boy. Just as important is Lung: he is introduced as Miss Jones's guide but it quickly becomes clear that he is considerably more than that, and his affair with Miss Jones ends up driving most of the action. Miss Jones herself is clearly the center of everything: it's her strength of will (and occasionally, her quick trigger finger) that gives the group its direction and enables it to get as far as it does. Further, rather than Theodore's Christian faith carrying him serenely through his confrontation with the heathen Tibetans, Theodore finds himself questioning his faith, perhaps not unreasonably given the destruction of his father's mission and the death of his father and indeed essentially everyone Theodore has ever known. In fact, his time in the monastery of Dong Pe actually helps him refind his faith, although it may not be exactly the same as it once was. The depiction of the monks of Dong Pe is particularly strong: their powers are, quite clearly, real, and the lama is both a politician scheming to preserve his monastery's independence from the Chinese and the government in Lhasa and a genuine holy man. And in the end, our heroes don't succeed in thwarting the monks: indeed, Miss Jones has more or less joined them, although she is clearly sufficiently formidable to challenge the lama one-on-one. As a standard-issue adventure, the book would probably be slightly racist and more than a little boring, but by tweaking the tropes of the adventure novel, Dickinson produces a thoroughly enjoyable story.

Elizabeth LaPrelle says

Dickinson would make it into my top 5 writers if I had a top 5. He has an uncanny gift for narrative voice and absolute believability. His genius lies somewhere in his writing as a naive narrator--there are gaps that will never be filled in. This makes his universes all the more complete and satisfying. I think Peter Dickinson is what magical realism wishes it could be.

I recommend Tulku highly as young adult fare for those who dig historical fiction. If Eastern religion is not your bag, you probably won't care about it.

MAB LongBeach says

Thirteen-year-old Theodore Tewker is the only survivor of a Boxer attack on his father's mission Settlement. Alone in rural China, he falls in with a botanist and her servant/translator. Although Theodore finds Mrs. Jones to be crude and blasphemous, he comes to like and admire her anyway. The three of them travel across China, dodging bandits, eventually heading across the border into Tibet. There they meet a lama who is searching for the reincarnated Tulku and believes that Theodore might be the one. So they find themselves at a monastery, not quite prisoners, and taking instruction in Buddhism, much to Theodore's disquiet.

Exciting and thought-provoking, with compelling characters and no easy answers. Written as YA, but well

worth attention by adults.

Now available as an ebook.

Jane says

The very best of Dickinson's work. I wonder if he was inspired by Rudyard Kipling's Kim. There are parallels - a journey, a chela and guru, a fascinating look at Tibetan Buddhism - but then he throws in the delightful Mrs. Jones, a British plant collector and a character of great charm and originality. Her unlikely romance with Lung, her Chinese guide, ends in a most unexpected and satisfying way. A memorable book.

Mathew says

Definitely one for KS3 or above as the reading is challenging in terms of its writing and style but the story is excellent and, as you would expect with Dickinson, rich in figurative language, a sense of self and identity and a world so well-crafted that you walk within it.

Tulku is a historical novel set in China which won Dickinson is Whitbred Award and the Carneige. It feels like a long read but you cannot deny its craftsmanship and story.

J K says

A good story, one I wasn't expecting to get into. The writing is a little simplistic but the story is full of adventure and deals with repercussions of adult relationships and prejudices between and within religions and cultures. It was an absorbing take on the reincarnation theory of Tibetan monks and what faith actually means. I do wonder if the English woman is as happy as she makes out in the end, and what that means for the protagonist in the end. Definitely an intriguing read, very thoughtful and approachably spiritual without being, I felt, especially preachy or in favour of one particular answer. From what I remember, this story was ambiguous about both and left it to the individual characters to choose where they placed the fate of their lives and their souls.

Ben says

An adventure story set in China and Tibet during the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901). In rural south-west China, a Christian settlement is attacked and a 13-year-old boy, son of the missionary who founded the settlement, is left by himself. He encounters Mrs Jones, a charismatic English botanist, and starts out on a journey which takes him to the high mountain fastness of Tibet.

The book is billed as children's fiction, and it won two prestigious children's fiction prizes, and whilst the action and themes seem at first quite adult, they do focus on the things a child of this age comes up against, whether they are thrown into such an extreme and dangerous situation or not. On the journey, Mrs Jones and her Chinese porter become lovers, testing further the Christian values Theodore begins to question after the settlement is attacked. What child of Theodor's age, brought up to religion, doesn't start to question that

religion, and doesn't start to notice and to think about sex?

Theodore's beliefs come under further strain within the Buddhist culture the travellers encounter in Tibet. Mrs Jones and the porter conceive a child, and the lama of the monastery believes this child carries the soul of another lama who went missing, and whom they have been seeking. This child is called the 'Tulku', hence the novel's title.

Tulku is a strange and unique mix of adventure, religion and love story. I enjoyed it very much. What stands out the most is the clash of religions and Mrs Jones, with her grammatically incorrect Cockney speech, her intelligence and her ability to play a part. She is a formidable character and quite a feat of literary creation.

Kristina UK says

I read this book in primary school, one of my teachers brought it in for me because I had exhausted the supply of books at the school. For the first time I got completely enthralled in a story.

Maybe if I re-read it now I might be disappointed, I hope I'm not as if I find a copy somewhere I will read it again.

Polly says

A very strange and wonderful book. It's about faith, and how faith can be the same in different religions (or very different indeed), and it's about cultural collision, and growing up, and class divisions, and it's also very exciting and sometimes frightening. It's so much of what I love about the writings of Peter Dickinson.

Ian Wood says

This is the complete review as it appears at my blog dedicated to reading, writing (no 'rithmetic!), movies, & TV. Blog reviews often contain links which are not reproduced here, nor will updates or modifications to the blog review be replicated here. Graphic and children's reviews on the blog typically feature two or three images from the book's interior, which are not reproduced here.

Note that I don't really do stars. To me a book is either worth reading or it isn't. I can't rate it three-fifths worth reading! The only reason I've relented and started putting stars up there is to credit the good ones, which were being unfairly uncredited. So, all you'll ever see from me is a five-star or a one-star (since no stars isn't a rating, unfortunately).

I rated this book WARTY!

WARNING! MAY CONTAIN UNHIDDEN SPOILERS! PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK!

Set amidst the so-called "Boxer Rebellion" in China, over a century ago (around the turn of the nineteenth century), this is a story of Theodore, Lung, and Mrs. Jones, which starts out really well, but fades into rambling incoherence in the second half. Theo is a young man whose father is killed by the Boxers. These

insurgents are trying to throw out the Imperialist occupiers of China who were milking money from the nation, and telling the Chinese their religions were useless and they really ought to migrate to Christianity!

Many nations formed a coalition against this rebellion and really stuck it to the Chinese, sending in an eight-nation army of some fifty thousand troops, occupying Peking, arranging the whole-sale slaughter of those involved, and fining the Chinese government millions of taels of silver in reparations (which was an astronomical fine even by modern standards).

The coalition was remarkable to modern eyes, rather reminiscent of the one which formed against Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in the nineties. In this case it consisted of: Austria-Hungary, the Empire of Japan, the French Third Republic, the German Empire, the Kingdom of Italy, the Russian Empire, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This story discusses none of that. Instead, it wanders away into the hills and honestly? It gets lost.

I'm not a fan of organized religion, so I had no skin in this pissing contest between the Chinese religions, the Tibetan, and the Christian. I think all of them are silly, and in this case especially this nonsensical business of thinking that the Tulku reincarnates and can be found as a child. In some ways the story is very reminiscent of the 1993 Bertolucci movie *Little Buddha* which was eminently forgettable despite its rather stellar cast - but it was better than this story!

The day after his father is killed by the Boxers, and his mission village is destroyed, Theo runs into Mrs Jones, her right-hand man (and lover) who is named Lung, and some pack horses. Jones insists he accompany them to the next mission. In the end, they give up on that plan and head for Tibet, where Jones, who is on voluntary exile from England for ten years - financed by a wealthy family to keep her away from their son - hopes to find flowers which have never been described before by science. In the end, they give up on that and retire to a monastery.

This novel, as I indicated, started out strongly and drew me in, but as soon as the three travelers meet the monks, it dissolves with disturbing rapidity into a vague and rambling tale of ceremony, sitting around, more ceremony, more sitting around and a fizzle of an 'ending. It creates expectations which are never met and became truly tiresome. I can't recommend this.

Kathryn McCary says

Some powerful Dickinson themes here--the charismatic missionary, and the charismatic missionary's child (first seen in *The Glass-Sided Ant's Nest*), the nature of religious belief and experience, the girl raised in poverty who becomes a lady--in her own way, and on her own terms. Some utterly unforgettable characters--Lung, Mrs. Jones, Major Price-Owens. And a breathtaking journey through China and Tibet. . .and on to England. A great Himalayan adventure saga in pure Dickinsonian.

Zazzu says

This is a book I read years ago and enjoyed. If you've read about Alexandria Navid-Neel you'll enjoy it too-- I think the author read about the real-life explorer and decided to fictionalize her life! There are certain broad similarities that make me think this. An enjoyable read, nice to visit an old friend from the past.

Sam Musher says

I keep picking this book up because Peter Dickinson is one of my favorite authors, and then I keep getting bored by it. I think it is not meant to be. Read *Eva* or *A Bone From a Dry Sea* or *The Seventh Raven* instead.

Susan says

Thirteen year old Theo is hiding in the woods due to the destruction of his father's mission. His father is dead. Theo is on escaping from the Chinese rebels of the Boxer uprising. Mrs Jones, a botanist takes Theo with her. There are bandits that are attacking them when a Buddhist monk stops it. The monk has been looking for their spiritual master Tulku to lead them. He insists that Theo is that person or maybe Mrs. Jones unborn baby. Theo has a conflict with his Christian belief and Buddhism belief. Will he be able to resolve this?

The author writes a historical novel that is also about religious beliefs. It's a fascinating novel. Many incidents occur that surprise Theo. He must make sense of this and stand on his own two feet.

Disclaimer: I received an arc of this book free from the author/publisher from Net-galley. I was not obliged to write a favorable review, or even any review at all. The opinions expressed are strictly my own.

Joran Kapteijns says

Not bad but I couldn't really get into it for some reason.. maybe it's just not my style. And the book ended two pages too late...
