

TLC Showcase

BÉATRICE CRAWFORD

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Introduction to *Voices on the Great Wall*

My book, *Voices on the Great Wall*, is the true story of my trek on the Great Wall of China. It is what is called today a travel memoir in the sense that it weaves together the detailed description of an arduous physical journey and the evocation of the life-changing spiritual journey that it became as a pilgrimage in memory of my son who died in his early 20s.

I wanted to draw the readers into that story, and to entice them to walk with me on the Great Wall experiencing the thrill of climbing thousands of steep and often crumbling steps. I wanted them to see in their mind's eyes that gigantic snaking dragon clinging to the crest of the splendid Yanshan mountains. I wanted to share with them the unforgettable moment when I saw and touched that stunning construction for the first time. I wanted them to fall under its spell as I did. I wanted them to recognize it as the ideal soulmate to support me and encourage me to keep going.

To achieve my goal I had to make the readers aware of the formidable presence of that Great Wall, not only with vivid and detailed descriptions, but also by recounting its two-millennia role in the history of China. Readers will learn a great deal about the changes in Great Wall policy since the First Emperor, Qin Shihuang Di. They will also discover China through many amusing anecdotes about my encounters with the local people.

Weaving the darker thread of a spiritual journey through grief without spoiling the richly evocative descriptions, or the many humorous episodes was my main concern. I had to strive to create the perfect blend between wit and grief. Writing the story in the third person turned out to be an excellent solution, with all the potential for ironic self-deprecation and good humour.

Voices on the Great Wall is not a book about grief. It is a story of survival, of courage, of hope, of step-by-step triumph over grief. I want my readers to go on an unforgettable journey that will enthral and inspire them. If my Amazon reviews and hundreds of emails and letters are to be believed, I hope that once they begin to read they will be unable to put the book down.

I can't praise highly enough the expert and charming team at The Literary Consultancy. I attended their excellent three-day 2014 Annual Conference, 'Writing

in a Digital Age', also their Workshops and their 2015 Digital Book Party. What I learned proved invaluable. Rebecca had the extraordinary generosity to have a 'quick look' at my PDF, and her comments that it was 'powerful' and 'extremely well written' sent me zooming towards self-publishing. Understanding the puzzling digital age is a tour de force at 78, but my little grey cells are re-energized as soon as I see Rebecca, Aki and the team. I owe them my book.

Voices on the Great Wall, by Béatrice Crawford

Prologue (p.1)

Let me tell you a story. A true story.

It is the story of B, a Frenchwoman, who goes trekking on the Great Wall of China to raise money for NewShores Children's Hospice.

Why does it come to her one day that she is meant to take up that challenge? At sixty-eight, to go that far, leaving her husband behind for the first time, is rather adventurous. But is it a new chapter in her life, or simply another episode in a journey that started unexpectedly thirteen years ago?

Wherever that journey takes her, the same companions go with her. They are always present, but nowhere to be seen. One of them is ageless, featureless. Some might be tempted to call him God, but B rarely does, and to avoid inadequate metaphors, she calls him the Great Mystery, or GM for short. Like old friends, they challenge each other with serious debates and raging arguments, even sulking silences. The other one is blue-eyed and smiling, with a tall lanky frame. He is her son, Eric, who died thirteen years ago, and is for ever twenty-three years old.

Let us follow their Odyssey. It will take us far away, to the Great Wall. The Chinese call it Chang Cheng, a name resonant, and mysteriously inviting. No more delay. All aboard! Chang Cheng, here we come.

First encounter with the Great Wall (pp.56-57)

The powerful feeling of communion with the Great Wall, that overwhelmed her when she first touched it, foreshadowed a link between its history and her personal story. Looking back at the fortuitous circumstances that brought her to China, she recognises in them a thread pulling her inexorably towards that revelation.

A mysterious bond unites her with that Great Wall unable to achieve its *raison d'être*. It has touched in her a sympathetic chord. They can both claim the right to view themselves as failures. With that formidable companion, she can share and reassess her deep sense of worthlessness. She stands transfixed, as if turning into redeeming

stone in the stare of a Medusa. Already she feels that she is no longer adrift, no longer flotsam. Can her life return some day to its moorings?

In her heart, the words, *'la Grande Muraille de Chine'* sing a survivor's song. She murmurs to herself their trailing sonorities and hears them echoing along this massive construction. They seem to float away as they release the aural ballast of their French cadences. Was part of her already responding to the uncanny music of its French name when she decided one morning to leave behind the daily round to join this charity walk?

Such is the power of language. It explains her present need to silence everyday words and hollow remarks. The only conversation she wants to join is with herself. Why should she not let her thoughts play freely in her mind? As a bereaved mother, she belongs ineluctably to a world separate from the world of those spared such tragedies. And during these walking days, more than ever, she has to feel free to navigate in her parallel orbit, alone in her private capsule. She is simply unable to change course to join the group.

Still under the spell of the moment when the Great Wall revealed its secret meaning to her, B begins the walk towards the rest of her life. An exhilarating feeling of everything being as it should be propels her. Here the Great Wall asserts its presence, imposes a direction, prevents any false start. Its ramparts, in places as high as ten metres, the stone slabs of its walkway, feel even and safe under foot, and bring a spring to her step. Bounded securely by its brick parapets, she finds it liberating not to have to pick her way through unmarked countryside with the risk of getting lost. It is as easy as walking along a corridor, with the bonus of brilliant sunshine.

But after a few metres on the flat, the Wall takes off towards a rocky outcrop soaring high above the group of walkers and turns into an almost vertical stairway. On such a steep gradient, the Ming labourers chose to build steps with a normal tread depth but a much increased height for the risers, instead of adopting the opposite solution. It was imperative for the soldiers guarding the Wall to be sure of their footing if they had to move quickly to defend themselves against nomad assailants.

Pandemonium in Jinshanling (pp.90-91)

When mountains begin to rise on the horizon, B takes her gaze from the road and lets her eyes wander right and left to admire the view. Alan picks up the microphone.

'You've noticed all these orange and green banners floating on poles along the road. They are for the Peach Blossom Festival. It's on at the moment in the Pinggu District of Beijing. But now we're in the Gubeikou mountain range and we're going through its main pass. You can see the Crouching Tiger Mountain on the left, and the Coiling Dragon on the right. In Chinese, Wohu and Panlong. In about twenty minutes, you'll be in Jinshanling where we stay two nights.'

After a two-hour drive, it is exciting to arrive at a new destination. The coach stops in front of an open gate with walls on either side. Everyone inside gets ready to leave the coach. But what is happening outside? Pandemonium breaks out as a pack of about fifteen women fight their way towards the door of the coach while five young boys in khaki uniforms battle to push them away, to open up a passage for the group. They are all shouting at each other. The women are yelling and pointing fingers at the boys, as if they are telling them to stop being a nuisance. The boys stand their ground, yelling back at them, but appearing not entirely sure of what to do next. Then, as quickly as it started, everything stops, no more threatening gestures, no more screaming. Loud laughter erupts in both camps, followed by cheerful exchanges. Everything seems forgotten. It was all theatre. The performance is over, the actors are all smiles. Alan reassures the dumbfounded audience that it is perfectly safe to come out of the coach.

While everyone sorts out their bags and suitcases as the driver unloads them, a young woman comes towards B to grab her hand and say with an engaging smile, 'I am your friend. I like you. I help you.' B is amazed to be greeted in English. 'I am your friend, too. I like you also. Thank you.' She is deeply moved by this friendly welcome and wants the woman to feel that she should not feel guilty about what happened a few minutes ago. Then the woman pushes forward a tiny girl who was hiding behind her and tugging at her sleeve. 'My daughter, she is five, her name is Li Hua, my name is Ling.' B bends down to the girl's level and clasps her in her arms exclaiming, 'Hello, Sweetie.' Terrified, the little Li Hua wriggles out of her embrace and retreats behind her mother. 'Me, grand-mother,' explains B, holding one hand with extended fingers to indicate the respective heights of her five granddaughters. Ling nods a few times with a puzzled expression on her face and all of a sudden smiles broadly, 'Ah, you, Naa Naa!'

Why would she call her Nana? B has never let anybody call her by that name; she dislikes it. She uses the title of *Grand-Maman*. But she must admire a young Chinese

woman living in a remote village in the mountains who is able to speak some English and even knows words of little practical value like 'Nana'. So, she agrees joyously pointing at herself, 'Yes, I am a Naa Naa.' It is only when she tells that story to Alan that she learns that 'Naa Naa' is actually the Chinese word for grandmother.

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(p.94) After the meal, Alan explains what the earlier commotion was about. In China today, every eighteen-year-old male fit for compulsory military service must serve for two years. Their tasks are those of policemen rather than soldiers. In a small village like Jinshanling, their official duty is to maintain peace and order. That includes keeping the hawkers at a discreet distance from the tourists. On the other hand, it is legitimate for these hawkers to approach tourists to offer their services as 'helpers', to accompany them during their trek. The pandemonium had resulted from their having rushed forward too fast. You are in China, and negotiations cannot be rushed.

A perilous stretch (pp.146-147)

Progressively, the paved incline gets steeper and small steps are built into the slope roughly a metre apart. Soon the number of steps increases and the space between them becomes shorter. If it gets harder to climb them, that is nothing compared with the next section. What is usually a sloping ramp to access a watchtower, is here a long and almost vertical flight of steps, less than a metre wide, between the two parapets. To add an extra frisson to the climb, the tread of this seemingly unending stairway is only half as deep as the length of an average foot. Handrails run on each side of that narrow stone ladder cut roughly in the rock, and B grabs them as a lifebelt. Having counted already fifty steps, and being only halfway up that devilish passage, she realises how presumptuous and foolish she was to think she could make such an effort. It is impossible to back down now, as a couple of young non-Chinese trekkers are right behind her, and squeezing past them would risk their lives and hers. She must soldier on, and soldier on she will.

Until this moment she has never had a chance to test to its limit the strength of her instinct for survival. Until now she has never been so confident that someone is watching over her and protecting her wherever she is. She can also count on her new friend, the Great Wall, to make sure she comes to no harm while he carries her towards her goal.

No words could describe adequately her desperate efforts to scramble up those last steps. Suffice it to say that she reaches the end of that vertiginous ladder crawling on her stomach and being unceremoniously hoisted onto the small platform of the ruined watchtower by sympathetic hands that prop her against what remains of a partly destroyed side wall. At the opposite end, an archway is still standing, but cracked bricks piled up across it block the access. Beyond it the Great Wall is no more than a track made of loose broken steps and crumbling stones still clinging to the hill crest. It is clearly impassable.

The youngsters who have arrived on the watchtower platform with B are not casting kindly eyes on her. Far from it. Having to wait behind an older person is unbearable. And now that they have no way to escape, she makes them listen to her telling them, 'I'm 68, you know. Wait until you're my age and you'll see how slow you'll be!' Instead of a gratifying reply, all she gets is a look that says eloquently, 'Why can't you keep quiet, woman, and get lost?' Oh well, after all, she should not have gone on the offensive like that, but we ought to forgive her; she is worn out and can hardly think straight at the moment.

The only reward she wants is that nothing and no one should prevent her from enjoying the glorious spectacle awaiting intrepid and courageous climbers who have reached this elevated viewpoint. The purpose of a watchtower like this one is to command a strategic position and to allow the Ming soldiers to keep watch from a superior height. Instead of aesthetic pleasure, they must have experienced a combination of terror and intense boredom. But today it offers B the chance to admire those endless chains of mountains rippling away eastward and westward, with the snaking Mutianyu Great Wall pinned to their ridges by numerous watchtowers.

A final conversation with GM (pp.175-176)

Day after day, GM, the Great Wall lent me its ramparts in the grand setting of the YanShan mountains. I had no need to know where I was going or why. I was never forced to turn around, or to choose between directions. It guided me. I had only to stride ahead. Walking gave free rein to my thoughts, let my imagination run wild. In my mind, I travelled in the distant Chinese past, and I travelled in my own ephemeral past on its trail of memories. It was a unique chance and a privilege to dedicate those ten days to celebrating Eric's life.

For thirteen years, I have been torn apart by pain, a pain that is now part of me for ever. The Great Wall has been torn apart for millennia by wars, by ideologies, and today by consumerism. We are both damaged. And yet, we both still find the strength to climb along rocky precipices, and to plunge into deep ravines. No slope is too steep for us, no crumbling steps can stop us.

GM, it was exhilarating to walk with you and Eric. I see now that you were in charge from the moment I said, 'I am going to China'. You knew that no slow sedate climb would give me the full measure of my resilience. You decided that trekking on the Great Wall would do so, and it did. Thanks to your wise choice, I am now aware of my inner strength, and I am confident that it can only increase over the years. Pain does not go away, but thanks to you, and with Eric's help, I shall always defeat it whenever it strikes.

During that wonderful journey I learnt to apply new criteria to my life that no logic can destroy or penetrate. I acquired knowledge that 'transcends all understanding.' The death of a child calls the whole universe into question for grieving parents, but a question without an answer in this world. On the day I succumbed to grief and hit bottom, you were there to rescue me. You took me to a world where the words 'No more', 'Never again', 'If only', were replaced by a voice whispering, 'He is still Here'. At that moment, I felt intimations of timelessness, I sensed a hidden meaning. Suffering led to exhilarating and everlasting joy.

GM, you made this trek a beautiful and unique adventure for me, one that I'll never forget. Thank you.

About the Writer

I am French. I come from Paris, where I married an Englishman 51 years ago. We lived in California for seventeen years, and then came back to England. We have lived in Oxford since 1998.



I read German at the Sorbonne and pursued graduate studies at Stanford University, first in the German Department, writing an MA thesis on Kafka, and then in the French Department, writing a PhD thesis on the poet Ronsard. Spending those years analysing literary masterworks was for me the best training in understanding the many ways in which words can be used to create a lasting literary work of art.

Having then to write hundreds of pages of a clearly and logically presented thesis taught me how to organise my thoughts and express them convincingly. That excellent discipline had a profound influence on my future writing.

My experience of three cultures and languages helped me to acquire a wider outlook on life. It made me aware of the importance of sticking to my chosen point of view, and to the voice I have decided to adopt in anything I write.

It was also useful to attend creative writing, travel writing and life writing classes, hemming and hawing over every paragraph to improve my skills. That led me to write short stories, and send one of them to the Ian St. James Competition. I had a monologue, *'Working Arrangement,'* performed at the 1994 Birmingham Readers and Writers Festival. I entered a play, *'Entente Cordiale,'* that was long-listed in the Vodafone Play Writing Competition, at the 2003 Oxford Literary Festival.