

RIVER OF DUST



A NOVEL 運

Virginia Pye

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On the windswept plains of northwestern China not long after the Boxer Rebellion, Mongol bandits swoop down upon an American missionary couple and kidnap their small child. As the Reverend sets out in search of the boy, he quickly loses himself in the rugged, corrupt, drought-stricken countryside populated by opium dens, sly nomadic warlords and traveling circuses. Grace, his young wife, pregnant with their second child, takes to her sick bed in the mission compound, where visions of her stolen child and lost husband begin to beckon to her from across the plains.

The foreign couple's capable and dedicated Chinese servants, Ahcho and Mai Lin, accompany and eventually lead them through dangerous territory to find one another again. With their Christian beliefs sorely tested, their concept of fate expanded, and their physical health rapidly deteriorating, the Reverend and Grace may finally discover an understanding between them that is greater than the vast distance they have come.

Inspired in part by journals of her grandfather, who was himself an early missionary in China, Virginia Pye delivers a hypnotic, emotionally powerful, spiritually resonant debut that is at once both lyrical and dynamic.

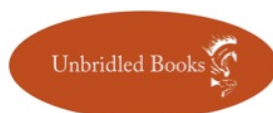
PRAISE FOR RIVER OF DUST

"Terrific, tremendous, wonderful...a strong, beautiful, deep book." – **Annie Dillard**

"Virginia Pye's *River of Dust* is a remarkable novel in the ways that delight me the most: It has a compelling narrative voice, a dynamic story and a deep resonance into the universal human condition, all of which is inextricably bound together. This is a major work by a splendid writer." –**Robert Olen Butler**

"A vividly imagined and beautifully drawn picture of the life of Christian missionaries in China in the early 20th century." — **Jung Chang**, author of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*; co-author, *Mao: the Unknown Story*

"The entire novel ultimately becomes an analogy for grief over a lost child, and China is simply the treacherous, foreign landscape on which it is laid. In the end, the sense of adventure beckons the characters more than the sense of loss buries them. Pye's hand manages to paint a rather naked response to what it means to move forward with only a sort of faithless hope."—**Style Weekly**



EXCERPT

The Reverend loomed over the barren plain. He stared at the blank horizon as if in search of something, although to Grace's eyes, nothing of significance was out there. Sunset burned his silhouette into a vast and gaudy sky. Standing tall in his long coat on the porch above his wife and son, he appeared to be a giant—grand and otherworldly. Perhaps this was how the Chinese saw him, she thought. Her husband spread his arms toward the blazing clouds and shadowed flatlands as if to say that all this was now in the Lord's embrace.

The breeze shifted, and billows of smoke circled their way. Grace watched the Reverend's outline waft and shimmer. She would not have been surprised if his body had gone up in flames right there before her eyes, ignited in a holy conflagration with only a pile of ash left behind to mark his time on this earth. Grace shook the strange notion from her mind, although she wondered how so good a man could appear so sinister in such glorious light.

As he started down the porch steps, Grace roused their sleeping child from beside her on the seat of the buckboard. "We're here," she whispered. "Our sweet vacation home."

The boy opened his pale blue eyes and blinked. How would it appear to someone so young? Grace wondered. Desolate or full of potential—she could not know. The Reverend lifted the boy from her arms and swung him high on his shoulders, Wesley's favorite perch. He rubbed his cheeks and surveyed the endless plain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR

1. As the story unfolds in *River of Dust*, Grace becomes transformed from a naïve ingénue to a more confident and independent person. By the end, she thinks of herself as a "modern American woman." How does she still remain constrained by convention and do you think that her independence comes too little too late?
2. As Grace gains in emotional strength, she loses physical power. Do you think that might have been a common experience for women of her time? Also, as she gains in strength, the Reverend is steadily losing his power. Do you think that because of his hubris, he deserves how his life ends? Or, is he, like Grace, ultimately constrained by their colonial experience and therefore somewhat blameless?

3. In the final scene, Grace thinks to herself, “So little she and the Reverend had ever understood of what transpired around them in this strange land. How had they ever convinced themselves that they were anything but tourists?” Do you think that Americans still feel this way about China? Will we always sense we are looking in from the outside?

4. Do you think that Mai Lin and Ahcho understood their master and mistress better than Grace and The Reverend’s understood them? What would this story have been like had Mai Lin or Ahcho told it instead?

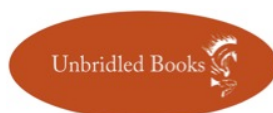
5. Is this a story about a loss of faith, or merely a loss of religion? If we could ask her, would Grace say that she still believes in God, as well as in her husband? How might that be different for an American woman today?

INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR VIRGINIA PYE

What inspired you to write *River of Dust*?

I first worked on a novel for five years that told the story of three generations of an American family with ties to China and Vietnam. It went through over twenty drafts and was read by many publishing professionals and fellow writers. There was a lot good about that book, but it somehow wasn’t quite working. I ended up seeking help from Nancy Zafris, an author and a long time editor. Over one weekend at The Porches, a writing retreat in rural Virginia, she and I brainstormed about how to make that novel successful. I ended up taking the first and last chapters of the previous book and creating a new book between them, *River of Dust*, an altogether different story set in one crucial year in China. In other words, I killed my darlings and ended up with a much better book as a result.

The larger story of how I came to write a book set in China goes back to my family history. My grandparents were missionaries in China and my father was born and raised in Shanxi Province. I have never been to the mainland, but I grew up in a household filled with Chinese objects and my father was a political scientist who made China his life’s work. The aura of China was around me.



Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I've been writing since I was ten and love it now more than ever. I started out writing poetry, then short stories. I wrote my first novel in graduate school at Sarah Lawrence College and wrote another one just before my children were born. I picked up again after several years when my second child started kindergarten. I've been married for twenty six years to my college sweetheart. We've lived in cities up and down the East Coast, including Hartford, New York, Philadelphia and now Richmond. He's a contemporary art museum curator so I've been around art and artists a good deal, and visual artists often show up in my fiction. At the moment, I'm working on two different novels and a collection of short stories. Philip Roth said in his retirement-from-writing speech on the occasion of his eightieth birthday that the job of the American novelist is "to discover the most arresting, evocative verbal depiction of every last American thing." I, and every writer I know, have our jobs cut out for us. Luckily, there's nothing else I'd rather be doing.



AUTHOR BIO

Virginia Pye holds an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and has taught writing at the University of Pennsylvania and New York University. A three-term president of James River Writers, a literary non-profit in Richmond, Virginia, she writes award-winning short stories that have appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *The North American Review*, *Tampa Review* and *The Baltimore Review*. She currently lives in Richmond. This is her first novel. (Author photo by Terry Brown.)



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by Virginia Pye

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