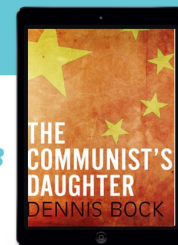




February 15 - March 1, 2018



Dear Reader,

Hi. My name is Dennis Bock, and I'm thrilled to be part of this year's Together We Read program.

I grew up in a small town on Lake Ontario, just west of Toronto, and first heard of Norman Bethune some time back in high school. I didn't hear much about him, mind you, just that he'd worked as a doctor in Spain during the Civil War, and later in China during the Sino-Japanese War, where he died in 1939. That was the extent of it.

Years later I wrote this fictional memoir, *The Communist's Daughter*, in which I've done my best to recreate Bethune's voice as he recounts his amazing life.

I'd started thinking about writing Bethune's story after I'd already had a couple of books published. He was an exceptional man. He had a significant role in some world-changing events, and even had a love affair with a Swedish spy in Madrid. If that can't keep a novel moving, nothing can. But as a writer I'm more interested in trying to understand what makes a great character tick than I am in just recounting the adventures he finds along the way. What compels someone to leave behind comfort and security and put his life on the line on the other side of the world?

Think of three people digging around in the same grave—a novelist, an historian, and a propagandist. I'll wager that the novelist always finds himself alone in that grave, shovel in hand, long after the historian and the propagandist are done for the day. The novelist digs on into the unknown, hoping to discover innuendo, suggestion, cracks in the official record. The novelist looks for the unrecorded narrative of the human heart. He looks for the motivation behind the act and event, the driving life force. Not the What or When or Where—but the Why. Why did Bethune do what he did? What drove him? What lay in the secret corners of his heart and mind that propelled him forward? The answer to this question isn't told in the hard fact of dates and locations of the historian, or in those simple-minded, one-dimensional stories of virtue and moral rectitude pedalled by the propagandist. The novelist wants the richer portrait, one that sustains contradiction, moral ambiguity, and discrepancy.

Years after the novel was published, I was invited to China to talk about my book and Bethune as part of the 70th anniversary celebrations marking the end of the Second World War and the defeat of fascism in China. It was something else to see the impact Bethune has made on that country. You see his legacy everywhere, but it's only the official Bethune story you get in China. At the Bethune International Peace Hospital in Shijiazhuang I spoke with a group of young medical students who told me how deeply their career paths had been shaped by Bethune's example. I witnessed that over and over in the weeks I spent there. I saw that Norman Bethune has come as close to sainthood as you can get in a secular country like China.

I've done my best to turn his larger-than-life figure back into a real human being in *The Communist's Daughter*. More man than saint, then, I offer this portrait of an imperfect hero whose altruism and humanitarian spirit is layered with some pretty recognizable human flaws, not to demean him but to complete him, and so here it is, my retelling of the life of this great Canadian.

Sincerely,
Dennis Bock

Join the discussion at togetherwewread.com

