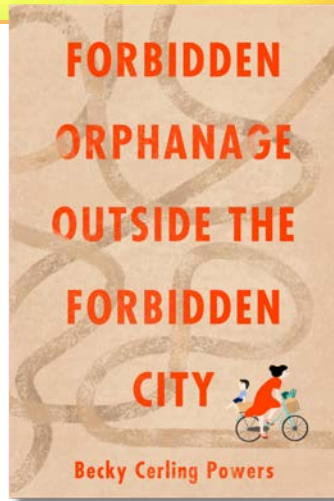


Forbidden Orphanage Outside the Forbidden City

Teaching Guide

Written by Becky Cerling Powers



God loves faith, and it can come in surprising packages.

Forbidden Orphanage Outside the Forbidden City tells the story of Laura Richards, a shy American farm girl and nurse who moved to a remote North Chinese village in 1929 to take in castaway babies and orphans. She took seriously Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. With no visible means of support, asking God alone for what she needed, she began to raise destitute children. She lived in the same conditions as Chinese peasants to demonstrate to impoverished Chinese Christians that they, too, could live by faith. And so, during the next twenty-two years, she provided a little pocket of the Kingdom of God on earth for over 200 children whose lives she saved during famines, bandit invasions and two major wars.

Faith can move mountains, Jesus said. Laura's mountains came in the form of Japan's invasion of China and its war with the United States. By faith, Laura managed to stay out of Japanese concentration camps with incarcerated Americans during World War II; by faith, she kept her children fed during a famine that killed thousands of local people, and – because the Japanese threatened to kill any Chinese who helped her – it was by faith she found the strength and practical wisdom needed to inspire, train, and manage children to run an orphanage of over one hundred kids with no modern conveniences like indoor plumbing or central heating.

The able-bodied orphans cared for babies, younger orphan siblings, and sibling orphans with disabilities. They gardened, cooked meals, cleaned house, tended livestock, milked goats, prepared baby formula, washed and dried laundry by hand, fed newborn infants round the clock, hand sewed family clothing, darned socks, raised a garden and foraged for food to feed the family.



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In 1949, the People’s Republic of China, run by the officially atheistic Chinese Communist Party, overthrew China’s ruling Kuomintang government. A time of terror began, with public trials, mob beatings, and mob murders. The new government took over all China’s charities run by foreigners. However, after interrogating the children and investigating Laura for two years, they said they would make an exception for Laura. She could continue as head of the orphanage if she would stop teaching the children about Jesus and publicly denounce the U.S. president.

She refused.

Laura Richards’ story was too dangerous to tell when she returned to the U.S. in 1951. Anything she said could be twisted into an accusation and used to imprison or even kill orphans or former volunteer orphanage workers. Friends and relatives in America badly wanted to know more about the orphanage, so she told them a few stories about the early years before it was taken over. Otherwise, she kept resolutely quiet for the remaining thirty years of her life.

Laura Richards was my mother’s cousin. Laura was twenty-eight years older than Mom, who was eight years old when Laura started the Canaan Home Orphanage. Mom’s family did not attend church, and Mom was fascinated with the stories of answered prayer that Laura wrote about in letters she sent to her family and supporters in the United States. These stories catalyzed Mom’s childhood journey to faith in Jesus.

Laura returned to the U.S. when I was four years old, and she occasionally visited our family for a few days or a week. I grew up very curious about this gentle, cheerful lady who could not talk about how a government took over her orphanage and killed her Chinese husband.

Years later, after I married and had our second child, I wrote to her with my questions about raising my little ones. She didn’t say much. She wrote one sentence: “I have found I must be completely dependent upon Him in order to receive His blessing.”



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Her words hurt. I prided myself on being a mature Christian leader in the church, and she seemed to be implying that I had missed something basic. If anyone else had said it, I would have ignored it. But her sentence stopped me in my tracks and made me re-examine my walk of faith until I began to recognize that whenever I felt threatened, my automatic response was to assess my own resources and scheme a solution. My real trust was in myself.

Laura also sent me a book, *Something More* by Katherine Marshall. Her one sentence, together with the book, challenged me to a deeper, simpler, more practical relationship with Jesus. By the time Laura died at the age of eighty-eight, I had a journalism degree, a husband, and three children. People began giving me little caches of Laura's old letters, photographs, and memoir notes. These stories fascinated and inspired me. I thought, My children should know this story because Laura is their relative. But the more I learned, the more I realized that many people would find Laura's story compelling.

I began a twenty-five-year journey of searching out the story while I homeschooled our kids and wrote features and parenting columns for the El Paso Times and other publications. Over the years, I was able to track down and interview people who knew Laura in China, including a Chinese family who put me in touch with Laura's Chinese pastor, Wang Ming Dao. Pastor Wang had spent twenty-five years in prison for his faith. He put me in touch with two former orphans, who wrote memoirs that Chinese Christians then hand-carried to the United States in order to avoid government interference. Years later, I was able to travel to China to meet the orphans in person. (That story is at the end of the book in a chapter titled "What Happened to the Canaan Home Orphans?")

Laura's story was dramatic, so I wrote her story as a nonfiction narrative, using the strategies of novel writing to keep readers' interest the way a novel does, while still giving a historically accurate account. However, the cliffhanger rescues and miraculous answers to prayer in the story were so incredible that I was afraid skeptics would assume I made them up. So, I documented my sources and editorial decisions chapter by chapter in endnotes that are published on the *Forbidden Orphanage* page of my website (www.beckypowers.com)



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The book's structure is unusual. Between each chapter, I sandwiched old photographs and excerpts from old letters, other original documents and interviews with people who were familiar with Laura and the orphanage. These, too, testify to the historicity of the story.

Forbidden Orphanage is actually three stories – the story of Laura's life of faith in China, the story of my twenty-five-year quest to learn Laura's story, and the coming-to-faith story of Sherry, Laura's adoptive granddaughter – child and niece of two former orphans – who took me to China to unite with some of the former orphans of Canaan Home. The three stories combine into a moving account of what St. Paul called "the inheritance of the saints" – the family of faith, uniting in fellowship across the boundaries of continents and generations.



Forbidden Orphanage Outside the Forbidden City provides a simple yet stunningly powerful role model of faith that continues to bear fruit. Twenty years ago, Laura's granddaughter Sherry translated the manuscript into Chinese so that it could be smuggled into China for the orphans to read. About ten years later, I gave a copy to a young Chinese Bible translator who was visiting. The story inspired him to undertake a huge project – inventing an alphabet for his wife's unwritten tribal language and obtaining funds to pay mother tongue translators to translate the Bible. Recently he told me that they have completed translation of the New Testament, the Jesus film and parts of the Old Testament. Thus, faith begets faith.

It is now three-quarters of a century since Laura had to leave her children. Many of them experienced persecution for their faith and for their connection to an orphanage run by an American. I have lost touch with all of them. So have the people who helped connect me to them. They were teenagers and young adults when their mother had to leave them 75 years ago, so we believe they have all died and are no longer in danger of harassment and mistreatment.



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Teachers can use this book in the classroom by incorporating it into classes in history and political science, Bible and theology, or literature and writing.

In a Christian history class, a teacher could use *Forbidden Orphanage* as a text to explore the history of the rise of communist China and the rise of Mao, specifically the way the text documents the clash between Western and Chinese cultures and how Christian missionaries were caught in the cultural crossfire. Or use it as a case study of the rise of an authoritarian power, considering how that manifested in a historical context, discussing these kinds of political movements around the world historically and today. Pairing *Forbidden Orphanage* with Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel duology, *Boxers and Saints*, allows students to explore early uprisings against Western imperialism as well as Chinese reactions to Christianity (both positive and negative), and then tracing it to the expulsion of Western powers, including Christians, from China during the rise of communism.

In a Christian high school Bible/theology class, teachers could use this book in a unit on missions. For example, why did Laura eat and dress like the Chinese? What kinds of issues did the Presbyterian Mission board face that caused them to feel they had to make a policy against their missionaries starting orphanages...even though their mission strongly supported Laura's work when she became an independent missionary? Who was George Mueller, and how did his teaching influence Laura to start Canaan Home Orphanage?

Laura based her life's work on the principles Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount, so a Bible study on the Gospel of Matthew could look at what connection students see between Jesus' teachings in the sermon and specific stories in the book. This can then be applied to understanding their own lives and their commitment to Jesus and the principles of the Sermon on the Mount.



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Developmentally, middle school and high school kids are trying to figure out who they are. Much of their focus is on who they are in their peer group, or who they are relative to their peers. English and history teachers can encourage students to consider the family history aspect of their individual identities by asking questions such as these:

- The author wrote this book because she wanted to find out more about her mystery relative. Does your family have a mystery relative? Ask your relatives if there is anyone in the family's past that they were curious about and wanted to learn their story. If so, why and what did they learn?
- Do you know any stories of parents or grandparents when they were little? What was life like for them? Did they live in the same country as you, or a different country? Did they live on a farm, or in a city, or a village?
- Did world events—like wars, economic downturns, or large migrations—ever affect your family in some way?
- Sometimes, older people—parents or grandparents—have learned “lessons” through their own life experiences. What kinds of “lessons” do your parents or grandparents like to teach?



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Author Bio:

Becky Cerling Powers is a retired journalist and parenting columnist and the author or compiler of four books: *Forbidden Orphanage Outside the Forbidden City* (narrative nonfiction); *Wherever I Go: Psalm 139 for Kids* (illustrated picture book); *Sticky Fingers, Sticky Minds* (parenting insights); and *My Roots Go Back to Loving* (El Paso family stories). Becky loves to listen to people's stories and teach kids to write. As a teaching artist in local public schools, she taught poetry writing to K-3rd grade and special education students. She also developed the Family StoryPower Writing Workshop for children and family members, teaching kids to write through the sharing of family stories. You can find more about Becky at www.beckypowers.com, <https://www.facebook.com/beckycerlingpowers>, and [@beckycerlingpowers](https://www.instagram.com/beckycerlingpowers)

