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TO: Nicholas Jose
Cultural Affairs Officer
Australian Embassy
BEIJING China

FROM: John McLaren

TOTAL NUMBER OF PAGES INCLUDING THIS ONE: 4.

MESSAGE (IF ANY):

Courage against the lies

John McLaren

Review for Overland
Best wishes and
congratulations,
John.

Nicholas Jose: Avenue of Eternal Peace (Penguin \$19.99).

Western writers have consistently used China as a way of discovering themselves. Wally Frith, the central figure in Nicholas Jose's latest novel, does the same. A much-studied and travelled Australian professor of oncology, he has lost his wife to his professional enemy, cancer. To recover from his loss, he goes to China to trace a family tradition and a professional lead. But, as he realizes at the end of the novel, his search has been more personal.

He had come grieving to China, and through all its layers-- his searching for a treatment, a past, a lost old man, a lover--had been his quest for Bets, for a body to wear her shadow.

But China refuses to give him what he seeks. His lover, Jin Juan, refuses his offer of marriage and life in the west, preferring her integrity and personal independence as a Chinese. He does trace his family past, and meets the professor whose research leads he is following, but neither proves as rewarding as he had hoped. At the end, all he has to look forward to is "the solid routine of work and science" through which "his grief would be turned to loving memory."

Yet, in giving him nothing, China has also given him back himself. The grief he takes with him is not only the grief he brought, for his lost wife. This is now merged, but not lost,

in the larger grief for another love, and for the people of a country which has betrayed them.

For Jose's novel is not just about one man, but about China. In his author's note, he suggests that it is impossible to write a book about China, and that he prefers to think of China as the element in which his work is plunged. But in being plunged, it is also changed. A work about human relationships becomes also a study of the politics of freedom and oppression.

Jose overcomes the problem of writing about a foreign culture by presenting the Chinese through the experiences of a visitor trying to come to terms with them as well as with his own life. He mixes with others in similar predicaments, including not only expatriates but also Chinese academics, students, artists, officials and businessmen who have been deracinated by years of Maoist lies and propaganda. Some of these are struggling to find their own voice, others have surrendered to the empty words of the government behind which they pursue their own interests. This present is given perspective both by Wally's recollections of his life on three continents and by extracts from the diary his grandmother kept during her life on a mission in China during the previous century.

Language plays a critical role in this book. Jose has a keen ear for the deadly excuses of bureaucracy, the brave proclamations of protest, and the fumbling words with which people try to overcome barriers of culture and suspicion as they try to enter into honest relationships. He also recognizes the use of words as a defence, a Daoist tactic for bending to the wind. This tactic simultaneously preserves the

integrity of the individual and abandons hope for human control over our destiny. It is the matter at issue between Wally Firth and the Chinese master from whom he hopes to learn how to synthesize the truths of eastern and western medicine. Instead, Hsu Chien Lung reminds him that eastern medicine has become a fraud and western a mere mechanism. Both have lost touch with the creative imagination. For Hsu, wisdom is in the recognition of human limitation. His language has achieved the unambiguous clarity of age. Wally, however, continues to believe that wisdom lies in the pursuit of truth.

Wally's personal pursuits are entwined with the personal quests of those he meets and with the political efforts of the new generation of China to find a future, to cease to be collectively "a wraith haunting a great ruined culture, consolable neither in body nor spirit." Inevitably, their efforts culminate in a tragedy which foreshadows the Beijing massacres of June 4 this year. In an afterword, Jose chronicles the events which led to this historic event. His novel helps us to understand this and the tragic loss of hope that it represented. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of both the separateness and the universality of all human experience.