

Close Encounters of a Third-World Kind - Jennifer J. Stewart

About the book: Twelve year old Annie Ferris is not happy when her father announces that the family will join him on a medical mission to a remote mountain village in Nepal. She does not want to go, doesn't want anything to do with her five-year-old sister, Chelsea, and is unhappy about the prospect of living in a tent, using a latrine, no hot showers and wearing a long skirt instead of cargo pants, and that she will have to "watch" her pesky sister. But Annie does get a chance to help at the clinic where she meets a ten-year-old local girl, Nirmala, who speaks some English and helps translate for the medical team. A friendship develops between the girls, and through Nirmala, Annie gains a new appreciation for her younger sister whom everyone – including the parents at times – considers annoying. Nirmala is the youngest of six sisters and knows what it is like to be the baby of the family. Annie, who loves to sketch, captures her experiences and the village people in her drawings, learns what it is to be brave and gains a new appreciation for what she takes for granted at home. Told from Annie's point of view, the story is humorous and lighthearted but also filled with details of the customs, beliefs and problems faced by people living in an underdeveloped country.

About the author: Jennifer J. Stewart has traveled extensively in Nepal where she taught health education classes to women and children. She has also trekked to Annapurna Base Camp and ridden a runaway elephant. Ms. Stewart lives in Arizona. This is her third novel.

Questions

1. Before reading a book, the first thing we encounter is the cover art. From looking at the cover, what kind of a book did you think this would be? After reading the book, did you think the cover conveyed the real story? Why or why not?
2. What is the meaning of a "third-world country?" What are some examples?
3. What are close encounters? What type of encounters does Annie face?
4. Who is the narrator in this book? Do you think the author made a good choice in using Annie for narrator, telling the story from her point of view? Why?
5. Describe Annie and the other members of her family.
6. Why did the Ferris family go to Nepal? Would you like to make this type of trip? Why or why not?
7. How is Nirmala's life different from Annie's?
8. What are some of the medical conditions that Annie sees at the clinic?
9. Explain what happened when Nirmala took Chelsea and Annie to see the Rhododendron trees and then got lost. How did this adventure affect Annie and Chelsea's relationship? How did each of the characters change?

10. Why does everyone ask Mrs. Ferris if she has any sons? How are boys treated differently from girls in Nepal? What do you think of this?
11. How does Annie capture memories and people she meets in Nepal? What are some other ways you could “record” your stay in a foreign country?
12. What is Nirmala’s goal, what does she want to become? Do you think she would be able to reach it in Nepal? Why or why not? How does the Ferris family help? If you were Nirmala would you make the same choice?
13. Predict how Annie will change because of her journey to Nepal. How might you change?
14. Pretend you are Nirmala and have been with the Ferris family for a week in America. You are about to write your first letter to your family back in Nepal. What are some of the things you will tell them?
15. Discuss the ending of the book. Did you like it? Did you expect Nirmala to go to America with the Ferris family?
16. How do you think Nirmala will like America? Would you like to switch places with her and stay in Nepal? Compare her life in Nepal to the one she will have in America
17. What were your favorite parts of this book? Your least favorites?

Activities: Show portions of a film about Nepal (see below)

Display books on Nepal for the students to view and check-out.

Snack: M&M’s and Yak cheese (maybe sub Baby Bonbel)

Some Resources:

Healing Our World: Inside Doctors Without Borders / David Morley (2007)

The Children of Nepal / Matti A. Pitkanen (1990)

Kanu of Kathmandu: a journey in Nepal / Barbara A. Margolies (1992)

Nepal (Children of the World) / Hitomi Watanabe (1987)

Nepal, Kathmandu Valley, Chitwan, Annapurna, Mustang, Everest / Richard L’Anson (2007)

I, Doko, the tale of a basket / Ed Young (2004)

Video: Exploring the Himalayas, Nepal & Kashmir / Questar Home Video (1990)