

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain

by Robert Olen Butler

**Teaching notes prepared by
Merilyn Howorth**

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Page numbers in these notes refer to Butler, R. O. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* Minerva, 1993.

Section 1. An introduction to *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

Robert Olen Butler is a professor in creative writing at McNeese State University in Louisiana. He has a Bachelor of Science degree from Northwestern University, Illinois and a Master of Arts degree from the University of Iowa. In Vietnam he served as a linguist with the US army in 1971. He began his career at McNeese in 1985 as an assistant professor.

Butler has been awarded a number of notable prizes for his writing. He has been the recipient of a Rosenthal Foundation Award, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, the *Southern Review* / LSU Prize for Short Fiction and an Emily Clark Balch Award. *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* won him the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993. He was recently awarded the Lotos Medal of Merit by the New York Lotos Club, one of the oldest literary and artistic clubs in the United States.

He has written numerous articles in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *GQ* and *Esquire*. Butler has written the screenplay of five stories in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* ("A Good Scent", "Mr Green", "The Trip Back", "Fairy Tale", "Love") for movie director Oliver Stone and is currently working on several projects for film and television. In an interview and readings of several of his stories, available on tape, Robert Olen Butler explains with openness and gusto how he draws on his unconscious sensory memory to bring into being the moment-to-moment realisation of character central to the experience of fiction. He traces his development from actor to playwright to novelist in light of this quest for fiction as an authentically sensual experience.

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain is a collection of short stories about Vietnamese expatriates living in south-west Louisiana. The stories range through humour, spirituality, nostalgia for a lost homeland to mild and more biting criticism of life in modern America and the bitter reminders of war veterans' experiences from both sides of the war. Vietnamese folktales and family traditions still retained from Vietnam anchor other stories firmly in the homeland.

Although the stories are written in America from the point of view of the expatriate, they encompass much of the life left behind in Asia, some are filled with rancour and regret, yet others show an acceptance that life is continuous and there is much to be thankful for in the new country. The perception and clarity of vision they present suggests that Butler has close links to the Vietnamese community living in Lake Charles, Louisiana, for it appears that he is able to see with their eyes the America in which they have chosen to live.

Despite their American flavour, the stories in this anthology have something interesting to say to Australian readers as well, especially as Australia has taken in so many Vietnamese refugees, who have congregated in communal suburbs such as Richmond, Springvale and Footscray in Victoria and Cabramatta in Sydney, in much the same way that the Vietnamese of *A Good Scent* have formed communities in Florida and Louisiana. Perhaps through the objectivity of studying stories set far from Australia, a world away in fact, our students may be able to see more clearly the experiences which have moulded many of the present residents of their own country.