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WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES
VOLUME III, ISSUE I

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Open Theme

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WOW Review: Volume III, Issue 1
Fall 2010
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Table of Contents

Introduction and Editor's Note	2
<i>Across the Nightingale Floor</i>	3-4
<i>Bamboo People</i>	5-6
<i>The Black Book of Colors</i>	7-8
<i>The Firefly Letters</i>	9-10
<i>Fly Free!</i>	11-12
<i>The Good Garden</i>	13-14
<i>Monsoon Afternoon</i>	15-16
<i>A Step from Heaven</i>	17-18
<i>The White Swan Express: A Story About Adoption</i>	19-20

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Introduction and Editor's Note

This first issue of Volume III serves as a grand reminder of the vast and complex spaces that constitute the global community—geographical spaces, spaces across time, diversity of issues and challenges as well as commonalities. The picture and chapter books in this issue reflect complex stories and together cut across time, culture, geography, and genre.

A quick look at the titles reviewed in this issue points to the complexity of insights to be found in international literature. *Fly Free* (Roseanne Thong, 2010), a picture book that focuses on acts of kindness, takes place in Vietnam while *A Step from Heaven* (An Na, 2003) is a novel telling of a young Korean girl in an immigrant family pursuing the American Dream—geographically, quite a distance from the Asian continent. *The White Swan Express* (Okimoto and Aoki, 2002) tells of adoption that begins in China and concludes with the adoptees beginning their lives in the United States. Seeking freedom knows no particular era. Struggles for freedom by both slaves and women in Cuba are the focus of *The Firefly Letters* (Margarita Engle, 2010) set in the early 1800's while another struggle for freedom from oppression is described in contemporary Burma as children are forced into war in the novel *Bamboo People* (Mitali Perkins, 2010). Across the global culture, issues abound from that of supporting and empowering the poor farming communities in Honduras through education, as found in *The Good Garden*, to issues associated with the struggle for identity that take place in an adventure packed fantasy novel of ancient Japan, *Across the Nightingale Floor* (Lian Hearn, 2005). Two other books reviewed here remind us that the vast global communities share many experiences in contemporary times. *The Black Book of Colors* (Menina Cottin, 2009) originally published in Mexico, shares the importance and beauty of all our senses and resonates with all cultures. *Monsoon Afternoon* (Kashmira Sheth, 2008) while focused on a young girl and her grandmother in India, reminds readers of all cultures about that special bond between generations.

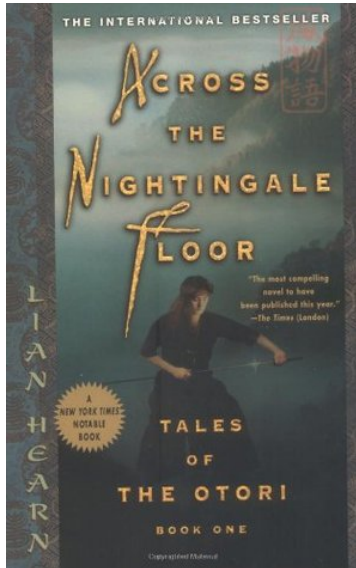
As selected titles are reviewed, many others are recommended within each review to extend even further the potential insights to the cultures, eras, and places of the global community. The reviewers hope that readers will recognize and share other titles that come to mind as they read this issue of *WOW Review*. Such linked but varied titles can serve to strengthen the connections among global citizens while making more accessible the rich diversity of this community.

Janelle B. Mathis, Editor of WOW Review

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Across the Nightingale Floor

Written by Lian Hearn
Firebird, 2005, 276 pp.
ISBN 978-0142403242

"It is good to come home. But just as the river is always at the door, so is the world . . . always outside. And it is in the world that we have to live" (p. 49).

In a fantasy novel set in an ancient country reminiscent of feudal Japan, a twist of fate forces fifteen-year-old Tamasu to abandon his childhood and native culture. Tamasu lives among the pacifist, spiritual, and

deeply persecuted people called the Hidden. His serene existence is shattered when his village is set on fire and he finds himself embroiled in a clan war against the powerful Tohan leader Iida. Fueled by revenge, Tamasu miraculously divides his body in two to avoid Iida's sword attack, saving his own life and sealing his fate as an enemy of the Tohan. The benevolent Shigeru of the Otori clan rescues Tamasu and offers him a new name and identity as Takeo of the Otori clan. Among the Otori, Takeo discovers that he is endowed with the mystical powers of the Tribe, a discovery that both sheds light on his paternal history and further complicates his identity. Takeo cannot deny his allegiance to his newly adopted father Shigeru or the competing forces of his ancestry. Takeo thus embarks on a journey of self-discovery that tests the boundaries of loyalty and self.

Through the use of poetic imagery, vivid characters, and a compelling storyline, *Across the Nightingale Floor* engages the reader in the tale of a warrior set in refreshingly atypical cultural context. Part of a trilogy, this gripping, action-packed novel is written in the tradition of Harry Potter and will leave readers anxious to begin the second book. Most adolescent readers will identify with the struggle to balance familial ties with the urge to live authentically in a world that poses new possibilities. This novel is an ideal complement to other novels that explore the interplay between geography and identity, such as *Daughter of the Flames* (Nancy Holder, 2009), *Fighting Rueben Wolfe* (Markus Zusak, 2009), and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (Randa Abdel-Fattah, 2005). As a worldwide best seller, this novel boasts universal appeal and entices even the most reluctant reader to root for Takeo, an unexpected hero battling injustice.

Author Lian Hearn is a scholar of Japanese language, history, and culture, and the recipient of a grant through the Asialink Foundation that enabled him to live in Japan for three months. While he professes that this book cannot be definitively placed in feudal Japan because it is a fantasy novel, Hearn did extensive research to ensure that the novel was culturally authentic. Indeed, the book is infused with classic Japanese metaphors, narrative forms, and idioms. The landscape in which Takeo's journey unfolds is typical of feudal Japan even if liberties have been taken with more concrete details such as specific names, places, and events. *Across the Nightingale* offers an alternative setting for experiencing the feudal systems of medieval times through literature.

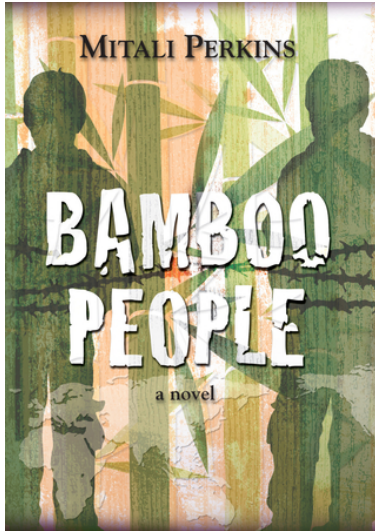
Through enthralling storylines about abuses of power, religious persecution, and the necessary balance between interdependence and independence, the novel is a well-crafted, culturally plausible, riveting read that will captivate adolescent readers.

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Bamboo People

Written by Mitali Perkins
Charlesbridge, 2010, 272 pp.
ISBN: 978-1580893282

Bamboo People takes place in modern-day Burma (Myanmar) where there is political upheaval between the Burmese people and ethnic minorities in that country, specifically the Karenni people. The first part of the book is narrated by Chiko, a Burmese boy, who aspires to be a teacher to make a difference in the world. With his father in prison for resisting the government, Chiko answers a call in a newspaper to help his family. Unfortunately he discovers he has been tricked along with other applicants to be a boy soldier in the Burmese army. He is pressed

into the army and bused to a remote camp in the border region to put down a Karenni rebellion. Chiko's reading and writing skills help him endure a cruel army captain and brutal conditions. He is eventually captured by the Karenni rebels who send him to refugee camp in Thailand where he awaits their decision on whether he will be killed, kept captive, or released. The second half of the book is told by Tu Reh, a Karenni boy, who is involved in Chiko's capture. Tu Reh is forced to live in a refugee camp after Burmese soldiers burn down his family's home and is consumed by anger and the desire for revenge. He is chosen for a military mission as part of his people's resistance movement. Chiko and Tu Reh's stories artfully come together when both are sent on their first mission into the jungle and Tu Reh has to make a difficult decision, "Who is his enemy?"

Lengthy back matter includes insights about modern Burma and "What's in a name?" in addition to an informative author's note and acknowledgements. Readers will learn additional historical and contemporary information about Burma by accessing a website with resources, a teacher's guide and suggestions for involvement. In the author's note Mitali Perkins shares that she lived in Thailand, next door to Burma, for three years, and visited the Karenni refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. On the website, she states that she was astounded by how the Karenni kept their hopes alive despite incredible loss, dreaming of the day when they would once again be a free people. She was impressed with how the Karenni creatively used the bamboo plant for all kinds of purposes, including transportation, weapons, food, storage, and irrigation, and so decided to use the plant as a symbol for the peoples of that region. Her interactions with Burmese teenagers made her aware of their difficulties as well because of the lack of schooling and jobs and the realization that, for many young boys, being a soldier is their only option to feed their families. Perkins notes that all of us face powerful negative emotions, but also face choices in acting on them. See www.bamboopeople.org for more information.

This riveting novel shares the horrors of war, the oppression of ethnic minorities, the lives of child soldiers from two different sides, and insights into a country that is not familiar to many adolescents. With themes of war, prejudice, child soldiers, friendship, and family, this book could be paired with *The Enemy: A Book about Peace* (Davide Cali, 2009), *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (Ishmael Beah, 2007), or *Daniel Half Human: And The Good Nazi* (David Chotjewitz,

2004). Readers may also want to explore other books by Mitali Perkins such as *Secret Keeper* (2009), *Rickshaw Girl* (2007) and *Monsoon Summer* (2006).

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The Black Book of Colors

Written by Menena Cottin
Illustrated by Rosana Farla
Translated by Elisa Amado
Groundwood, 2009
ISBN: 978-0888998736

This captivating, hands-on book conveys a blind person’s perception of colors using matte black pages with embossed glossy

representations of objects and simple descriptive statements. Each color is explored non-visually, evoked through taste, smell, feel or sound, never appearance—“Thomas says that yellow tastes like mustard, but is as soft as a baby chick’s feathers.” Red is the sting of a skinned knee and the tartness of an unripe strawberry, while brown is the crunch of fall leaves and the smell of chocolate. The observations that Thomas makes about each color reveal an assertive and engaging character, moving the book beyond color concepts.

Each all-black double-paged spread is devoted to one color, with the simple sensuous text rendered in a clear white typeface and in raised Braille letters on the left while the right illustrates the objects with raised lines that encourage tactile explorations by readers. Readers are invited to imagine experiencing the world by living fully with their senses beyond sight. This visually stunning picture book provides a unique and innovative reading experience as well as serving as an educational resource for discussing difference, perspective, and ways of experiencing the world. A full Braille alphabet is included in the book. A special edition of the book with Braille-punched parchment is available for the blind.

The book was originally published in Mexico as *El libro de los colores*, by an author and illustrator from Venezuela. The book has received excellent reviews and multiple awards, including the New Horizons Prize at the 2007 Bologna Children’s Book Fair, although it has also been critiqued as condescending to the blind for whom color is not significant. Menena Cottin studied design and illustration at the Pratt Institute in New York and lives in Venezuela. Her other titles include *Equilibrio* (2007) and *La doble historia de un vaso de leche* (2007). Rosana Farla lives in Caracas, Venezuela and has illustrated many picture books, including *Nina Bonita: A Story* (2001), written by Ana Maria Machado. Elisa Amado is a Guatemalan writer and translator who lives in Toronto, Canada. She frequently translates books from Spanish to English for Groundwood and has written several books, including *Tricycle* (2007) and *Cousins* (2004).

This book can be paired with other books on experiencing the world without eyesight, such as *Do You Remember the Color Blue? And Other Questions Kids Ask about Blindness* (Sally H. Alexander, 2000), *See the Ocean* (Estelle Condra, 2006), *Piano Starts Here: The Young Art Tatum* (Robert A. Parker, 2008), and *The Seeing Stick* (Jane Yolen, 2009). *The Sound of Colors* by Jimmy Liao (2006), translated from Chinese, focuses on a young blind girl who travels the subway as her mind takes her on imaginative journeys and so provides an interesting perspective and character. Another possibility is books about color, such as the classic book of color poetry by Mary O’Neill,

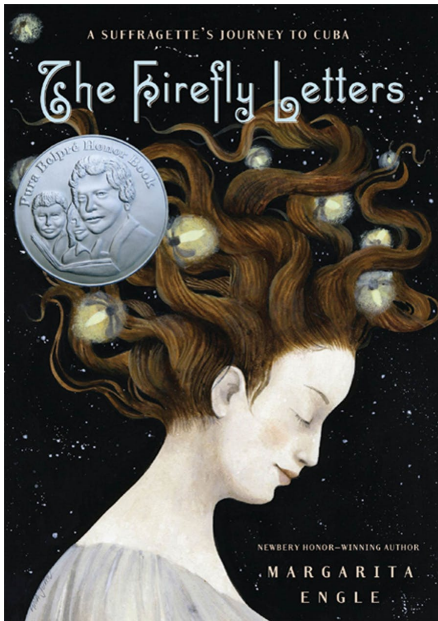
Hailstones and Halibut Bones (1990), or *Red Sings from Treetops* (Joyce Sidman, 2009), which contains poetry describing the seasons through color.

Kathy G. Short, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ

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The Firefly Letters

Written By Margarita Engle
Henry Holt, 2010, 151 pp.
ISBN: 978-0805090826

Fredrika Bremer, who lived in the first half of the 19th century, was one of the earliest advocates of women's rights. A friend of Hans Christian Andersen and other writers of that time, she was Sweden's first woman novelist and her writings were the impetus for tens of thousands of Swedish immigrants to Cuba. Her rich sensory descriptions from a three-month visit to this country in 1851 are the substance of Margarita Engle's poetic prose in this historical fiction.

In keeping with the style of her previous stories of Cuba's struggles for freedom, Engle assumes the perspective of this

historical author as she creates a sharp contrast between the beauty that Fredrika finds in Cuba and the painful instances of slavery she witnesses as slaves, many of them children, are brought illegally from Africa. Arriving in Cuba to quietly experience the serene beauty of this anticipated "Eden," Fredrika sets out to discover how the people live with the help of her translator, a slave girl named Cecilia. Of special interest to her is the role and treatment of women and she fast becomes friends with Cecilia as well as Elena, the daughter of the plantation owner who is her host.

The story is told from the alternating voices of the characters, Fredrika, Cecilia, Cecilia's husband, Beni, and Elena. Readers learn from Cecilia about being sold at age eight and brought to Cuba from Africa as a slave. Engle shares in her eloquent text the images of Africa that dwell in the mind of lonely Cecilia. Readers learn of Fredrika's disdain of the wealthy life style of her parents and her decision to forego that wealth in order to travel, write and advocate for the rights of females. Elena reveals that she is jealous of this Swedish visitor who can roam as she desires around the countryside, talking to whom she wishes, unlike women and girls of her status in Cuba. Readers hear little from Beni but know his marriage to Cecilia was arranged and that he is a respectable slave.

As the three women reveal their thoughts, the narrative reflects the experiences of each during Fredrika's visit. The social and political contexts of Cuba in 1851 are incorporated with an emphasis on how slavery was enacted in this island country. Fredrika records all in her journal – fireflies, slave dances, and stories of both Cuba and Africa. Engle uses subtle but powerful contrasts to point to the inequity of this era. Each image of the island's natural beauty is contrasted with an image of slavery. The lonely and limited existence of the wealthy female is contrasted with the abuse shown towards more impoverished females, as women of both social classes desire freedom.

Award winning author Margarita Engle has already revealed through her earlier novels her personal interest and detailed research into the individuals who make up the history of Cuba.

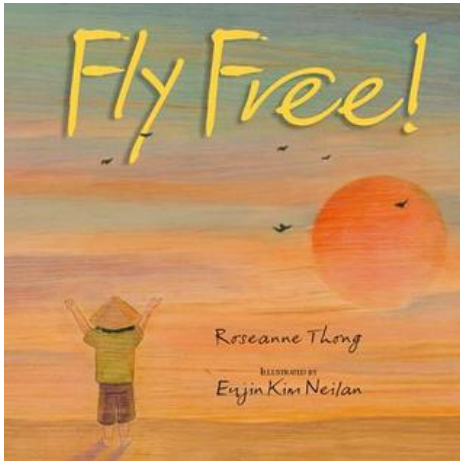
She includes both a historical note and an author's note with a list of references for her work, the majority of which are the actual writings of Fredrika Bremer. In keeping with this theme of Cuban freedom, *The Firefly Letters* might be used with Engle's other books, *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* (2006) and *The Surrender Tree: Poems for Cuba's Struggle for Freedom* (2008) both reviewed in earlier issues of *WOW Review*. The struggle for women's rights has been the focus of numerous children's and young adult books, and this theme might be continued with such titles as *Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream* (Tanya Lee Stone, 2009) or *Claudette Colvin: Twice toward Justice* (Phillip M. Hoose, 2009).

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Fly Free!

Written by Roseanne Thong

Illustrated by Eujin Kim Neilan

Boyd's Mills Press, 2010,

ISBN: 978-1590785508

“Fly free, fly free in the sky so blue. When you do a good deed, it will come back to you.”

Mai softly sings these words when she invites Thu to help feed the caged sparrows outside the Buddhist temple in Vietnam. Mai wants to free the sparrows, since setting an animal free is a good deed in Buddhism, but she can't afford to pay for their release. So, she visits and feeds them. Mai's good deed sets a series of events in motion as Thu gives her shoes to a girl, who gives water to a man, who gives a woman a ride in his cart, who feeds a monk, who treats a boy who is ill—each repeating the song Mai shared. The boy's father, thankful that his son is again healthy, goes to the temple where he sees Mai feeding the sparrows and singing the song. Understanding how good deeds and kindness are passed from person to person, he gives the sparrows' owner all the money he has to free the birds. Mai joyfully opens the cage, calling “Fly free, fly free, in the sky so blue...” as the sparrows fly into the sunset.

This story of kindness and hope draws on the Buddhist ideas of karma and samsara, that good deeds (or bad) eventually return to you, whether in this life or the next. The story is simply and beautifully written as a circular narrative that illustrates how good deeds cycle through life, back to their origin. Though an Author's Note at the end explains aspects of Buddhist beliefs, the story's rich message transcends religion.

Eujin Kim Neilan's illustrations are done in watercolors on board, the grain of which enhances the composition and movement between illustrations. Wood boards are a common material and reflect the simple life of Mai and others in her community. This is further highlighted by the simple singular colored shapes in each illustration. The sunlit tranquil scenes match the story's kind and tender message.

Roseanne Thong was born in Southern California but lived in Asia, primarily Hong Kong, for over 15 years. Because she is concerned with being culturally accurate, she asks “insiders” to proof her work to make sure she is accurately representing another culture and acknowledges these individuals at the beginning of the book.

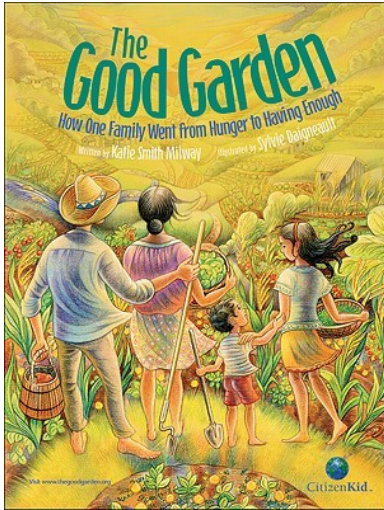
Fly Free! works well in a text set on acts of kindness with books such as *One Smile* (Cindy McKinley (2002) and *One Thousand Tracings: Healing the Wounds of World War II* (Lita Judge, 2007). It could also be paired with *Zen Shorts* (John Muth, 2005) to examine readers' hopes, understandings of life, and relationships with others. *The Caged Birds of Phnom Penh* (Frederick Lipp, 2001) would offer another perspective into the practice of buying and releasing caged birds at the temple gates.

Prisca Martens, Towson University, Towson, Maryland, USA

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The Good Garden

Written by Katie Smith Milway

Illustrated by Sylvie Daigneault

Kids Can Press, 2010, 31 pp.

ISBN: 978-15545534883

The latest in a collection by Kids Can Press that is designed to inform and inspire children as global citizens, *The Good Garden* takes readers to the hills of Honduras where farmers, such as the family of María Luz Duarte, struggle to grow enough food to feed themselves. With poor rainfall, insect invasions, and land in need of nutrients, María worries that they will have to borrow seeds from the coyote, who, in turn, will charge them many times more in repayment. Ultimately, the

farmers, campesinos, can lose their land to the coyotes. Hoping to avoid this, María's father leaves to take physically difficult temporary work on a coffee farm.

Readers become part of the daily activities of the Duarte family, learning much about the culture of the Honduran farming community. María goes to school where a new teacher has big ideas to help the children make their lives better. Through helping Don Pedro with the class garden, María learns many things about restoring the land—creating compost, building terraces along the hillside to keep land from washing away, planting marigolds to keep insects away, and planting beans with other crops to put nutrients back into the soil. When her father returns with money for seeds, María and her father plant their garden using their new knowledge. Ultimately, they not only feed themselves but have crops to sell. Other families make improvements as well and are able to bypass the greedy coyotes as they improve their land and lives. As is the custom in Honduras, Don Pedro is eventually assigned another school, but his contributions to this community remain. Sylvie Daigneault uses colored pencil and colored paper in the illustrations to share the story in brightly detailed images. The pictures provide insight to the story while maintaining a hopeful tone due to the bright yellow colors.

Katie Smith Milway offers much insight into this story and into the “global garden” in the final pages of this book. Readers learn that the Duarte family is based on a real family and the teacher, Don Pedro, is based on a Honduran who worked throughout his life to educate farmers about their land and about cash crops, thus enabling them to provide money for medicines and school supplies. With 75 percent of the poor being farmers in developing countries, such information is critical to making more individuals “food secure”—having enough food to eat. Milway opens the discussion to include the global community. Using Don Elías as a model to inspire, she challenges readers to consider what they can do by providing suggestions, organizational contacts for involvement, and explanations of the work of organizations such as MicroEnsure and the Heifer International project. A vocabulary list is provided as she uses authentic vocabulary for key words.

In her acknowledgement, Milway recognizes Milton Flores and Margoth Andrews, individuals continuing the work of Elías, for reviewing the language and illustrations for authenticity. She also consulted others regarding the global messages included in this book. Milway is involved in programs for sustainable development on a global scope and currently is involved in a nonprofit

organization, One Hen, Inc., that uses many resources to teach children financial responsibility and giving back.

The Good Garden offers many possibilities to inform readers about countries that struggle economically and often do not have much literature available that reflect their people and lifestyles. Of course, the larger theme is the role of education and support to create empowered members of the global community. Helping young citizens realize they can participate in such global transformations is a purpose of this and other books in the CitizenKid series by Kids Can Press. This book can naturally be used with its companion titles such as *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference* (Katie Smith Milway, 2008), *One Well: The Story of Water on Earth* (Rochelle Strauss, 2007), or *If the World Were a Village: A Book about the World's People* (David J. Smith, 2002). Other titles on this topic might include *What the World Eats* (Faith D'Aluisio, 2008) or *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (Claire Nivola, 2008). The book can also play a key role in a science text set that focuses on the process of growing food or farming.

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Monsoon Afternoon

Written by Kashmira Sheth
Illustrated by Yoshiko Jaeggi
Peach Tree, 2008
ISBN: 978-1561454556

This charming picture book depicts a rainy afternoon in a modern Indian town. The young, un-named protagonist is looking for someone to play with in the rain. He asks the members of his family (Dadima (grandmother), Mommy, Papa, and brother Jai) to come outside and play with him, but no one can. When asked by his Dadaji (grandfather) why he looks so sad, he says “No one wants to go outside and play with me.” His Dadaji responds “Are you sure?” and thus begins an afternoon adventure beautifully illustrated in soft watercolors. Dadaji and he fold boats out of paper, and take them outside to the washtub filled with water. As the rain lets up they explore the neighborhood and the young boy asks his Dadaji about his own life as a boy. As the grandfather remembers his own childhood, the illustrations change to sepia to indicate the past, embedded in the soft pastel present.

The two walk through the neighborhood and see and do many things. Peacocks catch their eyes. They swing in the banyan trees. They find mango trees and pick mangoes to bring home. They return home with the mangoes they have picked and go into the house to change out of their wet clothing, only to be reprimanded by Dadima for tracking mud through the house. As they clean up the mess they have made, the young boy asks his Dadaji, “Did your dadima scold you and make you clean up?” Of course, the answer is “She sure did.” Thus the intergenerational bond is maintained.

Monsoon Afternoon is a luscious journey into the life of a young boy living in modern India. The illustrations show a modern home. For example, in one illustration the reader sees a room with the father working at a desk with a computer. The book was shown to a cultural insider who confirmed both the text’s and the illustration’s cultural authenticity. Kashmira Sheth, the author, was born in Bhavangar, India and raised in Mumbai until the age of seventeen when she came to the United States to study at the Iowa State University. Trained as a microbiologist, she worked in the field until an uncle from India sent her a letter recalling his childhood. This letter was the impetus for her to begin writing for children. She claims she learned to write by reading good children’s literature to her two daughters.

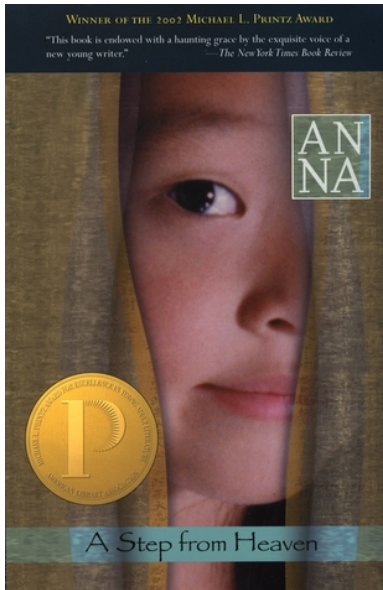
Although the book is set in India during monsoon season, children of many geographical locals will relate to the concept of “waiting for the rain” and the joy of playing outside when the rain arrives. Children who are fortunate enough to have loving relationships with older adults will respond favorably to the interaction between the young boy and his grandfather. Other books on the common experience of waiting for and playing in the rain, such as *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain* (Verna Aardema, 1981), *Come On, Rain* (Karen Hesse, 1999) and *Rain, Rain, Rivers* (Uri Shulevitz, 2006) can be put together. Books like *The Two of Them* (Aliko, 1987), *Storm in the Night* (Mary Stoltz, 1987) and *First One Foot, Now Another* (Tomie de Paula, 1981) recall the special bonds between grandchild and grandfather.

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A Step from Heaven

Written by An Na
Speak, 2003, 160 pp.
ISBN: 978-0142500279

A Step From Heaven is the first published novel crafted by An Na, an immigrant who grew up in the United States and became a middle school teacher before pursuing writing full time. She has an MFA from Norwich University. Growing up in California, she felt many of the same cultural issues experienced by the protagonist, Young Ju and her younger brother, Joon.

From the second page of the novel where An Na describes her grandmother as old with “a sleepy blanket face,” it is obvious that her words create a lyrical story. In addition, Korean words are woven into the context of the story and are often discernable without translation. The titles of the clever short chapters (usually no more than two pages) sometimes lead the reader and sometimes cause an “aha” moment at the end of the chapter, drawing on the reader’s ability to infer. Although An Na unfurls the story chronologically, she adds a circular element when the next to the last chapter ends with a same line from the introductory chapter. So, while the vocabulary is not difficult for middle school readers, the sophistication of text adds enjoyment and complexity. In many ways this book reminds one of *When the Emperor Was Divine* (Julie Otsuka, 2003) with its deep but simply written message.

The story takes Young Ju from the age of four until she goes to college but does not stop along the way each year, which would have bogged down the story. Her experiences over time are important in the sequence of her life, but stopping to relay events in all the years is not necessary for the reader to understand how she and her family relationships develop.

While An Na claims the novel is not autobiographical, she does imply that she lived through many of the experiences of the Korean family and this gives the story an added authenticity. The story of Young Ju initially is one of the parents’ American Dream, new American families guided by their home culture, gender struggles, and universal family problems that are independent of immigrant status. The two Korean American children are believable in their reactions to the father who takes on the role of male domination in the family. The children show stoicism when he insists the young son be a man and excuses inappropriate behavior (boys will be boys) while demanding a mental strength beyond his childhood years. Young Ju, the first child, is after all, just a girl and feels pain from this difference in expectations from her father. For many years, the father works several jobs and saves for a better home but this does not make him a better father or husband. The mother only occasionally crosses the father, but the results are physical and emotional beatings that eventually become serious enough to lead to a hospital visit. She turns to a church group for support and the children also enjoy attending, but the father only attends once. Later in the story Young Ju is put in the position of calling 911 and reporting her mother’s beating, knowing this will deal an emotional and disrespectful blow to the family, even though the mother will not press charges.

The loving grandmother spends time with Young Ju in Korea. When the grandmother dies near the end of the story, readers see Apa (the father) shrinking into the role he is demanding of his own son. He feels a failure toward his mother in his role as first son. The reader may feel sympathy for his plight and sorrow, but the father is an alcoholic, an abuser of his wife and children, and a failure as a Korean son, which eventually leads to deserting his wife and children.

The parents are a contradiction in that they want Young Ju and Joon to have the American dream but they want them to continue holding on to Korean ways. Young Ju's best and possibly only friend is American but the parents do not want this meshing of cultures. Amanda's parents become their foils and attend school activities, encourage the friendship between the two girls and often drive Young Ju home. Amanda even loans lunch money occasionally to Young Ju and when the mother, Umma, learns this, she feels ashamed.

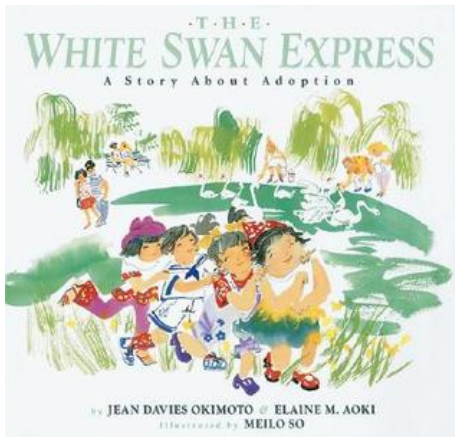
The novel, a 2002 Printz award winner and recommended for readers 8 and up, seems authentic and real. The American Dream success of Young Ju comes with a price. This book might be paired across cultures with such titles as *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian* (Sherman Alexie, 2007) or *American Born Chinese* (Gene Luen Yang, 2007).

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The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption

Written by Jean Davies Okimoto and Elaine M. Aoki

Illustrated by Meilo So

Clarion Books, 2002

ISBN-13: 978-0-618-16453-0

Okimoto and Aoki (2002) share the excitement and anticipation of four different families as they travel overseas to adopt four little Chinese girls in *The White Swan Express*. This well-crafted, joyful story depicts the differences each family brings, but also shows the love and bond that ties these families together. As the story opens,

the reader is introduced to four different families in four different geographic locations (Miami, Florida; Vashon Island in Seattle, Washington; Toronto, Canada; and Minnetonka, Minnesota). Despite diverse lifestyles, ethnicities, age and morning routines, they all wake to anticipation of a special event. On the other side of the world in Asia, four little girl babies, all dressed alike, lay asleep in their beds. Similar in appearance, their individual personalities are conveyed to the reader through their unique sleeping positions.

Okimoto and Aoki invite the reader into this shared experience as each family prepares and travels across a continent and ocean. Exhausted, they arrive in fog-shrouded China, and together board the “White Swan Express” to Guangzhou, where all foreign embassies are located. The anticipation builds, as the families get closer to meeting their daughters. While they anxiously wait, “their hearts thumped like drums and fluttered like the wings of a bird.” And one by one, they meet their daughters for the first time. Each family’s joy in the shared experience is clearly expressed through smiles and tears of joy. After signing all the papers, the fog is lifted, symbolizing good fortune for all.

The White Swan Express is based on Aoki’s real life experiences in adopting a child. Okimoto is the daughter of an adoptee. Together, they have co-chaired the Seattle reading awards. Aoki is a well-respected reviewer of Asian American children’s literature and was co-editor of *Kaleidoscope*, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) review of multicultural literature. The authors’ note in the afterword provides the reader with relevant background information that lends to cultural authenticity. Specific details, such as the gift of silver bracelets given to a Chinese girl at birth so parents can keep track of her, and the carefully chosen Chinese phrases, add to the accuracy and believability.

The illustrator, Meilo So, enhances the experience for the reader through vibrant watercolor illustrations. Throughout the book, her illustrations enhance the mood of the story, even through the use of weather elements such as the sun, moon, and fog. The detailed illustrations draw out the personalities of each individual family member and deftly portray the cultural subtleties in a respectful manner.

Over the past several decades, adopting children from Asian countries has become increasingly common due to economic, cultural, and demographic factors such as large numbers of Asian adoptees, U.S. couples who are unable to bear their own children, and the small numbers of children

available for adoption in the U.S. A number of authors have written picture books that can be paired with *The White Swan Express*. Written in simple language for young children, the picture book *I Don't Have Your Eyes* (Carrie A. Kitze, 2003) recognizes physical differences but celebrates the commonalities that all people share because "We don't look the same on the outside, but in our hearts, we are the same." *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Rose A. Lewis, 2000) is based on the author's own experience as she travels to adopt a baby girl from China and expresses her deep love and joy that the child has brought into her life. Teachers can explore themes with children that respect differences and celebrate universal emotions. Children can discuss how these parents felt about their adopted children or if it mattered that the parents in the stories looked different. Another good resource for adoption stories can be found at <http://sarahpark.com/>. These stories are an important addition to children's literature, sharing common stories for the increasing number of Asian children adopted by U.S. couples.

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