

The Extra Adjective: How I Came to Terms With Being a Multicultural Book Author by Grace Lin

These days, I am often referred to as a "multicultural children's book author/illustrator." It's a strange and long label. When I studied children's book illustration in art, I knew I wanted to be a children's book illustrator. When I started writing books, I knew I wanted to be a children's book author. I never thought about "multicultural." That extra adjective never crossed my mind.

And that extra adjective, as anyone who has experienced it knows, is quite a double-ended sword. When I published my first book, *The Ugly Vegetables* (a story about my mother and I and the Chinese vegetables we grew when I was a child) I was thinking more about my personal story than a genre. So it was a little surprising to hear a fellow striving author/illustrator say to me, "It's good that you're using your culture—multicultural books are hot now. That's what's getting you published."

Was it? Suddenly, the validation that I had broken through the publishing wall was marred by the idea that I had somehow squeezed through a back window. Was I only getting published because of my heritage and subject matter? Was I cheating? Was I selling out my culture for a career?

And this fear was something that haunted me. During that first year of publication, I constantly felt ill at ease, as if I was a chicken floating with swimming swans. I hadn't intended on getting on a platform for diversity in children's literature—I had just wanted to get a story I loved published. But, without meaning to, my book was seen as representative of the underserved Asian-American experience. And who was I to represent that? I felt, in my desperation to get published, I had faked my way in.

So soon after, during the discussions for another project, when an editor asked me to change my Asian girl character to a Caucasian boy, I knew I should have felt a sense of satisfaction and relief. The reasons were good - changing the character would make it so that the book wouldn't be considered multicultural; its sales wouldn't be limited; and I, as an author, wouldn't be pigeon-holed. But, instead, I was even more uneasy.

Suddenly, I found myself not caring if I was getting published for the wrong reasons or if I wasn't selling enough books for the right ones. Somehow, given the opportunity to prove I was publishable without my heritage seemed a pale consolation prize when compared to creating a book that was true to my vision, to the readers who loved my books and to the child I once was.

And it's not that I'll never do a book with a Caucasian boy (I would do a book on anything if it felt right) or that the books I do publish are meant to preach (horror of horrors!) but I realized that being able to publish my work was a gift not to be squandered on something soulless. And my soul is Asian-American.

So, strangely, it was the unsettling nature of this editor's request that made me finally find my balance. It sifted away my fears, the practical reasoning and the backhanded compliments. It's left me proud of that extra adjective and of what I am—a multicultural children's book author and illustrator.

*[Grace Lin](#) is the author and illustrator of more than a dozen picture books, including *The Ugly Vegetables* and *Dim Sum for Everyone!* Most recently, Grace's first children's novel [The Year of the Dog](#) was released with glowing praise. While most of Grace's books are about the Asian-American experience, she believes, "Books erase bias—they make the uncommon everyday, and the mundane exotic. A book makes all cultures universal." See [more about Grace](#) and her work at [her website](#).*