

Don't Judge A Book By Its Character (even if it is Chinese):

Why I Wrote "The Year of the Dog"

By Grace Lin

"I'm cleaning up the house," my mother said during one of her phone calls, "Can I get rid of your old Cheerleaders book?"

My Cheerleaders books. I had loved those books, treasured them. They were dog-eared and had been reread hundreds of times.

But they were also really terrible books. Poor cousins of Sweet Valley High, they were full of insipid romances, ridiculous dramas and irritating plots. Even as a young reader I had loathed the superficial stories, embarrassed if anyone caught me reading them. But these books had one redeeming quality that outweighed all other flaws. One of the Cheerleaders was Chinese.

I was never a cheerleader and I never had any longing or desire to be one, either. However, I did have an insatiable yearning to read a book with a person like me in it.

Growing up Asian in all-Caucasian community had given me a conflicted sense of identity. Surrounded by blue-eyed friends, I would forget I was Chinese and feel a sense of shock and disappointment when I saw my slanted eyes reflecting in the mirror.

I searched endlessly for characters I could connect with. Television, magazines and books almost always ignored my existence. So, when I discovered an Asian character I forgave all faults. A low budget, bland TV show with a non-defined Asian friend? I cursed myself for not taping the episodes when it went off air. A magazine ad with a typecast Asian woman selling pantyhose? Pinned on my wall. Cheerleaders books with a Chinese cheerleader, even though I hated cheerleading? Cherished and preserved, to the point that 20 years later my mother hesitated to throw them out without my permission.

C.S. Lewis said, "We read to know we're not alone." And while at the time I probably couldn't have cared less about quotes from long gone authors, I was the perfect illustration of his words. I read those books over and over again, clinging to them as if they could keep me from drowning. And, in a way they did. Those books fed me. They told me that I, too, could be considered pretty, have friends and a boyfriend—that I was a part of the world that surrounded me.

Now that I write books, I look back at my young reading years with bittersweet nostalgia. Grateful as I am to those books, I bristle at their poor writing, their insistence of making the Chinese girl always a secondary character, and their complete stereotyping and

shallow understanding of the culture. Imagine how much more those books would have meant to me if they had been books of substance, if they had reflected my life with more accuracy and heart, addressed concerns and struggles and triumphs that really affected me. Imagine if instead of being fed crumbs, I had been served a real meal. I deserved more and so do the girls today.

It was with these considerations that I began work on my first novel for children, *THE YEAR OF THE DOG*. Half fiction and half memoir, I tried to capture everything I lived and loved— with an Asian-American girl leading the way. When Pacy tries to get her parents to buy a turkey for Thanksgiving or goes to a Red Egg Party or is questioned why she can't speak Chinese, they are events that display the distinctive blending of Asian-American culture. It is a uniqueness to be appreciated.

With the publication of my picture books, I've become aware of my audience. Nothing thrills me more than having a roomful of little Chinese girls mesmerized by my stories. I see myself in every one of them and my fondest wish is that the books plant subtle seeds of identity. But time goes on, and these girls grow. Soon my picture books will be for their younger sisters. They will look for something more-- something longer, something meatier. When they feel twisted from the threads of their identity, they will look for something that shows how the threads make a rich tapestry. *THE YEAR OF THE DOG* is my gift to them, as well as for the child I was so many years ago.

And because of this I can answer my mother's question with ease.

"My Cheerleaders books?" I say to her, "Oh, you can get rid of them. I don't need them anymore."

*[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](#).*