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Conversations with Yep and Soentpiet Negotiating between cultures: Establishing a multicultural identity through writing and illustrating

LAURENCE YEP, AUTHOR

Laurence Yep has written for young people in a variety of genres. His numerous works include science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, contemporary fiction, poetry, plays, and folktales. He began his writing career at age eighteen while he was a student at Marquette University. His first published story appeared in a science fiction magazine and paid him a penny a word. Since then, he has garnered an impressive list of awards for his writings, including the IRA's Children's Book Award for **Dragonwings** and two Newbery Honor Awards for **Dragonwings** and **Dragon's Gate**. In his autobiography, **The Lost Garden**, he writes, "All those years I had been trying to solve puzzles when the biggest puzzle had been myself" (Yep, 1996, p. 102). A third generation Chinese American, Yep spent his childhood in San Francisco. There he "experienced at least two different San Franciscos" (Johnson-Feelings, 1995, p. 9).

Outside of Chinatown, his parents owned and operated a mom and pop grocery store and the family lived in the apartment over the store. The neighborhood was predominantly African American. He attended St. Mary's Grammar School, near Chinatown, which had been a mission to convert Chinese Americans into Christianity (Yep, 1996, p.52). The older members of his family were not Christians, and the only connection he had with

their traditional celebrations was the firecrackers that he could shoot off at New Year's. His immediate family did not speak Chinese at home. He was resentful when St. Mary's was transformed from a "regular" school into a Chinese School and he was forced to learn Chinese, which was to him a foreign language.

Though he may not have thought of himself as Chinese, other children clearly saw him as Asian.

I remember a group of children who came down the block, both black and white. They were pretending to be soldiers in World War II. Suddenly they began making me a target, assuming that I was Japanese. Saul came along and chased them off; but I realized that I was the neighborhood's all-purpose Asian ... It made me feel like an outsider more than ever in my own neighborhood (Yep, 1996, 38).

Those who taunted him were not educated enough to know or to care that there are different Asian cultures. At the same time, Yep was so much a part of American culture that he did not readily recognize the distorted images of his own ethnic community. In another instance, he recalled watching a cartoon in which the protagonist had a conflict with Chinese laundry men. The characters clad in black pajamas with exaggerated slanted eyes did not seem real, "I remember putting my fingers

up by the side of my eyes to slant them like the characters in the cartoon and running around making high, sing-song noises. My horrified mother said to me, "You're Chinese. Stop that!" (Yep, 1996, 41).

While Yep stopped doing imitations of cartoon laundrymen, he did not particularly want to be Chinese. In the 1950s few people wanted to be different. There was pressure on white children to be like others in their schools and neighborhoods, and there was even greater pressure on minorities to be like the whites (Yep, 1996, p.42). Yep writes that he became one of those obnoxious children who had to have a fork instead of chopsticks at banquets in Chinatown and insisted on Coca Cola instead of tea (Yep, 1996, p. 51). It took years to realize that "I was Chinese whether I wanted to be or not" (Yep, 1996, p. 43).

Yep credits his maternal grandmother, Marie Lee, as a person who helped him confront his Chinese heritage. She represented a "Chineseness" in his life that was as unmovable and as unwanted as a mountain in one's living room. She did not speak much English and he writes, "Instead, what I learned, I picked up in a subtle fashion, soaking up things like a sponge so that years later I was able to use it in a book" (Yep, 1996, p. 49). To come up with answers in his life, he began to keep a file of family history. Whenever a relative told a story, he tried to remember it and write it down. When he began to piece stories together, he realized how difficult a journey it had been for his grandmother from China, through Ohio and West Virginia, to San Francisco's Chinatown. He writes with admiration, "She had not only survived, but she had become her own person--which was something I wanted to do" (Yep, 1996, p. 54). Through her example, he learned a respect for history and experience, and used his file of family stories in his well-researched books.

However, Yep had not always wanted to be a writer. In high school he thought he would study chemistry in college. At the same time, he knew that he enjoyed writing as much as he enjoyed science. When his class went to the wine country near St. Helena for a retreat, he spent many sunny days walking in the fields. During one of these contemplative walks, he realized that he enjoyed making stories more than making bombs. He writes, "It was more an impulse at that point in my life; but that is the way many self-truths reveal themselves--like a sprout germinating from a seed that has to work its way up through the dark soil

and find a path that will lead it up from underneath a rock" (Yep, 1996, p. 93). In looking back at this epiphany, Yep comments humorously that he was sure the sunshine and the night sky also had something to do with his choice.

Yep's writing and imagination helped him flourish and survive, and he has maintained his interest in the experiences of survivors and outsiders. One of the great strengths in his writing is his ability to build connections among conflicting elements of human life. "His courageous young characters create their own independence without severing ties either with cultural history or with the generations they rebel against. They face racism and bigotry, often matter-of-factly, but also find caring and inclusion among those of different races and cultures" (Vandergrift, 1996, pp. 449-450).

Since many professional writers begin their journeys as voracious readers, my conversation with Yep began with his childhood reading experiences.

How were you introduced to reading as a child?

My parents read to me constantly. I had a book called **The Big Fisherman, Little Fisherman** that I loved to death. A lot of times, though, it was comic books. However, for every comic book I read to them, I had to try to read one book to them, so all the reading skills were there when I finally discovered the books in the library. The important thing was that my parents made me feel at an early age that reading was a pleasure.

Was there a particular person who influenced your book selections?

The librarians tried their best, but they kept trying to get me interested in books like **Homer Price and His Doughnut Machine** where every child had a bicycle and everyone seemed to leave their door unlocked. Since I lived in an urban neighborhood and went to school in Chinatown, I didn't know anyone who would leave their apartment unlocked. And I didn't know anyone who had a bicycle either. So Homer Price and his ilk seemed silly to me. The books that spoke to me were science fiction and fantasy where children leave our ordinary world and go to a faraway place where they have to learn strange new customs and languages. Above all, science fiction and fantasy talked about adjusting and that's something I did every time I got on and off the bus. So I selected my own favorite books. In those days, the library

had a blue rocket on the spine of any science fiction or fantasy book. Once I had exhausted the children's collection, I began to try the young adult and even some adult books.

Often children who read a great deal reach a point where they say to themselves, "I can do this." Do you recall any such moment?

Unlike children nowadays, I thought authors were all dead people. My own bent was towards science.

What is your earliest memory of writing?

I belonged to a boy's club that was part of my school in Chinatown. To raise money, we used to put on variety shows. I used to write skits and plays. One of them was a parody of "The Untouchables" called "The Uneatables." That will tell you about the caliber of my writing in those days. The play was performed after we served the audience spaghetti dinners. That will also tell you something about the caliber of my judgment.

Were there particular events that triggered your earliest writings?

I didn't really think about becoming a writer until my senior year in high school. My English teacher, Reverend John Becker, told some of his better students that we had to get something accepted by a national magazine if we wanted to get an A in his course. So I did and got my first rejection letter—one of many that continue to this day. He later retracted the threat but I got bitten by the bug and kept writing. Father Becker set many published authors on that path simply by insisting that we had talent and should try.

Were you aware of particular needs being fulfilled while you were writing?

I published my first story when I was eighteen. It was a science fiction story and ultimately wound up in a collection of that year's best. I sold other science fiction stories. It was only years later that I realized the stories were about alienated heroes or were even the first-person narratives of aliens. As a child, I had never found any books that spoke about my experiences as an Asian American. I can see now that in my science fiction stories, I was developing the emotional vocabulary to talk about myself.

You have written that you wrote *Dragonwings* to Ralph Vaughan Williams. When did you start to write to music?

After my first few sales, I began to write stories influenced by the lyrics of songs—I remember a novel that used some of the ideas and words from

"Music From Big Pink" by The Band. Those stories were heavy-handed—what I now call written from the head rather than from the heart. However, that developed a life-long habit of listening to music.

How do you choose your musical selections?

I can't say exactly how that happens. However, I know a book is finally clicking together when I have the right piece of music to which I can write. Sometimes it's classical and other times it's rock music. My Star Trek novel, **Shadow Lord**, got written to the music of "Men at Work" because the Australian band sounded exotic to me and suggested that faraway world. Recently I've started to write to the music of Japanese animation which can be quite a bit more elaborate than American animation.

Do you need other conditions besides music to write?

I have a study in which I write. When I taught creative writing, I urged my students to set aside one period of time and one place in which to write. The place might be the kitchen table but it was their place at the appointed hour. When you write, you open up a window to your imagination. There are certain things you can do to trick that window into opening. Among other things, you can condition yourself to write at a certain time and place. The window will sometimes rise automatically at that time and if you're in that spot.

What do you do when you need to write about a person or place unfamiliar to you?

Research. Research. Research. I very rarely read fiction nowadays because I can see all the tricks that an author is using and because I can usually figure out the ending. Most of what I read is history and nonfiction for future projects. However, gathering the facts is only the first step.

For instance, most people think of historical fiction as a kind of autopsy report. They think the writer of historical fiction is a kind of coroner who arrays dates and statistics on a page like bones upon a table. However, the skeleton is no more a person than the dates and statistics are history. A writer has to be a necromancer breathing his or her own life into the bones to make them come to life. Historical fiction should be a dialogue with the dead.

Some scholars of children's literature argue that authentic stories must be created by someone from the ethnic background in the stories. How do you feel about this perspective?

I am against censorship in any form, and that includes telling someone what s/he can and can

not write. However, having said that, I would also ask that if writers were to write about an ethnic group other than their own, that they do so responsibly. First, they should do research. Second—and the harder thing to do, they should ask themselves if they are interpreting their research according to the truth rather than according to their prejudices. There are so many terrible books written about Chinese Americans by white writers who simply made up whatever they wanted. There is a smaller group of books where an author was conscientious enough to do interviews. Unfortunately, even these authors distorted the data to fit their cultural prejudices and stereotypes. Rudine Sims Bishop spoke about these issues more eloquently than I can in her book **Shadow and Substance**.

Any writer nowadays has the responsibility to portray an experience authentically. When I write about Chinese-Americans, I try to use the process of self-examination that the Jesuits taught me during four years of retreats in high school. They called that process of self-examination the spiritual exercises to be used in inspecting your soul for confession, but the exercises can be applied to other introspective things. Trying to be authentic is like taking a razor blade to your soul. You must keep asking yourself if you are making assumptions and taking the easy way out or if you are trying to get at the truth. There are very few writers of any race who do that; and yet it should be the most important thing any writer does since what they write shapes children's opinions.

Do you consider yourself a Chinese American writer, an American writer, or an international writer?

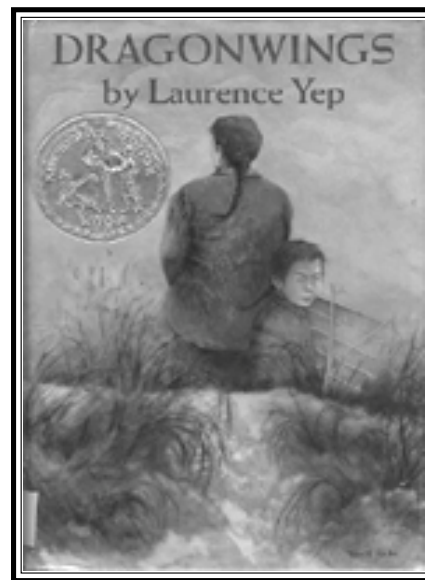
I think of myself principally as a writer. I often write about my experiences as a Chinese American, but I've also written about faraway worlds. Writing is a special way of seeing. Good writing brings out what is special in ordinary things, and I hope that's what I do. It's nice being paid to day-dream.

It is no surprise that Yep's first novel **Sweetwater** is a complex science fiction tale. It tells of two rival human factions with different lifestyles that co-habit an already inhabited alien planet named Harmony which they colonize to support the planet Earth. The main character, Tyree Priest, lives a life of adventure and reflection while crossing racial and social barriers across the three cultures. Through his secret mentor, Tyree gains an appreciation for music, and he struggles with

his community not only against human adversaries but also against the forces of nature. As he grows into a mature young man, he discovers the meaning of family. Simply put, **Sweetwater** is a story that attempts to establish through music true harmony in life on Harmony. The handling of these themes leads Yep next to write **Dragonwings** and, in doing so, to confront more directly the reality of his own bicultural identity.

MOON SHADOW

Yep published **Dragonwings** in 1975. The book was a Newbery Honor Book in 1976, and won the Children's Literature Association's Phoenix Award for its lasting value and resonance across time and readerships twenty years later in 1995. It reflects Yep's "ability to build connections among conflicting elements of human life," and remains a work worth revisiting (Vandergrift, 1996, p. 449).



Dragonwings is the story of a young boy named Moon Shadow and his physical and emotional journeys between Chinese and American cultures.

Jacket illustration from **Dragonwings** by Laurence Yep. Copyright ©1975. Reprinted with permission from Harper & Row, Publishers.

Establishing reader empathy

At the start of **Dragonwings**, eight-year-old Moon Shadow is in China and wants to know about the Land of the Golden Mountain where his father crossed the ocean to work. His mother is reluctant to talk about the wealthy but dangerous land of the demons. When Moon Shadow badgers his grandmother for information, she reminds him that his own grandfather was hanged almost the moment he reached the shores of the Land of the Golden Mountain.

Before Moon Shadow leaves for America, he begins his journey with stories, the terrible stories he hears about the Land of the Golden Mountain,

its temptations and pitfalls. Readers hear what Moon Shadow hears and learn through Moon Shadow's ears.

When Moon Shadow is nine years old, his cousin comes from America to bring Moon Shadow back to America with him. Moon Shadow's mother and grandmother protest but Moon Shadow insists on going and being with his father. During the sea voyage, the passengers, including the cousin who escorts Moon Shadow, tell more and more stories about the demons. This terrifies Moon Shadow. Now, in addition to stories about the demons, he actually sees the tall, hairy demons as the sailors on the ship.

Upon arrival in America, customs officials keep Moon Shadow and his cousin in a long, two-story warehouse for two weeks while they wait their turn for an interview. Finally the officials question Moon Shadow about his village and kinsmen and try hard to prove that he is not his father's son. The officials do not succeed, and Moon Shadow moves on to the next step. He must strip naked for a physical. The officials take all his measurements so no one else can sneak in to America as his father's son. At last he and his cousin stand at the open doorway leading out of the warehouse. There is no Golden Mountain to greet them. Moon Shadow is confused and disappointed.

Through Moon Shadow's ears, eyes, and experiences, readers understand how they as non-Chinese are perceived when they are the unknown entity. On the one hand, since they are the demons, they are united in their demonhood. On the other hand, simultaneously, they identify with Moon Shadow because, as human beings, they have also faced unfamiliar, frightening situations. Moreover, in this nation of immigrants, many readers are immigrants or have connections to voluntary or forced immigration. Thus, by page 12 of **Dragonwings**, Yep firmly establishes empathy with Moon Shadow on three levels: (1) the perception of Americans from a child's point of view, (2) our common human experience of confronting new situations, and (3) our common history of immigration.

Maintaining reader empathy by balancing cultures

However, no author can maintain empathy if the demons are constantly bad and the Chinese are constantly good. Yep balances Moon Shadow's experiences in both cultures. For example, as the ship nears California, Moon Shadow observes that the

land of the demons is "a brown smudge on the horizon" (Yep, 1975, p. 11), and then he remembers that the Middle Kingdom, his homeland, looked the same from a distance as the boat was leaving.

The older women in Moon Shadow's life, his mother and the demoness, Miss Whitlaw, voice similar perspectives on meeting new people as people first. His father reminds him, "Your mother was always polite to everyone" (Yep, 1975, p. 100), and Moon Shadow later observes, "Another thing to say for the demoness was her genuine interest in learning about people as people" (Yep, 1975, p. 116).

In fact, Miss Whitlaw is a perfect person for Moon Shadow to meet. When he first visits her home, she offers him gingerbread cookies and milk. He thinks the cookies are dung and the milk is cow's urine. His father urges him to be polite. After Moon Shadow eats several cookies, he discovers that the milk does not taste so terrible. When he learns that Miss Whitlaw believes that all dragons are mean, he decides to help her learn about dragons' good deeds. He visits her with a box of jasmine tea. At first, she does not want to accept his gift but when he insists, she looks inside and is surprised to see flowers. She boils water for tea, and Moon Shadow convinces her, despite her misgivings, to omit sugar and cream. After one tentative sip, she drinks her tea. In the same way that Moon Shadow learns to like gingerbread cookies, Miss Whitlaw learns to like jasmine tea.

Just as Moon Shadow begins to think that demons are not so bad, the neighborhood boys pelt him with rotten vegetables and call him names. He later fights Jack, the biggest of the group, knocks him down, and gives him a bloody nose. When Moon Shadow wins, the boys decide he is an "all right guy". Moon Shadow learns that these demon boys are like the Tang boys he knew at home. If you go after the biggest, the rest will leave you alone. Moon Shadow's understanding later approaches empathy when the San Francisco earthquake strikes. One side of Jack's tenement falls off and Moon Shadow looks up in time to see Jack sitting in bed right before the building collapses.

Moon Shadow confronts his new culture head on when the demon girl, Mrs. Whitlaw's niece, visits Moon Shadow. She looks at his father's aviation books and questions Moon Shadow about his knowledge of dragons. She demands to see the books about dragons, and Moon Shadow tells her that he and his father know the stories about drag-

ons because they grew up hearing them as part of their lives. They do not come from books but the stories are true. She responds, "In China?", and Moon Shadow, upset, declares, "In whole world. You 'Mericans not know everything." The demon girl responds grudgingly, "But then, you don't know everything either" (Yep, 1975, p.125). Fortunately, after this tense confrontation, they continue to talk about reading and books, and the continued dialogue about their mutual interest promotes some understanding of each other. By the end of the evening, Moon Shadow calls the demon girl by her name, "Robin", and the evening becomes a watershed experience for Moon Shadow. Now he can recognize personhood beyond demonhood.

Yep continues his theme of shared books and shared stories as a meeting ground between disparate peoples. Moon Shadow begins to visit Miss Whitlaw every evening to read with Robin, and Miss Whitlaw encourages him to write short paragraphs about dragons. While Moon Shadow sets out to reeducate the demoness about the varied personalities of dragons, Miss Whitlaw educates him in the demonic language. They learn from each other in fair exchange. Moon Shadow's decision to learn not only to speak English but also to become literate in English establishes his ability to function in his new culture. His developing ability in English forges the mechanism which allows him a communicative bridge to his second culture.

Appealing to a universal audience

Moon Shadow's physical move into the demon world permits intellectual and emotional contact and exchanges. Prior to the evening visits at Miss Whitlaw's, Moon Shadow encounters both bad demons and bad Chinese. He lives with his father and uncles in Chinatown and makes only occasional trips outside the ghetto. Once a granduncle's opium-addicted son nearly kills Moon Shadow and Moon Shadow's father takes revenge. The two of them must leave the laundry, the brotherhood, and Chinatown. Moon Shadow's father makes the decision to enter the demon world when he contacts a demon man whose car he repaired. The demon man sets him up with jobs repairing small machines and with housing in Miss Whitlaw's garage. This arrangement puts Moon Shadow and his father, Windrider, physically in the demon culture. The San Francisco Earthquake serves as a second physical catalyst to separate Moon Shadow and his father from Chinatown. This time, however, they separate from the demon community as well.

Windrider, an expert kite maker, decides that the chaos from the Earthquake has loosened their connections not only to the land but also to its communities. The time has come to pursue his dream of making a flying machine. He rents a barn on a hilltop and he and Moon Shadow eke out a bare existence separate from most humanity, putting everything they earn into the needed supplies to build an aircraft. Moon Shadow supports his father's dream. He is proficient enough in writing English to establish a correspondence with Wilbur and Orville Wright for his father. With this correspondence and their physical isolation, Yep leads Windrider and Moon Shadow beyond Chinese and American communities to a universal connection, the world of human invention and creativity. Because humanity has for centuries dreamed of human flight, Windrider's dream, which Moon Shadow shares, is also easy for the readers to share.

But their dream costs dearly. When Moon Shadow and Windrider are living in the hilltop barn working on the aircraft, we see through the eyes of other characters that Moon Shadow is malnourished. His clothes are worn and patched, and the barn where he and Windrider live never loses the odor of animal manure. Through other people's observations of Moon Shadow, readers recognize the extent of his physical sacrifice to his father's dream but not through Moon Shadow's own words. Moon Shadow does not give any clues about his living conditions and physical sacrifices because he understands the need to sacrifice everything that makes daily life comfortable to attain a shared dream that may or may not be realized. Through the realization of Moon Shadow's and Windrider's large and small sacrifices to an idea, Yep successfully takes his readers to the pinnacle of compassionate imagining. He makes them one with the characters. Consequently, as Yep unites fictional and real human characters, he captures a universal audience.

Writing to cope

Yep's imagining rings even more true when we become aware of the life contexts for **Dragonwings**. His father was born in China in 1914 and joined his father in America when he was 10 years old. They flew kites together. In his *Afterword* Yep describes **Dragonwings** as a "historical fantasy" inspired by both his father's journey to America and the newspaper account of a young Chinese flier, Fung Joe Guey, who flew for twenty minutes in the hills of Oakland, California

on September 22, 1909. Guey improved not only the Wright Brothers' original design but also made his own wireless sets and telephones.

After six years' research, Yep was able to uncover little about the human experience of Chinese immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century. He did learn that from the 1850s to the 1930s males from economically distressed areas of southern China came to work in the United States and earned money to send back to their impoverished families. While they worked in America, they formed a bachelor society. In later years, the American government allowed wives to join husbands and raise families in the United States. While the Chinese strove to adapt to American customs, many, including Yep's own family, lost touch with the rich cultural traditions of their homeland and the history of the bachelor society.

To mentally recreate Chinatown and its bachelor society of the early 1900s, Yep went through a unique process of imaginative discovery akin to his growing up. In **The Reading Teacher** Yep states, "I had grown up as a child in the 1950s so that my sense of reality was an American one. Now I had to grow up again, but this time in the 1900s, developing a Chinese sense of reality" (Yep, 1977, p. 360). For a Chinese American like Yep, an understanding of his ancestors' experiences required not only extensive research but also a powerful imagination.

Yep finds that his writing has helped him navigate his personal journey, and he is willing to confront what he calls his "Chineseness" through his books.

I was the Chinese American raised in a black neighborhood, a child who had been too American to fit into Chinatown and too Chinese to fit in elsewhere. I was the clumsy son of the athletic family, the grandson of a Chinese grandmother who spoke more of West Virginia than of China. When I wrote, I went from being a puzzle to a puzzle solver (Yep, 1996, p. 91).

In the writing of **Dragonwings**, Yep is solving his own personal puzzle. He has written a book in which the reader learns to understand what someone else hears, sees, and feels, to keep a balance when judging cultures, to try what is new, to see people beyond stereotypes, to learn languages, to share books and stories, and to recognize common humanity. Through Moon Shadow's journey, Yep is making his own journey to understand the

realities of negotiating bicultural identity, and, in so doing, Yep himself becomes his own audience for **Dragonwings**.

CHRIS K. SOENTPIET, ILLUSTRATOR

I am fortunate to have a famous illustrator in my neighborhood, and he graciously consents to an interview about the process of creating his drawings and the place of drawing in his life.

Chris K. Soentpiet (pronounced soon-pete) is the illustrator of thirteen books and the author-illustrator of two others. He won IRA's Book Award for **More Than Anything Else** and the Society of Illustrators' gold medal for **Peacebound Trains**. His books have been recognized by numerous journals and associations, including the Notable Books for a Global Society. Once again, he is this year's winner of the IRA Book Award for **Molly Bannaky**.

Chris was born in Korea and lived in very poor circumstances. He remembers, as a child, selling fruit on the street. His mother died when he was six-years-old and his father exactly a year later in a car accident when Chris was seven-years-old. His oldest sister managed to come to the United States and to put herself through nursing school. She arranged for Chris, who was the youngest, and his next older sister, to be adopted together in America. They separated from their remaining siblings, who were older and able to care for themselves, and went to live in Hawaii.

THE BEGINNING OF AN ARTISTIC JOURNEY

What is your earliest memory of drawing?

I can remember doodling and drawing robots in Korea when I was six-years-old. My twelve-year-old sister, who was really my caretaker, noticed what I was drawing in school even though there was no art course. I used to copy comics and television characters. There were a lot of Japanese cartoons then and toys. My older brother even managed to find me some real robots. However, it wasn't until I got to America that I received some proper art materials like a full watercolor set and full big drawing pad. My adoptive mother saw what I was doing as we sat in the living room, and she would say, "Man, that looks just like Donald Duck." I would say, "What's Donald Duck?" I copied anything around me, mostly cartoons like any other kid. I just looked and basically copied. In Hawaii, I remember Tarzan books. There were Tarzan stories in magazines with pictures on the side, like

picturebooks. They were graphic and stylized. I liked the realistic look of them. I think that style carried over to what I do now.

Were you aware of particular issues worked out by drawing?

The passing away of my parents was terrible. I didn't understand why I was adopted or how I got to this strange country. I didn't realize it then but I understand now that drawing eased me out of my confusion and frustration. Everything else went away when I drew. When I didn't draw, every question I imagined came to me. When I drew, I concentrated on something in front of me and it was like meditation. Luckily I had a skill that I could use as a positive outlet. Plus, I enjoyed it, and my mother and teachers told me that I was good at it. I never thought I would make a career out of it. I wanted to be a policeman or fireman. I am grateful that I found drawing. I could have gotten angry at my brother and sisters for letting me get adopted or at the unfairness of the death of my parents. My life could have gone in a very negative direction. Also, I am grateful that I had the passion and motivation to keep drawing, especially as a teenager.

How did you make a professional decision to choose painting as a life's work?

After I was in Hawaii a year and a half, we moved to Portland, Oregon and stayed there. I was in a Talented and Gifted (TAG) kids program sponsored by the city in elementary and middle school. When I was in fifth grade, I entered a contest and won a scholarship for an art school. Through middle school and high school I took college courses at Portland Northwest College of Arts. I took drawing and painting once a week for three hours for seven years. I took mostly portraiture. I think you can see from my books that I love doing faces and the faces of different ethnic groups. I remember the first day I walked into my painting class, I hated it. I wanted to do something comfortable like drawing with pencil. Oil painting was slippery and smelly. I had to memorize the values of the colors. My mother pushed me to continue by saying, "You know these courses are really expensive. If you had to pay for them, they would be costly. You got a scholarship. You should be thankful." But I was a kid, and I wanted to go out with the other kids. Now, of course, I am grateful she forced me to stick with the program.

My art teacher my senior year in high school

told me, "I have taught you for three years now. All you have to do is make ten paintings and you'll get an A." He sectioned off the classroom and made a little studio for me. He gave me new paints and paintbrushes, which I later learned he had bought with his own money.

Three months before I graduated, I had made ten paintings. He took them home secretly, made slides out of them, and sent them to art colleges. I got a full scholarship to Pratt Institute. At that time I was so naive I didn't even know Brooklyn was in New York City. I didn't even know I was going until I got the letter in the mail. In fact, I hadn't known what I was going to do with myself. I thought I might go to a community college and then a four-year-college to follow a career in business. I am very grateful that an adult saw the potential in me, took the time, and wanted me to do bigger and better things.

By my second year at Pratt I decided I was done with painting. I felt I had learned as much as I could and I knew I had to make some money so I went into commercial art. The school administration had warned us that if we went into fine art, they couldn't guarantee us jobs. By my junior year, I was disappointed because all my courses were about packaging products and making money for corporations. When I got to my senior year, I did the bravest thing. The semester before I graduated I went to the dean and told him that I wanted to change my major but I wanted to graduate on time. At first, he said that it wouldn't be possible. After I insisted that I could substitute particular commercial courses for illustration courses, he asked to see my portfolio. He made an exception for me so that it worked out.

Then I saw a flyer announcing a Ted Lewin lecture. After his talk, I went up to him and told him he looked really familiar. We realized that we went to the local gym at the same time and had even spotted each other. Anyway, he looked at my portfolio and asked which major I was studying. He told me that I wasn't very good at commercial art but that I could be a terrific illustrator of children's books because I do a lot of figures and paint in watercolors the way he does. He invited me to his house to see some of his children's books. I went and I thought, "This is what I have been looking for." I have always been telling stories with pictures. I just never thought of putting them into a book. I began to illustrate, and none of my books is out of print.

CHANGES IN PROCESS WITH ADULTHOOD

Are you still as happy with painting as you were as a child and teen?

I am still happy with painting. However, the nature and level of my paintings have changed. As a child, I drew and painted any time of the day. When I did not want to paint, I stopped. Now I have deadlines and appearances at conferences, schools, public libraries, and bookstores. I must be more disciplined.

When I paint ten hours or more a day, every day can become a job. I try my best to give each book its own unique look. Each story is unique so I take chances by varying my lighting which is very important to my paintings. I want to create the most believable atmosphere in daylight, bright sunlight, candlelight, lantern light, artificial light, or moonlight.

There are times I get very discouraged when I have to think about the business end of children's books such as sales, advance money, and deadlines. These aspects have nothing to do with the quality of the paintings or the message of the story. Once I remember why I started to make children's books and who my audience is, the love of storytelling through my artwork makes everything worthwhile.

What do you do when you need to draw a person or place unfamiliar to you?

I spend a lot of time in pre-production which is a great deal of work, especially if I go to actual locations. For **Molly Bannaky**, which takes place in Maryland, I went to St. Mary's, a living museum in Maryland that demonstrates the life of indentured servants, and did research there. I read, took 60 rolls of film, asked the actors questions, and even bought reproductions of costumes, though most of the time I handmake my costumes. Still questions come up. In the book I drew a Holstein cow and a librarian asked if there were Holstein cows in America in 1680. I had taken a picture of the cows at St. Mary's and her question had me wondering if the museum had just brought in any kind of cow from a local farm or if the original breed of cows had changed. On the Internet I found the Holstein Cow Association of America and I called them up. Their historian called me back to say that the first Holstein cows in America were brought over by the Dutch to New York in 1629. I called my publishers and they called the librarian. This kind of effort is important to me because I want to be historically accurate. These books are

going to be used throughout the country by teachers to teach children.

Most of the time I try to go to the location where the story takes place. In 1994 I had the opportunity to be reunited with my brothers and sisters in Korea. I hadn't seen them in 16 years and at the same time I knew I was doing **Peacebound Trains** which takes place during the Korean War. People got on trains to travel from Seoul to Pusan in the south. There is an actual museum in Seoul about the war showing military equipment and native costumes from the 1950s so I was able to take photos of authentic props for the story.

If I can't go to the actual location, New York City is always useful. The models that I used for **The Last Dragon**, my second book, are from the Cantonese community in Chinatown. Then I wasn't married to Rosanna, who is Chinese, and I had no Chinese friends. I went to the Community Center in Chinatown. I talked to the director and asked him if anyone would like to be in a book. Many Chinese people were sitting playing *mahjong* and cards and he was able to talk to them. They couldn't come to my studio so I had to move boxes and boxes to clear a storeroom in the Center and set up lights. It took hours to put people in poses, get them to act in a certain way, and take photos. Most of them didn't speak much English. Anyway, that's how authentic I try to be.

For **Silence in the Mountains** I couldn't go to Lebanon so I went to the library and bookstores gathering information. To get authentic faces I went to Arab stores on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. My wife and I walked into a store and my wife noticed the grandfather with the great moustache right away. We asked where they were from and it turned out they were from Lebanon, from the countryside outside of Beirut where the story takes place. They agreed to be in the book. I took all my equipment, lights, cameras, tons of film. I went inside their kitchen after the store was closed and became director, photographer, costume designer, and set designer to get the appropriate storyboards. I have to show models how to act out the scenes. Because the people are not professional, I have to do a lot of coaching. Luckily my wife comes with me and she is a great help. In fact, I take photos of people's faces but sometimes use my wife's body. She has helped make a grandmother, grandfather, and even a tree.

In **So Far From the Sea**, I modeled for the character of the dad while my wife took photographs. The characters of the mother and two chil-

dren are from professional models. When I read the story, I had the idea of putting the past scenes in black and white and the present scenes in color. I took the sketches to the editors and art directors, and they were happy with the idea of the past explained in flashbacks.

Usually I never call the authors whose stories I am illustrating, but this time I made an exception and talked with Eve Bunting, a lovely woman. She had gone to the sites and had pictures of the internment camps which she generously shared with me. As a reference, I also used a book called **Manzanar**. Interestingly, the library said the book was out of print but when I left the library I met a street vendor who had that very book. I felt fated to be the artist for this “controversial” story.

Readers tell me that the most poignant scene in **So Far From the Sea** is the one in which the child, who grows up to be the dad, puts on his cub scout uniform. His father tells him to show the soldiers that he is American so he won't be taken to the internment camp. I tried to give that particular scene an American context to emphasize the family's dilemma. In that scene I painted American furniture and even an American flag. I went so far as to call the Boy Scouts for the type of salute the boy should give. Of course, the family is taken away but I think it is important for illustrators to highlight messages in the story and to portray the story behind the story. In this way, the illustrations become an ideal combination with the author's text.

When I look back at my books, I am amazed at how much I have learned over the years. I keep files and files of photos. I had to learn photography hands on. I also learned how to do research, how to dress the models, how to approach people to be in books, and of course the painting.

When you paint every day, what kinds of conditions get you in the mood to paint?

I have to get some kind of motivation going. For example, sometimes I don't want to paint a car but I have to paint it because it works with the story. So I think of ways to enhance the car through composition, light, and shadow until it becomes interesting. Also, I think of a higher calling for the paintings. I remember that these books are going to be seen by lots and lots of kids. I would like them to see something positive. I go into schools to do programs and I have groups of students all day long. They might hear one word or see something in my slides or paintings that could make them think, “If that guy can make something out of his life, I can

too.” When I think of changing a life, the motivation for me to paint becomes really powerful.

The preparation that I mentioned before is also very important. The more prepared I am, the better and easier the painting. That's why I only do about two books per year. The lengthy, focused pre-production makes quality paintings later.

I have to have serenity to let the creativity flow through my mind. I cannot be interrupted while I am painting. My wife takes care of survival kinds of necessities. She is my agent and handles the telephone, UPS, schedules, etc. She says that she doesn't mind but I know she works hard to free me to paint. She guarantees this quiet for me when I am in my studio.

I also drink hot water with honey and lemon almost constantly and I try to get started as early as possible in the morning after breakfast. When I get frustrated, I listen to soothing music.

I am also gaining more control over what I paint by becoming an author. Since I am the author, I can change the words at any moment and work back and forth across words and paintings. I am writing and illustrating a book about my adoption that will probably come out in the next three years.

You have painted Chinese, Koreans, African Americans, Arabs, and Caucasians. Do you think of yourself as a Korean American artist, an American artist, or an international artist?

I consider myself a multicultural artist. I don't have a preference for any ethnic group.

I have an interest in Asian populations because of my Korean heritage and my wife's Chinese heritage. Because I have an interest, however, it does not mean that I am limited to those particular groups. My adoptive mother is Irish and my adoptive father is Dutch/Indonesian. I have assimilated into American culture by growing up in Hawaii and in a mixed white and African American community in Portland, Oregon. I have lived in New York City since I was 18 years old. These living experiences have given me the opportunity to appreciate different cultures and the respect for various ethnic groups.

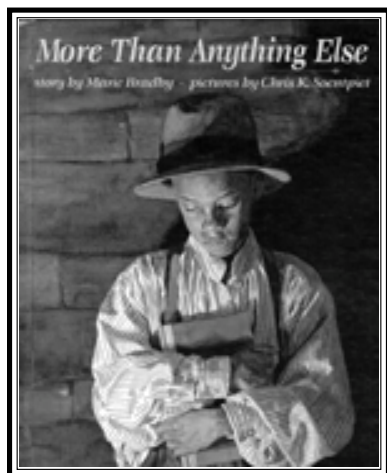
Then how do you feel about children's literature specialists who feel that for a story to be authentic the author and illustrator must come from that particular ethnic group?

I have two thoughts on that. First, when I

started painting, I would have agreed. Publishers kept sending me Asian stories but I knew that I was no authority on every Asian culture. They seemed to feel that even if there were mistakes in the illustrations, it was okay because I was Asian. Now that I have done children's books, with experience, I have learned to do even more research and to be even more sensitive than someone who comes from a particular ethnic group.

Also, the time period and the location of a book could be unfamiliar to someone who is from the ethnic group in the story. In **More Than Anything Else** the time period is 1865 and the location is West Virginia. An African American illustrator from an urban area in 1995 would have to do the same research I would. Moreover, we all have emotions.

More Than Anything Else is a universal story of overcoming obstacles despite societal limitations and physical pain. I understand wanting to do something badly. I understand how reading can change a life.



Jacket illustration from **More Than Anything Else** by Marie Bradby. Pictures by Chris K. Soentpiet. Copyright ©1995. Reprinted with permission from Orchard Books.

For **Something Beautiful** I lived in Brooklyn next door to housing projects and I visited the little girl who is on the cover. I have experiences with poverty as a child. I know what it is to be a second class citizen. We all have struggles that unite us as humans and many human experiences are universal. What counts is whether the portrayal is accurate not who did the portrayal. I paint faces

that are warm, and I try hard to create paintings that are sensitive to both the story and the culture. I think that is what makes a good multicultural artist and hopefully a good person.

NEGOTIATING BETWEEN CULTURES

Clearly, the understanding of ethnic and personal identity is a complex issue to work through for children. Such understanding becomes even more complex for children who move between two or more cultures.

I would like to thank Laurence Yep and Chris Soentpiet for sharing their stories about their journey as bicultural children toward “solving the puzzle” of their own identity. By using their craft in writing and illustrating, we are blessed with a wealth of multicultural literature that we can share with our children in the classroom.

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