

Interview with Mary J. Wong

Heidi Bacon

For this issue of *WOW Stories*, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing art collector and retired teacher-librarian, Mary J. Wong. Mary's Chinese name, which is different from her English name, means "Jade." When translated, her full Chinese name means "beautiful precious jade," an apt metaphor for Mary's life, work, and generosity of spirit. Mary's passions include literature, collecting, cooking, and entertaining. She has hosted events for visiting authors for over 25 years and has entertained 150 authors at her Phoenix home, a featured stop on the 2017 American Association of School Librarians conference tour, "Art and Architecture in the American Southwest." Although she describes herself as shy, Mary makes friends easily and is skilled at building relationships, maintaining an impressive global network of friends, authors, illustrators, and professional contacts.

A three-time graduate of the University of Arizona, Mary double-majored in elementary and special education. She holds two master's degrees, one in special education and another in library science, where she completed an internship at the Phoenix Public Library. Her internship was influential in her professional trajectory. As a teacher, Mary loved teaching special education, but sought to expand her repertoire and earned a teaching endorsement in library science. After completing her coursework, Mary obtained a position as a school librarian. Despite her coursework and teaching experience, she still felt unprepared and enrolled in the Library Science master's program at the University of Arizona. She also made a point of joining professional organizations such as the American Library Association, the American Association of School Librarians, the International Board of Books for Young People, and several literacy organizations. Mary remains active in professional organizations and has taken on a variety of leadership positions. She has been instrumental in bringing authors to the American Kidney Association's annual children's literature luncheon, currently coordinates the Children's Author-Illustrator Network and chairs the Grand Canyon Reader Award.

Mary's service evidences her desire for equity and tolerance. Honored by the Maricopa YWCA in 2004, she was one of 11 women whose lives and accomplishments embodied the fight against racism by embracing diversity and empowering women and families (Midey, 2004). When I asked if she viewed herself as an activist, Mary replied that it is important for people to "practice what they preach." As such, Mary considers herself an activist and advocate for reading, literacy, and library programs.

I inquired about Mary's experiences, wondering how her personal life and professional background intersected and coalesced. Her answers drew on her early experiences. Mary explained that as the oldest of eight children born to immigrant parents, her childhood was difficult. Her family was the first non-white family to move into their post-World War II model home community in Flagstaff, Arizona. Initially mistaken for Japanese, Mary and her siblings were not allowed into the homes of their playmates. She spoke no English when she entered school and often felt confused. Looking back, she remembers being quiet to avoid making mistakes and risking the ridicule of her classmates.

In retrospect, Mary understands that she had little frame of reference for the lessons she was learning. She recalls that homonyms were particularly challenging and shared an anecdote where she confused *flour* with *flower*. Mary's enthusiasm for making things led her to ask her

teacher for paste to take home for her various projects. Her teacher finally told her how to make paste from flour and water. Mary spent months attempting to make paste from water, clover, daisies, and roses, an experience she finds humorous today, but one that exacerbated her feeling of being awkward and different.

Although her early childhood was difficult due to societal intolerance toward non-white cultures, Mary did well academically in junior and senior high school. She still struggled with some courses and academic texts and often felt as though she did not fit in. She suspected her teachers had little understanding or knowledge of Chinese culture and values. Mary perceived that her teachers did not recognize her intelligence because, unlike her classmates, she did not speak up or participate in class discussions. Her mother supported her and urged her to persevere. She told her to be a role model, to excel academically, and to rise above discrimination, lessons Mary took to heart and carried forward.

Given the mission of Worlds of Words, I asked how people's perspectives can be expanded through global children's and adolescents' literature. Mary answered that society needs to be tolerant and inclusive of all races and nationalities, and she articulated the critical need for children to read stories by authors and illustrators of color. Several years ago, Mary served on the United States Board of Books for Young People award committee, and found the experience incredibly valuable, as it enabled her to add international literature to her school library's collection. She was pleased to see *Noodle Pie* (Starke, 2010) selected by the committee in 2011, as she could relate to the protagonist since Chinese and Vietnamese cultures share many similarities.

Mary described meeting Kathy Short as "kismet." She cannot call to mind exactly when or how they met, but Mary remembers attending Kathy's workshop with author and illustrator Yuyi Morales and another with author Nancy Farmer. In Mary's words, "I learned a lot through her [Kathy's] workshops." Mary invited Kathy to sit on Governor Janet Napolitano's First and Fourth Grade Book program. The program provided a new book for every first and fourth grade student in Arizona and gave out approximately 100,000 books each year. Mary and Kathy served with first and fourth-grade teachers from across the state until Governor Napolitano left to join the Obama administration. In turn, Kathy asked Mary to serve on the Tucson Festival of Books committee to help plan the program for children and teens, which delighted Mary.

I asked about Mary's views on librarians and her advice for teachers who work with librarians and those who do not have access to a school librarian. She explained that she always viewed herself as a teacher-librarian and a librarian-teacher. In this dual role, Mary regarded herself as a resource for students, parents, teachers, and other school librarians, providing information about programs, teaching ideas, and book selections. And she thinks this is true of all school librarians. Mary defines an effective librarian as a "resourceful person who can think outside the box." She offered the following advice for teachers:

- Teachers who have access to a school librarian should work with them to the "nth" degree;
- Those who do not have access to a librarian should strongly advocate for hiring a school librarian;
- Partner with local bookstores, especially independent bookstores, for information on

what is new in children's literature;

- Sign-up for electronic newsletters, many are free or charge a small subscription fee (Mary subscribes to *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist Online*, *Library Journal*, and *Hornbook*)
- Subscribe to *School Library Journal* (print edition); and
- Follow blogs about children's and teen's books, such as <http://www.underdown.org> and <https://cynthialeitichsmith.com>.

Mary stressed the importance of joining and taking an active role in professional organizations and learning to network with colleagues and professionals across the disciplines. She also highlighted the need for creativity and stressed the willingness for teachers to “always try something new at least once.”

In four decades of service, Mary exemplifies what it means to be both a resource and resourceful. In a search of the *Arizona Republic* archives, I realized that Mary has been a knowledgeable and influential community resource for children's literature across a variety of featured topics from letting books and babies grow up together to pioneer women and Mexican culture. Mary further exemplifies resourcefulness in how she cultivates relationships and networks. When asked about her longitudinal relationship with the newspaper, one that many organizations would envy, Mary's enthusiasm and dedication were evident, as she spoke of sending press releases for all library events and programs to her district office, newspapers, and local television stations throughout metropolitan Phoenix.

Connie Midey captured Mary's tenacity in the title of her 2004 feature article in the *Arizona Republic* titled “1 Librarian Who's Tough to Catalog” where Mary weighed in on the importance of libraries and librarians. She shared how she and her sisters had library cards and checked out the Nancy Drew and Dana Girls mystery series along with classics such as *Heidi*, *Black Beauty*, and the *Swiss Family Robinson* and her pleasure at finding fiction that enabled adolescents to ‘learn about their relationships with family and friends’ (Midey, p. E1). Mary stated her belief in helping students make a personal connection to the books they checked out and emphasized that students need to see the authors of the books they read as real people. Most importantly, Midey quoted Mary as saying “I want students to know they all have stories to be told” (p. E2), a driving force for Mary's passion, activism, and advocacy.

Additionally, with today's global news available instantaneously, Mary believes it imperative that children and adolescents have an understanding of, and insight into, the world in which they live. She underscores the vital role of literature to reflect the world that children see in their schools and communities and what they see globally in the news. Mary laments constraints imposed on libraries by the lack of funding to develop their collections.

Her comment on funding led me to ask Mary about fitting grant writing into her schedule. Mary pointed to her internship at the Phoenix Library during her Master of Library Science program as the catalyst. During her internship, she developed summer programs to encourage children to use the library. Her goal was to make the library a fun, exciting hub for reading, research, and exploration. Mary loved setting up bulletin boards and displays. She wanted kids, parents, and teachers to always wonder what they would find new and interesting at the library. Hence Mary's quest to seek funding for projects and programs grew out of her enthusiasm to engage new ideas and be creative in developing programs for people of all ages.

Mary explained that, around the same time, a group of Phoenix businesses got together to form the Teacher Venture Arizona Project, which awarded mini-grants up to \$500 for projects. Over the years, Mary received nine mini-grants, one of which was used to fund her story quilt project inspired by the story cloths of Hmong refugees (Cobb, 1993). Using fabric markers, students drew 216 stories based on their reading of international literature. Each grade produced a 6 x 6 quilt comprised of 36 squares. The quilts were displayed in the Desert Cove School library. Mary mentioned she wrote these mini-grants on her own to fund library projects, author visits, and school and community events. She notes that local and national grants for teachers, libraries, and schools are still available, but cautions that “while grants are available and out there, a teacher, school, or library should never have to pay to apply for a grant.”

As Mary referred to author visits, I asked her to elaborate on how one might go about bringing authors and illustrators to their classrooms and schools. According to Mary, preparation is vital for a successful author visit. To start, she involved the school’s Parent Teacher Organization to help raise funds. Mary ordered books in advance and added them to the collection. She gave book talks to generate enthusiasm, prepared bulletin boards, and notified her network, including other schools in the district. Mary also reached out to businesses to request financial or in-kind support, such as providing lunch for the author, and she asked parents to check with their employers to contribute matching funds, all of which are excellent methods for raising funds and generating goodwill in the community. Moreover, successful author visits accommodate students comfortably. Mary recommends the following: all must be able to see and hear the author; groups must be similar in age (e.g., K-2, 3-4, 5-6); and teachers should be knowledgeable about the author’s books, model appropriate audience behavior, and sit with their classes.

Mary then gave two examples of author visits that energized her school. In the first story, unbeknownst to her, a student was so inspired by the visiting author that she submitted a story to a nationally known children’s magazine. The student’s story was published, and the entire school community was proud and celebrated her success. Mary referred to the second story as “hysterical,” one of her “most interesting” author visits—a Friday night sleepover in the library. The children ate an early dinner at home and returned to school with their sleeping bags. Two authors and a storyteller presented to the children. Boys, volunteer dads, and teachers slept in the hallway, while girls, volunteer moms, and teachers slept in the library. A taped Reveille bugle call woke everyone the next morning. For Mary, these cherished stories provide proof that author visits are impactful and worth the time and expense. Mary remains involved with schools, arranging author visits across the greater Phoenix area and promoting reading.

Those who visit Mary’s home comment on her graciousness and her “museum quality” curated collections. The idea of collecting original art from children’s literature occurred to Mary when Jack Gantos gave her an illustration by Nicole Rubel from his first Rotten Ralph book. Mary thought it would be fun to collect original art, but had no idea how to go about getting started. In the beginning, she purchased a few illustrations from galleries, others from illustrators, and some through auctions and fund raisers. Now, she buys from the illustrators. Mary either contacts them directly or asks upon meeting them at conferences and book festivals. She acquired the art from author and illustrator David McPhail’s (2014) entire book of *Andrew Draws*, and her most recent acquisitions include Wilson Ong’s “N is for Nutcracker” from Sonia Rodriguez and Kurt Browning’s (2011) *T is for Tutu: A Ballet Alphabet* and two preliminary sketches for new picture books illustrated by Carolyn Conahan and Laura Kvasnosky.

Mary's autographed picturebook and novel collection began taking shape with her first author visit. The collection continued to grow as she attended state and national library conferences and state and national book festivals. Her earlier books were not first edition books, but Mary shifted her focus to signed first printings. In addition to illustrations and books, Mary has an autograph "doodle/wall" in her home. She initially got the idea from professor of children's literature and professional storyteller, Colleen Sally, who is since deceased. When Mary visited Colleen's New Orleans French Quarter home during American Library Association conferences, Colleen had several rooms with hundreds of doodles and autographs from children's book authors and illustrators. Mary currently has 85 doodles with signatures and looks forward to adding more. She would dearly like to see more schools and libraries have author walls.

Mary also likes to collect objects from other cultures and recently donated her collection of musical instruments from around the world and her collection of Hmong story cloths and Vietnamese embroidery to Worlds of Words, which featured the story cloth collection in "Stitching Stories: New Exhibit Featuring Hmong Story Cloths" (Geffre, 2018). To date, she has donated 60 framed illustrations and approximately 2600 autographed picture books and novels to Worlds of Words. Mary has 170 illustrations and another 3500 autographed books of which 90% are first printings in her home which will also be donated to Worlds of Words.

In closing, Mary's exemplary life of service was born of her experiences and desire for equity and tolerance. She views stories as a critical means to foster cultural and global understandings through reading and literature. For Mary, children's literature and her connection to Worlds of Words are the best and most seamless way to promote and effect empathy, equity, and diversity, and this is made evident in every facet of her life's work. And so, we offer Mary our thanks and gratitude for her gracious and generous spirit, her willingness to share her passions and experiences, and the enduring legacy of her gifts.

References

- Cobb, C. (1993, May 30). Drawing out their stories. *Arizona Republic*, p. KIDS.
- Geffre, D. (2018, January 18). Stitching stories: New exhibit in featuring Hmong story cloths [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://wowlit.org/blog/2018/01/18/stitching-stories-hmong>
- Hanging out with Frank Lloyd Wright, Mary Wong, and Jack Gantos #AASL17 (2017, November 13). *School Library Journal*. Retrieved: <https://www.slj.com/?detailStory=hanging-frank-lloyd-wright-mary-wong-jack-gantos-aasl17>
- McPhail, D. (2014). *Andrew draws*. New York: Holiday House.
- Midey, C. (2004, February 18). 1 librarian who's tough to catalog. *Arizona Republic*, pp. E1, E2.
- Rodriguez, S., & Browning, K. (2011). *T is for tutu: A ballet alphabet*. Ann Arbor, MI: Sleeping Bear Press.
- Starke, R. (2010). *Noodle pie*. La Joya, CA: Kane/Miller.

Heidi Bacon is an Assistant Professor of Language, Literacies, and Culture at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.