

ISSN 2577-0527



WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES
VOLUME II, ISSUE I

Fall 2009
Open Theme

Worlds
of WORDS 



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wowlit.org

WOW Review: Volume II, Issue 1
Fall 2009
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Introduction and Editor's Note

The reviews submitted for this issue indicate that readers are finding quite a variety of international books that appeal to their interests and needs. Just as international literature can span across continents and cultures, so it is found across genre and unique literary forms. The current issue of WOW Review, without specific planning on the part of the editorial committee, reflects a diversity of genre for readers of all ages.

Hannah's Winter, while meeting the criteria for realistic fiction, dips into the past and the supernatural. The current realities of poverty and disability frame the realistic fiction story in *Waiting for Normal*. Of course, realistic fiction for younger readers is easily identified as *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet* creates yet another event in the life of this familiar character. This issue includes, as well, realistic fiction in the form of a graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, and offers readers an invitation to explore this extremely popular literary form through a story of the challenges young people face when they are culturally diverse as well as recently immigrated to the United States.

Contemporary fantasy in *Chester* and *Bobbie Dazzler* point to the universal delight of personified animals whose humorous adventures make us laugh as well as reveal insights into daily life. Fantasy, for those who are intrigued with the futuristic dystopian society, lies waiting in *The Declaration*. Historical fiction invites readers on journeys across time and place. Secret Keeper takes readers to India in the 1970's while *Tamar: A Novel of Espionage, Passion, and Betrayal* paints yet another picture of Nazi occupation during WWII, this time in Holland. Both biographical and informational, *Three Cups of Tea* tells the story of one man's efforts to build schools in Pakistan—an ongoing endeavor.

As you read these reviews, you will hopefully find many invitations to explore these diverse genres and realize that each offers unique ways to connect readers to the global community. Hopefully you will also be reminded of books from each genre that you have read and would like to share with readers of WOW Review. Our next issue will focus on the theme of "Hope Amidst Conflict." You can find submission guidelines on this site as well as resources for identifying cultural authenticity. We look forward to your submissions, due November 15, as we hope to explore this theme from a variety of perspectives and genre. If you have further questions about submissions or wish to notify us in advance of a particular title you are planning to submit, please Janelle Mathis.

Janelle B. Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

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American Born Chinese

Written by Gene Luen Yang

First Second Books, 2006, 233 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-59643-152-2

This award-winning graphic novel about Chinese and Chinese-Americans focuses on the difficulties of being part of a culture that is often misunderstood or stereotyped. The novel follows the stories of three seemingly unconnected characters: the Chinese Monkey King, one of the most beloved characters in Chinese folk stories Jin Wang, a young Chinese-American boy whose family moves from Chinatown in San Francisco to a mid-western town where he is an anomaly and Danny, a nondescript teenager who has to endure the yearly visit of his inappropriate Chinese cousin, Chin-Kee. Each of the three stories deals with the difficulty of being an “outsider.”

The Monkey King desperately wants to become a member of the immortal deities, but when he tries to crash their heavenly dinner party they reject him because he is, well, a monkey. Even after he masters the twelve disciplines of kung-fu, which include developing powers of flying on clouds, changing size, and becoming invulnerable to heat or cold, he is reminded that, in the end, he is still just a monkey.

Jin Wang is the second Asian-American child in his new school the other, Suzy Nakamura, is Japanese-American. Of course the kids at school don’t make that distinction and think they are betrothed to each other, so, as Jin Wang says, “We avoided each other as much as possible.” When Wei-Chen arrives from Taiwan, Jin immediately tries to distance himself from him as well, but their shared experiences finally bring them together as best friends.

Danny seems to be a popular kid at his school, but when his cousin Chin-Kee arrives from China for his yearly visit, Danny must bring him to school with him. Later, we learn that Chin-Kee’s totally exaggerated “Chinese” behavior has embarrassed Danny to the point that he has already been forced to change schools three times within one year.

All three characters represent the experiences of Chinese-Americans living in the American culture where they are a small minority. Their experiences also speak to kids who feel they don’t belong, whether they are attending a new school or putting up with embarrassing family members, or kids who wish they could be someone else — someone taller, or shorter, or smarter, or more handsome. At the end of the novel, the three stories converge in a surprising conclusion — one that reminds us to accept ourselves as we are, rather than trying to change our basic nature to fit in.

American Born Chinese is laugh out loud funny at times. The teachers in Jin Wang’s new school quickly spread their own stereotypes about Chinese people and culture when they mangle Chinese-American students’ names and claim they all came directly from China. Chin-Kee (say his name really fast) is a completely over-the-top representation of all the negative stereotypes about Chinese people, from his fractured accent to his choice of food to his knowing all the answers in his cousin’s Danny’s classes. As a graphic novel, the text is written in a way that adolescents will appreciate, with

kids speaking the way they typically would with each other the Monkey King in particular is something of a punk who challenges authority with the kind of violence found in comic books.

Gene Yuen Yang was born in Alameda, California, the son of Chinese immigrants. As a child, he loved hearing his mother's stories about the Monkey King, to whom he refers as "the Asian Mickey Mouse." Since the Monkey King isn't part of American culture, he gradually gave up his fascination until he found a copy of Arthur Waley's translation of *Journey to the West*, which re-introduced him to the Monkey King. For more information about Yang and the Monkey King, visit Yang's Web site.

The winner of the 2007 Michael Printz Award and a National Book Award Finalist in 2006, *American Born Chinese* could be used very effectively in a classroom to discuss the stereotypes those of us who are members of a Western culture have of Chinese people in particular and Asian people in general, whether they are American or not. While some of the stereotyping in the book might be considered offensive, it successfully highlights the experiences of Chinese-Americans. Derek Kirk Kim, who has collaborated with Yang, is quoted on the back jacket as saying, "As an Asian-American, *American Born Chinese* is the book I've been waiting for all my life." I'll bet he's not the only one.

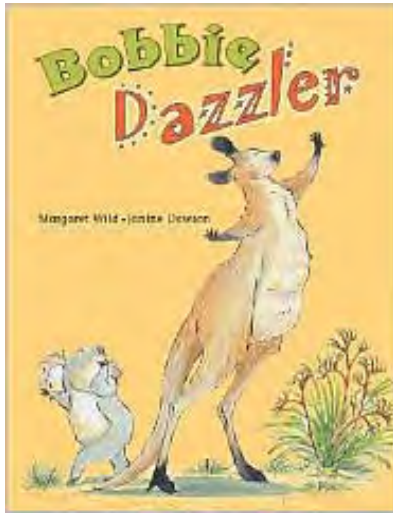
American Born Chinese can be read alongside two other autobiographies that illuminate the experiences of Chinese-Americans and Chinese in developing a sense of self. *The Lost Garden* (1996) is Lawrence Yep's autobiography of growing up as a Chinese-American boy who didn't fit in with either culture, and in *Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter* (1999), author Adeline Yin Mah shares the heartbreaking story of her treatment at the hands of her stepmother in Shanghai.

Ann Parker, University of Arizona, Tucson, A

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Bobbie Dazzler

Written by Margaret Wild
Illustrated by Janine Dawson
Kane/Miller, 2007
ISBN: 978-1-93360-546-3

Bobbie is a wallaby with extraordinary athletic ability. She can jump, bounce, skip, hop on either leg, balance, twirl, AND stand on her head. But she cannot do the splits. Her friends Wombat, Possum, and Koala say, “Never mind,” however, it bothers Bobbie a great deal. Bobbie tries time and time again, displaying all her gymnastic talents, ending each session with yet another attempt at doing the splits. Her friends stand by, participate when they can and, most importantly, support their

friend. Bobbie’s determination and perseverance pay off in the end as she is at long last successful, her friends standing in awe of her “dazzling” performance. In a last show of support, they roll Bobbie over when she finds herself stuck in the splits position, unable to move. Of course, now that they see it really is possible, Koala, Wombat, and Possum practice, practice, practice until they, too, can do the splits.

Margaret Wild has chosen a simple text to portray this personal quest of Bobbie’s, making this book accessible to young readers. This is in sharp contrast to the complexity of a child setting a goal for themselves and pursuing that goal energetically. A wallaby doing the splits is not a walk in the park. Rather it represents a fairly lofty goal as acknowledged by Wombat, Possum, and Koala in their repeated responses of “Never mind.” While this might be intended to comfort Bobbie, it may not be encouraging. The only voice saying “Keep trying” is Bobbie’s herself. Yet, in the end, once they all see the goal as attainable, the three friends also pursue that goal. Readers wonder how Bobbie will challenge herself next. Dawson’s illustrations mirror the text through her use of white space and her characterization of the four friends, whose expressions show concern, happiness, and comfort.

This story obviously comes from the land of marsupials, but wallabies attempting to do the splits are not commonly observed in reality. Even so, these personified animal characters reflect something we see in all children as they learn to walk and talk, read and write. They try and try again until they “own” the movement or the spelling or the meaning. Family and friends join in the efforts and learning becomes a collaborative process — a joyful celebration for all. Other books that speak to a developing sense of identity might be used with *Bobbie Dazzler*, such as *Leon, the Chameleon* (Melanie Watt, 2001) or *Scaredy Squirrel* (Melanie Watt, 2008). Also, other Australian personified animal families might be compared as found in Mem Fox’s *Koala Lou* (1989) or *Possum Magic* (1990).

Margaret Wild is a prolific writer and her books have been published in many different countries. She moved from South Africa to Australia in 1972 and is currently living in Sidney. Her books have received accolades both in the form of numerous awards and high praise in reviews. Her career began as a journalist, then children’s book editor, but her days always began in a caf  and a half hour of writing. Janine Dawson worked in animation for 25 years before moving into illustration. She

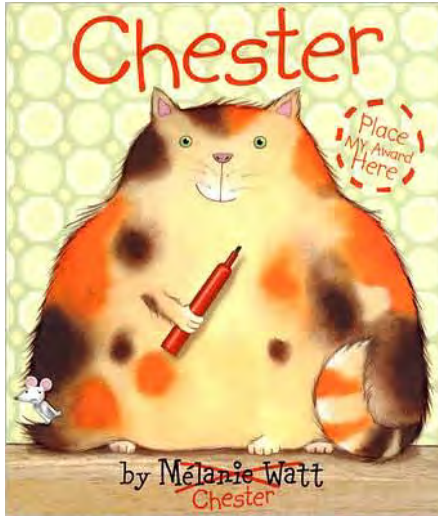
remembers clicking with Dr. Seuss on her first encounter. Dawson states, “Simple things and humor appeal to me” and she especially likes to illustrate how children, dogs, and cats perceive the world around them.

Jean Schroeder, Tucson Unified School District, Tucson, A

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Chester

Written by Melanie Watt
Kids Can Press, 2007
ISBN: 978-1-55453-140-0

Cats are cats the world over. Some keep out of sight. Some are playful, others more sedentary. Still others have the simple expectation of being treated like royalty, seeing themselves as the only one who is worthy of attention. Such is the principle by which Chester lives in Melanie Watt's book. The text — literally from cover to cover — records the tussle between the author and author (that would be Chester) throughout the story. Melanie begins a story about a mouse in the country and Chester, armed

with a red marker, ends the story on the first page. He then proceeds with his own story making changes in illustration and text. Melanie answers back, but Chester is ever ready with marker in paw as he revises, edits, and begins anew until the squabble becomes “personal.”

Cultures that keep dogs and cats as pets and view their pets as family members can easily relate to the relationship that Watt has given her readers. It seems quite apparent that the roots of this story stem from her personal experiences with cats and the back flap confirms that Chester is a constant in her life. She artfully takes the daily encounters and small moments of everyday living to create a tale that comes together in a humorous story. Readers recognize antics that mirror their own experiences with cats or perhaps with other personalities they know. This might account for the wide appeal of this story. Young students seem to be particularly amused by the idea of making the struggle for power personal as they watch the level of the tiff escalate throughout the story. Children recognize and laugh at themselves as most have the experience of needling a significant adult in their lives to the point of exasperation. In this case, the ‘child’ (Chester) comes out on top, which receives the total approval of young readers.

After hearing the story, students bombarded the school librarian with requests for *Chester*. They were absolutely thrilled to find *Chester's Back* (Watt, 2008) as well. This continuing saga of defiance and stubbornness reminded me of an encounter with a child registering at a new school. His mother read him the school's code of honor, telling him he had to be good all year. He replied, “You have to be bad sometime.” Melanie Watt's portrayal of naughty Chester provides understated appreciation and love for this conniving cat. Along with the Chester stories, the universal appeal of cats might be shown by pairing this book with *My Cat Copies Me* (Yoon Kwon, 2007) and *A Very Smart Cat/Una gata muy inteligente* (Mario Picayo, 2008).

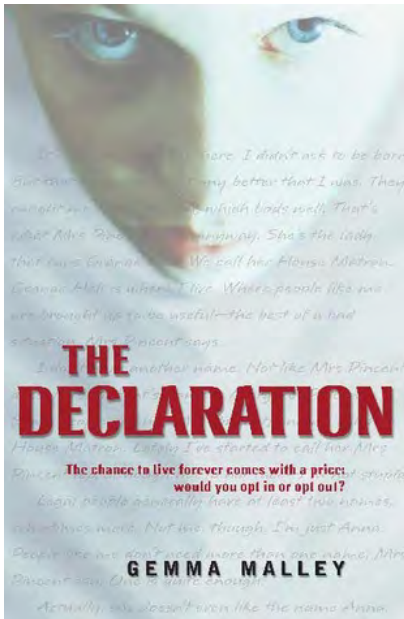
Melanie Watt resides in Montreal, Quebec. Her career began in 1999 with an assignment in her graphic design program for which she created a book called *Leon the Chameleon* (2001). Her book *Scaredy Squirrel* (2006) has received several awards including the Ruth Sylvia Schwartz Children's Book Award and the Amelia Frances Howard-Gibbon Illustrator's Award.

Jean Schroeder, Tucson Unified School District, Tucson, A

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The Declaration

Written by Gemma Malley
Bloomsbury, 2007, 301 pp.
ISBN: 13-978-1-59990-119-0

*I am not Anna Covey. I am Surplus Anna. I am. I know I am.
Please let things get back to normal. Please let everything be OK
again.*

Unfortunately for Anna, she is Anna Covey and her life will never be normal again. In this futuristic novel, a young girl discovers that living in an orphanage as “Surplus Anna” may not be normal. The Declaration portrays a dystopia where those who sign a “declaration” can live forever — as long as they don’t have

children. In fact, all children are illegal and people who choose to have them pay with their lives. The need for servants, however, is still strong, so surplus children are taken and trained to support the Legals, who are immortal. Anna, as a surplus child, lives a grim reality that holds little hope beyond filling a service as a “Valuable Asset” to those who have longevity. She does not even wonder how she became a surplus, having been indoctrinated to believe that her parents didn’t want her. That is, until Peter, a problematic surplus, is brought to the training school of Grange Hall. Peter tells Anna that she does have parents who love her and that if they escape Grange Hall, she will find her family.

Fast paced with on-the- edge-of-your-seat intensity, *The Declaration* is a middle grade novel that allows readers to ponder the concept of normal, the importance of questioning the status quo, and the benefits and challenges of having a world where people might possibly live forever. Protagonists Anna and Peter are well-developed and present the complexity of knowing what shouldn’t be known and how that knowledge can make one dangerous to society. The Declaration is followed by its companion, *The Resistance* (Malley, 2008), which continues the story, but can also be read as a stand-alone. *The Declaration* would make a great companion to books such as *The Giver* (Lois Lowry, 2002) *The Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008) the *Maximum Ride* (James Patterson) series, as well as the *Shadow Children* series (Margaret Peterson Haddix). An excellent example of suspense and governmental control gone amuck, this British tale could be a precursor to Dickens as well as the novel *1984* (George Orwell, 2003).

Gemma Malley is British and lives in London. *The Declaration* is her first novel and as she notes in an interview, she wrote about this novel as a way to question the idea that aging may be considered a disease that can somehow be cured. Taking the questions and issues of the present and writing the “what if” that follows, Malley will have young people thinking about their present circumstances, the question of change and progress in a world that no longer creates, and the morality of living forever at the expense of others.

Holly Johnson, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH

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Hannah's Winter

Written by Kierin Meehan
Kane/Miller, 2009, 212 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-933605-98-2

When Liana Forrester, an eccentric Australian gardening writer, goes to Japan to research her new book on Japanese gardens, she insists that Hannah, her twelve-year-old daughter, accompany her. Hannah would rather stay home with her father and brother to start the new school year with her friends, but Liana wants her to learn Japanese. In Japan, Hannah stays with her mother's friend, the Maekawa family, while her mother travels throughout the country. Hannah is worried that the Maekawa's thirteen-year-old daughter will resent having to entertain a young foreigner, but her fears are unfounded as she and Miki become great friends.

Shortly after Hannah's arrival, Mr. Maekawa receives a yellow box from a friend. Hannah and Miki and Hiro, a neighbor, are intrigued by the contents of the box, which contains a child's toy box along with other items. One of these is a poem that appears to ask for help for "the ocean boy," a lost soul seeking peace. They set out to solve the riddle, traveling to markets, temples, shrines, and an ancient castle and meeting people from the past who aid or hinder their quest. They are also assisted by Miki's aunt, Yukiyo, and Miki's father, both of whom have the ability to see ghosts. By the end of the story, Hannah, Miki, and Hiro complete all of the tasks set out in the poem, which allows Kai, the ocean boy, to rest in peace. Hannah believes that her ancestor was involved in Kai's story back in 1860 and that is why the ghost appeared after she arrived. But it is not only the ocean boy who obtains peace. Miki and Hiro get much closer on their quest to solve the riddle. The discoveries of Aunt Yukiyo's former boyfriend and Hiro's lost father also bring happiness.

Hannah's naivety towards Japanese customs results in humorous moments as well as allowing a natural means for the reader to become informed about Japanese culture. Miki's grandmother frequently catches Hannah making mistakes with the Japanese custom of "house slippers." Her day in Miki's school is an eye-opener for Hannah. The locations visited by the children — the markets, the Ninja Temple, the Sarumaru Shrine, the beach, an ancient castle and a mountain — also give greater insight into Japanese culture and tradition.

The story setting is Kanazawa, capital city of Ishikawa prefecture. The city sits on the Sea of Japan and is bordered by the Japan Alps and Hakusan National Park as well as the Sai and Asano rivers. Kanazawa city spreads out concentrically from the castle site, and still remains as an historical heritage around the city. The story is fiction, but the setting is real.

Meehan portrays Japanese people, food, temples, places and rivers using metaphors: a Ninja Temple with a dramatic history, "Kenroku-en" garden in a quietly creepy atmosphere, the town is white and silent with snow, and a house in which unexplained breezes suddenly occur. Also, she utilizes Japanese terminology in introducing foods and items: Buri okoshi (yellowtail of Kanazawa's favorite fish), kumazashi (bear fresh meat), chiyogami (decorated small origami), and shakuhachi (bamboo

flute). Furthermore, she brings in Japanese phrases used in greetings, such as Ohayo gozaimasu (good morning), Oyasumi (good night), and Sumimasen ga (Excuse me). From my perspective as a Japanese reader, Meehan shows her understanding of Japanese culture because the phrases she uses in the story are significant symbols of Japanese culture and tradition in people's lives. Readers can immerse themselves in a specific cultural experience through this story.

This book was originally published in Australia in 2001. Meehan studied at the University of Queensland, where she received a graduate degree in German and Japanese. She taught German and Japanese language lessons, and lived in Japan for several years. Meehan began writing in Esashi, a town on the west coast of Hokkaido, Japan, when she was asked to write a monthly column for the town's magazine. She has written three books: *Hannah's Winter* (2001), *Night Singing* (2003) and *In the Monkey Forest* (2005). She is a Japanese teacher in Eagle Junction State School in Brisbane, QLD, Australia.

Based on the theme of friendship, family, and cross-cultural experiences and quests, this book could be utilized along with *Habibi* (Naomi Shihab Nye, 1997), *Becoming Naomi Le n* (Pam Muñoz Ryan, 2005), and *A Step from Heaven* (An Na, 2003).

Junko Sakoi, University of Arizona, Tucson, A & World Language Education School, Japan

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Secret Keeper

Written by Mitali Perkins
Delacorte Books, 2009, 225 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-385-73340-3

This book takes place in the 1970's during Indira Gandhi's regime. Asha's father is unable to find an engineering position in India and moves to the United States to look for employment and eventually to send for his family. Asha, her older sister Reet, and mother move in with their father's family. At this same time Asha becomes a woman and is expected to stop playing tennis and cricket, grow her hair long, and wear a sari. This transition from childhood to woman is difficult because she has grown up with a lot of freedom.

Uncle's family isn't very welcome to this threesome and Asha escapes

to the rooftop to pour her heart out in a journal, the "secret keeper." Asha is unable to go to school because of a lack of money, so she reads aloud to her two cousins and tells many stories to pass the time. Asha also is a reader, "She'd already demolished the few books she'd brought along. They were dead, at least for a while. Certain stories could come back to life on the second, third, and even tenth reading if you gave them enough time between encounters" (p. 55).

Reet and Asha's mother suffer from depression and while at their uncle's house, they learn secrets that she has been withholding from them for years. Asha dreams of becoming a psychologist so that she can become a "mender of the mind" and help people release their secrets. Asha also has a secret — she begins a forbidden friendship with a boy next door. Many new and unexpected secrets are revealed as the book unfolds. A map and glossary of Bangla words are included.

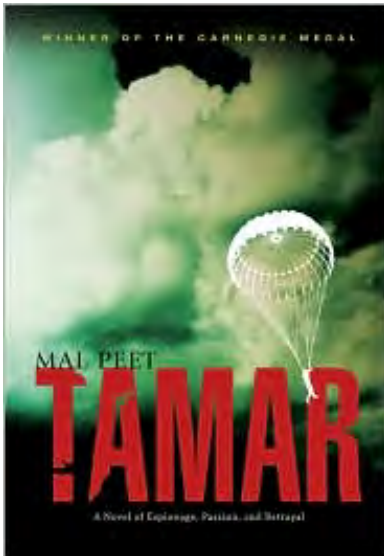
Adolescent girls will thoroughly enjoy this book because Asha is rebellious, courageous, and selfless and they will laugh out loud at Asha's crazy antics. They will also relate to Asha's feelings towards boys and becoming a woman. Themes such as mother/daughter and sister relationships and friendships would make this an interesting book for family literature circles. Mitali Perkins was born in Calcutta, India, and lived in various parts of the world until moving to California at age 11. She says that story was her lifeline in middle school, as she navigated between California culture and the Bengali culture of her home — her protagonists are thus often strong female characters trying to bridge different cultures. She lived in Bangladesh, India and Thailand as an adult before moving to Massachusetts. Visit her Web site for more reflections about her life and writing.

Perkins has written other books sharing personal insights into Indian culture and history, especially regarding the role of women and education. *The Secret Keeper* might be paired with books such as *Rickshaw Girl* (Perkins, 2007) or Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner* (2008) or *Royal Dark, Mango Sweet* (2006).

Deanna Day, Washington State University, Vancouver, WA



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Tamar: A Novel of Espionage, Passion, and Betrayal

Written by Mal Peet

Candlewick Press, 2007, 424 pp.

ISBN: 978-0-7636-4063-7

This historical fiction young adult novel contains two parallel stories. The first story takes place during the Hunger Winter in Nazi-occupied Holland. Two Dutch born British spies, code named Dart and Tamar, are on a mission to unite the fragmented Dutch resistance fighters. The men begin the story as comrades who rely on each other in order to survive the horrors of World War II. Their friendship unravels when Dart falls in love with a Dutch woman called Marijke who is secretly in a relationship with Tamar. Dart, a puzzle aficionado, cannot, ironically, crack the code of Marijke and Tamar's hearts. Dart becomes unstable

through his addiction to speed, his loneliness, and his fear. Finally learning the truth of Marijke and Tamar's love, Dart does something that he will regret the rest of his life — he orchestrates his friend's murder in order to possess Marijke, who is pregnant with a son by Tamar. This is the story of espionage, passion, and betrayal.

The other story is the tale of the aftermath of spying, love, and disloyalty. It is 1995 in London and fifteen-year-old Tamar is left a mysterious box by her grandfather, William, who has recently committed suicide. A puzzle lover like her grandfather, Tamar invites her distant Dutch cousin, Yoyo, on a trip to follow the maps left in the box and solve the mystery she is given. What Tamar discovers is love, family secrets, and the stubborn residue of past harms.

The reader is along for the ride as the story flips between the modern day and the Hunger Winter. Tamar and the reader learn about the other Tamar, the spy who was betrayed by his friend William, codenamed Dart. Modern day Tamar is the daughter of the son who was born to Marijke. William made a decision to live with his guilty secrets but cannot quite do it. He sees a chance for redemption through his granddaughter, Tamar, who is given this unusual name at William's urging. The name is both a plea for forgiveness and a vehicle to pass on generational guilt. A tool of William's redemption, Tamar's path is orchestrated to end at her father's house. Her father, having ferreted out the truth of his birth years earlier has a nervous breakdown and deserts Tamar and her mother. He is unable to forgive William and cannot forgive the choices that William has made.

Tamar does not allow herself to be a tool of redemption. The end of the story takes place tens years later and is narrated by the now grown-up Tamar who is living in Holland with Yoyo where they are expecting their first child. She is full of hope but has no closure regarding the past. Tamar says, "The past is a dark house, and we only have torches with dying batteries. It's probably best not to spend much time in there in case the rotten floor gives way beneath our feet" (p. 423).

Mal Peet, the British author who won the Carnegie Award for this novel, writes that he had a childhood friend whose father was a spy in Nazi-occupied Holland. Peet saw the actual code scraps spies like Dart used and this was his beginning point for this novel. Peet writes on the back page of the

book jacket that this novel is “a plea for forgiveness.” Forgiveness is the major theme of this complicated and complex novel where there is no end to war, to crimes, or to love. Concepts such as sin and redemption, right and wrong, and good and bad are examined in *Tamar* in the context of World War II and then again in the present day. This novel has no easy answers and gives many opportunities for the reader to see that good and bad may become hopelessly confused in war and in peace. More important, *Tamar* allows the reader to experience the aftermath of wrongdoing and live through characters who make very different meanings out of the tragic narratives of their lives.

As a piece of historical fiction, *Tamar*’s author Mal Peet fulfills his responsibility to the reader by offering a carefully researched backdrop with actual events woven throughout the story. Aesthetically, Peet challenges the reader to solve the mystery of the novel but also to start to explore how to solve the mystery of how to live a real life, one replete with guilt, shame, and the fragile possibility of love.

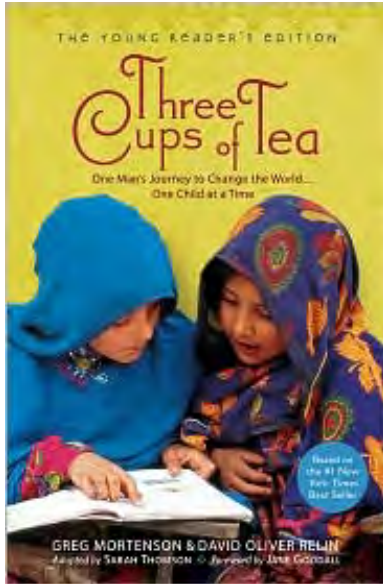
Tamar could be used in a text set that includes other stories of difficult decisions set during World War II in Europe such as *Daniel Half Human and the Good Nazi* (David Chotjewitz), and *The Book Thief* (Marcus Zusak). Following the theme of a child protagonist refusing to serve the past, a text pairing possibility is the historical fiction young adult novel, *A Gathering Light* (Jennifer Donnelly), which is the story of a sixteen-year-old who learns to let the dead stay buried in order to construct her own life.

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Three Cups of Tea, One Man's Journey to Change the World—One Child at a Time

Written by Greg Mortenson & David Oliver Relin

Penguin Puffin, 2009, 240 pp.

ISBN: 978-014241-412-5

Half frozen, weak, tired, hungry, and alone, Greg made a wrong turn and lost his guide. He stumbles into a village where he begins the most inspirational adventure of his life. The women cover their faces and back away, yet the children run without fear to Greg's side and lead him to their leader Haji Ali. Greg had fortunately learned to speak a little Balti while mountain climbing in Pakistan. Haji Ali, pushing his face in front of Greg's, demands to know why he, a stranger, has come to Korphe. With a smattering of Balti and many hand gestures, Greg roughly explains that he is an American, and was trying to climb to the top of K2 (the second highest mountain in the world) to place his deceased sister's necklace at the top when he became lost from his group. Now he is heading back to Askole in hopes of finding his group. Struggling, he begins to get up, but Haji Ali pushes him back into the pillows on the floor, explaining that he must sleep. Days pass and the Korphe people feed and care for Greg until he is healthy once again. Greg builds a relationship with Haji Ali and comes to admire him and his people.

When Greg is completely well and ready to return to the United States, he asks Haji Ali how he can ever repay him and his people for their great kindness. Haji Ali simply says, "Listen to the wind." As Greg carefully listens, he hears the faint voices of children. They walk on and come upon the side of the mountain where the children gather each day to work on their lessons whether the teacher was able to come or not. The children have no school house, no desks, and no books — only the dirt on the ground where they carefully write their lessons using a stick. Greg knows the answer to his question is, "we need a school." The rest of the book tells of Greg's passion and drive to fulfill the dream of these kindhearted, remote people. He has spent his life traveling back and forth to the U.S., raising money for supplies and returning to build not one, but many schools, throughout Pakistan and into Afghanistan. Greg shares many of the obstacles and hardships he has had to overcome in order to carry out this mission.

Greg Mortenson co-authored three books that tell the story of his journey to change the world through schools. They are *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace — One School at a Time* (adult version), *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Journey to Change the World — One Child at a Time* (upper elementary to young adult version), and *Listen to the Wind* (picture book version). Greg, an American, spent most of his childhood at the foot of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Africa where his father co-founded Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center, and his mother founded the International School of Moshi. He was influenced by his upbringing and compassion for the Korphe children and began the challenge of his life that involves traveling back and forth from Pakistan to the United States many times to raise money through fundraisers, conference presentations, and eventually the co-founding of the Central Asia Institute with Jeane Hoerne supplying money and Greg coordinating the jobs. They have now built over 90 schools, built bridges (both metaphorically and in reality), and

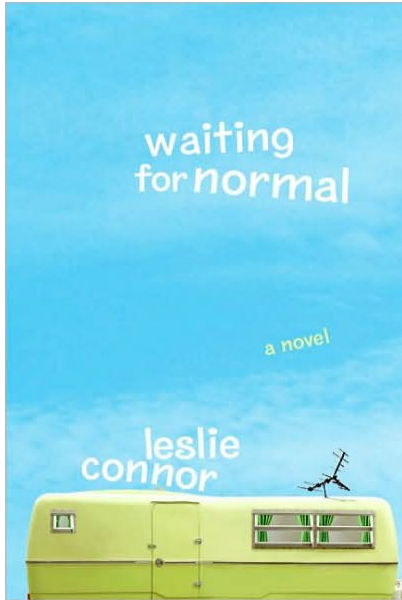
laid water pipes in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Greg's mission as he builds schools, visits the Pakistani people and leaders, and tours the U.S., raising money is to promote peace through education. Books such as *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (Claire Nivola, 2008) tell of other actions in Africa to promote peace through social action. Readers might also be interested in exploring other efforts around the world that focus on providing schools, such as *The Kids from Nowhere* (George Guthridge, 2006) that takes place in a remote Alaska community.

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Waiting for Normal

Written by Leslie Connor
Harper Collins, 2008, 304 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-06-089088-9

Twelve-year-old Addie dreams of a life of normalcy, one where she knows what will happen from one day to the next. She wants to be able to rely on daily occurrences like her mother, a.k.a. “Mommers,” home at a certain time, dinner at a specific hour, and enough food in the kitchen. Beginning with her father’s death when she was a toddler, Addie has experienced changes in her family life over the years including her mother’s divorce from stepfather Dwight and the simultaneous separation from her two younger half-sisters, lovingly referred to as “the littles.” *Waiting for Normal* underlines the cultural connections of urban northeastern communities, poverty,

adolescence and disability. At the start of the novel, Addie and Mommers are struggling financially as they live in a trailer under an overpass in Schenectady, New York.

Mommers with her “all or nothing” personality is a key reason why Addie craves a normal life. On one extreme, Mommers overdoes things like cooking a week’s worth of pasta or tacos, or buying Addie inappropriate clothing for her age, like a sexy ruffled dress for her band concert. On the other extreme, Mommers is secretive and neglectful in her role as a mother, constantly chatting online, pursuing a covert business endeavor, and abandoning Addie for days at a time. Due to her mother’s sporadic nature, Addie matures quickly. She takes control of day-to-day activities and strives to see the brighter side of situations. Many caring individuals, like her neighbors Soula and Elliot, classmate Helena, stepfather Dwight and grandfather “Grandio,” are drawn to Addie’s optimism. They give Addie the unswerving care that her mother does not. At the end of the novel, Addie tastes the reliability she has been craving. She is adopted by Dwight and looks forward to her new home with him, his new girlfriend and the littles.

Written in first-person from Addie’s perspective, *Waiting for Normal* captures the reader’s attention with moments of laughter and sorrow. Elements of author Leslie Connor’s background are authentically woven into the setting, language and characters. For example, Connor draws upon her memories of Schenectady where she lived during middle and high school to describe the roads and overpasses that make up Addie’s surroundings. Connor also lived in Ohio where Mommers was raised and thus integrates regional Ohio language, such as when Addie mentions Mommers’ enjoyment of “hoagies” — submarine sandwiches whose name hails from Philadelphia. In addition, Soula, who is undergoing chemotherapy, has characteristics based on Connor’s friends who have battled cancer. One aspect of the book that could be expanded is the friendship between Addie and Elliot, Soula’s gay friend. Addie befriends Elliot and later meets his partner Rick, yet there is no dialogue or mention of Addie’s thoughts regarding homosexuality. We might expect that a curious twelve-year-old who has grown up in upstate New York would have more questions about gay people. Elliot weaves in and out of the plot often enough that more connections could have been developed.

The Schneider Family Book Award honors books that contain artistic expression of life with disability for children and adolescent audiences. *Waiting for Normal* received the 2009 Schneider Family Book Award for Addie’s experience with dyslexia. Her disability is referenced at times when Addie states that she does not have the “love of learning” and needs extra time to read, complete homework assignments and master her flute lessons. It is important to mention that her disability is not the focal point of the novel, a stylistic element that appears intentional. Instead, the story highlights Addie’s resilience, optimism and friendliness, attributes that help her to remain sane amidst personal challenges. Addie is not alone in her struggle as we see how other characters face challenges too — Soula and her chemotherapy, Mommers and her disorganization, and the littles and their separation from Addie.

Waiting for Normal is a poignant novel for the middle-school classroom. It could be paired with *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Muñoz Ryan (2004) and *Tending to Grace* by Kimberly Newton Fusco (2004) for further discussion of themes including poverty, disability and resilience.

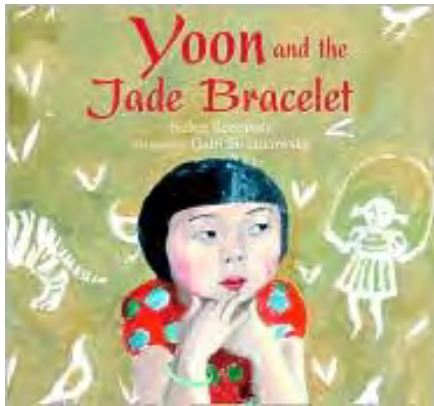
Further information about the book and author Leslie Connor can be found at www.harpercollins.com.

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Yoon and the Jade Bracelet

Written by Helen Recorvits

Illustrated by Gabi Swiatkowska

Frances Foster/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008

ISBN: 978-0-374-38689-4

This is the most recent picture book about Yoon, a Korean American child, by this author and illustrator team. Helen Recorvits is a second-grade teacher whose family immigrated from Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. Gabi Swaitkowska moved to the U.S. from Poland when

she was 17. She says that her art is inspired by Flemish painters like Vermeer and Rembrandt. In their earlier books, *My Name is Yoon* and *Yoon and the Christmas Mitten*, Yoon and her family experience social adjustments and acculturation as new immigrants from Korea to the U.S. In these books, Yoon constructs her bicultural identity as she adjusts to a new language, community, peer status and holidays. *Yoon and the Jade Bracelet* doesn't focus on Yoon's adjustments as an immigrant to the U.S. Instead, the story focuses on everyday issues such as birthday gifts, peer pressure, and relationships and the connections to her cultural identity. Yoon wants a jump rope for her birthday, but receives a Korean storybook and a pale green jade bracelet. Yoon's mother shares her special attachment to the bracelet, explaining that it is passed down from her grandmother to her mother, and now to Yoon. At school the next day, Yoon sits beside an older girl from another class who suggests that they jump rope together and Yoon happily agrees, however, Yoon doesn't get a turn to jump and has to turn the rope for the older girl until her arm grows tired. After jump roping, the older girl suggests that Yoon share the bracelet with her. Yoon hesitates but agrees to let the older girl wear her jade bracelet. When the girl refuses to return the bracelet the next day, Yoon goes to her teacher. The girl insists the bracelet belongs to her, but Yoon's understandings of the markings on the jade bracelet prove that she is the true owner.

Vivid colors and a wide range of patterns are used to illustrate each character's clothing in stripes, polka dots, and abstract prints that tend to match with the backdrop colors and patterns. The illustrations are impressionistic and surrealistic. For instance, Yoon's hair and eye color are dark black while the manipulative older girl has contrasting light brown eyes and hair. The older girl's facial expressions of anger and embarrassment are vividly portrayed so that readers feel as if they are facing an angry person. The portrayals of Yoon's clothing are gradually changed over time through three books, but her facial features are consistently portrayed as a Chinese doll with a thick hair bang and short bowl-cut hair.

Cultural authenticity is an issue. First Yoon hopes for a "very special" birthday present — a jump rope. Yoon wants to join the girls in her school, yet she is too new to get invited. Jumping rope is a metaphor of peer acceptance, however, hoping for a jump rope for her very special birthday gift reminds me of my father's childhood story that he hoped for a new pair of rubber shoes for his birthday in the 1950s. Hoping for a jump rope as a 'very special' birthday gift may reflect a confusion of historical with contemporary Korea. Yoon's humble wish for her very special gift doesn't seem to reflect contemporary Korea and Korean children who would rather have a computer game or a doll

house. Yoon's request for a jump rope seems to assume that Korea is an economically struggling country or to fall back on an image of "long-ago Korea" (Sung, 2009).

Second, Yoon's mother gives her a Korean storybook and a jade bracelet from Yoon's grandmother. Yoon is disappointed by the birthday gift, but hides her disappointment to protect her mother, acting like a mature and polite grown-up. In Korea, a birthday gift is not a surprise, instead children advocate for what they want. In that sense, Korean children are not much different from mainstream American children in terms of taking advantage of this once-a-year opportunity. The mother's gift comes from what mother wants to give, not what Yoon wants. Respecting children's desires is significant in contemporary Korea as the number of children in each family is one or two, yet Yoon is described as a polite and passive child. Perhaps Yoon's family is conservative and traditional, so Yoon has to be polite to her mother rather than advocate for her birthday gift, but the passivity with which she is portrayed seems overly stereotypical.

Another issue is that the jade bracelet is a misrepresented cultural item. According to Yoon's mother, "when I was a young girl, my own mother gave me this very bracelet. Now I am giving it to you." She explains the Korean name etched inside of the bracelet which is "the dancing symbols that mean Shining Wisdom" and tells her about the symbols of green jade to create meaning and make a blessing for Yoon. Jade is a popular stone within Chinese culture where a wide range of age groups wear this stone. In Korean culture, jade is an acceptable stone to wear with a Hanbok (traditional outfit) for grown-ups. Jade is often perceived as something an elderly person might wear, but would not be chosen as a gift for young girl. Passing down a special item like a ring or bracelet would occur on a special occasion like a wedding or engagement and would not be given to a young child. The mother's discussion about the dancing written symbols that mean Shining Wisdom and the meaning of jade and green doesn't seem drawn from Korean culture. The dancing symbols that have meanings behind them may be closer to Chinese characters. The written language of Korea, Hangeul, is sound sensitive rather than meaning-based. Also, the way Yoon's mother explains the meaning of the symbols and green color is not a typical practice in Korean culture. The symbolism of jade seems to be a cultural misrepresentation and an example of the assimilation of Korean culture into other Asian cultures in the U.S.

Lastly, the Korean name of Yoon is puzzling. Yoon can be a family name or can be part of a first name. The common Korean names tend to be two syllables. For instance, Yoon Hee, Yoon Ah, Yoon Ji are closer to the expected Korean name. The name Yoon sounds like either the family name or an incomplete first name unless the name is simplified. The mother addresses Yoon as "Little Yoon" but "Little Yoon" is used when two siblings have Yoon in their names. This name format of Yoon can happen but it is not common in mainstream Korean culture. Yoon's earlier Korean writing of her name in *My Name Is Yoon* doesn't have any last name or additional unit. The name seems to be "Pseudo Korean" that misrepresents the culture (Sung, 2009).

What Yoon and the Jade Bracelet conveys in terms of Korean culture and universal celebrations are still exotic features, tradition, and the colonial mindset of old traditions portrayed as contemporary. Celebrating a birthday can be a universal connection between readers and Yoon, yet the attitudes toward Korean culture stay as traditional and historical, and reflect an attitude of orientalism. This book does have a stronger approach to Yoon's life than the previous two books,

because of the focus on everyday issues such as peer pressure and intimidation. Another feature that is not typical of a new Korean immigrant is that Yoon is passive in the beginning when the older girl takes advantage of her, yet she is courageous and faces the older girl. The way Yoon takes her bracelet back shows her journey of adjustment to a new community. Yoon's peers support her when the teacher investigates who is the true owner of the bracelet, showing that she is accepted by her peers.

This book can be read alongside other books that are about family members who pass down items that are significant to their family culture. In *Always Prayer Shawl* (Sheldon Oberman, 1994), Adam's grandfather gives him his prayer shawl when Adam moves to the U.S. In *The Keeping Quilt* (Patricia Polacco, 1988), the great-great-grand-mother in Russia makes a quilt from the family's old clothing. In *The Name Jar* (Yangsook Choi, 2001), the grandmother gives a wooden stomp to Unhei that enhances Unhei's Korean identity and family memories.

Sung, Y.K. (2009) *A post-colonial critique of the (mis)representation of Korean-Americans in children's picture books*. Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Arizona.

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