



The Language Inside

Written by Holly Thompson

Delacore, 2013, 521 pp.

ISBN: 978-0385739795

This novel in verse addresses issues of love, loss, choices, language, and identity through the story of a 15-year-old girl who's outside appearance does not reflect her inner reality. Emma appears to be a white middle-class mainstream teen, but that appearance does not match her cultural identity. Emma has spent her entire life in Japan —she thinks in Japanese, finds it hard to find the right English words, and her values and worldview are shaped around Japanese culture. When she is suddenly uprooted to a small New England town, every part of her life is thrown into upheaval. Emma's mother has been diagnosed with breast cancer and so the family goes to

stay with Emma's grandmother while her mother receives treatment. The stress of the move, her longing for Japan, and concern for her mother results in migraines as Emma struggles to adjust. At her grandmother's urging, she volunteers in a long-term care center to help Zena, a patient with locked-in syndrome, write down her poems. She meets Samnang, another volunteer, who assists elderly Cambodian refugees. Her relationship with Samnang gradually develops through weekly visits to the care center and their shared interests in language and dance, but then Emma faces the difficult decision of whether to return early to Japan with her father or to stay in Massachusetts with her mother and brother.

The many strands of issues and plot lines in the book at first seem overwhelming, but the author weaves them together through lyrical free verse. The political and personal tragedy of the Khmer Rouge killing fields in Cambodia, the devastation of the tsunami in Japan, and the frightening reality of cancer are balanced against connections among families and a cautious, quiet romance. Several themes particularly stand out, including a strong focus on taking action to make a difference. The teens' volunteer work in a long-term care center and Emma's efforts to organize a fundraiser for survivors of the Japanese tsunami are two examples of how taking action in authentic ways, both locally and globally, is woven into the book.

The other outstanding theme is language and poetry as ways to explore and express deeply felt emotions and experiences. The novel explores how language, both spoken and unspoken, and poetry cross boundaries to create connections between people. Emma constantly reflects on language because of her own bilingual and bicultural identity. Japanese is her first language and the language in which she speaks inside her head and so there are many reflections on the significance of language across the book. Emma's work with Zena involves learning how to write down her poems since Zena is unable to speak or move. Emma hunts for poems to share with Zena as possible models in form or theme. Both Emma's and Zena's

poems are included in the novel and Emma constantly refers to poems that she shares with Zena. A list of the poems referenced in the narrative along with other recommended resources on poetry writing is included at the end of the book. The sessions with Zena are excellent and provide writing ideas that could be used in a poetry unit with students.

The author, Holly Thompson, writes out of her own lived experiences, having grown up in New England but living in Japan for eighteen years. She currently teaches creative writing at Yokohama City University but spent many years living in Kamakura, Japan. She says that her books reflect the crossing of cultures in her family, among her students and within the communities where she is immersed. She moved back and forth between the U.S. and Japan several times and returns regularly to the U.S. to visit family. Therefore, a bicultural life is a constant theme in her books and a norm in her life. It is no surprise that a favorite book is Allen Say's (1993) *Grandfather's Journey*, with similar themes of bicultural identity. Her first young adult book also picks up on these themes. *Orchards* (2012) is about a Japanese-American teen sent to spend the summer with relatives in Japan after her participation in bullying another teen leads to suicide. She is also the author of *The Wakame Gatherers*, a picture book reviewed in this issue.

Thompson says that she chose to use a novel in verse format because her focus on language, words, and communication was a good fit for this style of writing. She makes the distinction between verse novels and novels in poems, saying that she writes each chapter as a long poem with each page a sub-poem within the poem of a chapter. She carefully plans page breaks and, while each page does not have a stand-alone poem, it is a unit within the larger poem. Her other novels have also been written in verse, but she says that not all stories are suited to the pared down, condensed nature of verse.

A range of books could be paired with *The Language Inside*, including books that pick up on bicultural identity and language, such as *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai (2011). Another connection, of course, is books where the characters explore poetry such as *Spinning through the Universe* by Helen Frost (2004), *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (2002) and *Shakespeare Bats Clean-Up* by Ron Koertge (2006). Guadalupe Garcia McCall's (2011) *Under the Mesquite* is a novel in verse in which the main character also deals with a mother ill with cancer. Readers may want to explore *Never Fall Down* by Patricia McCormick (2012) to find out more about the Khmer Rouge and to understand the PTSD of the elderly Cambodians in the long-term care center. Another pairing is books about taking responsibility for action, such as *Antsy Does Time* by Neil Schusterman (2008) and *Notes from the Midnight Driver* by Jordan Sonnenblick (2006).

Holly Thompson has powerfully captured the intense longing and sense of displacement that comes with being in one place but feeling that you belong elsewhere. Instead of being frozen into inaction and resentment by this displacement, this novel inspires teens to consider how they can act to make a difference—a compelling and contemplative read.

Go to Holly Thompson's website (<http://www.hatbooks.com/>) for further information and access to interviews about her work. Read her discussion about novels in verse as well as her life in Japan here (<http://quirkandquill.com/2013/01/28/qa-with-author-holly-thompson/>).

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