



**The White Swan Express: A Story about Adoption**

Written by Jean Davies Okimoto and Elaine M. Aoki

Illustrated by Meilo So

Clarion Books, 2002

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Okimoto and Aoki (2002) share the excitement and anticipation of four different families as they travel overseas to adopt four little Chinese girls in *The White Swan Express*. This well-crafted, joyful story depicts the differences each family brings, but also shows the love and bond that ties these families together. As the story opens,

the reader is introduced to four different families in four different geographic locations (Miami, Florida; Vashon Island in Seattle, Washington; Toronto, Canada; and Minnetonka, Minnesota). Despite diverse lifestyles, ethnicities, age and morning routines, they all wake to anticipation of a special event. On the other side of the world in Asia, four little girl babies, all dressed alike, lay asleep in their beds. Similar in appearance, their individual personalities are conveyed to the reader through their unique sleeping positions.

Okimoto and Aoki invite the reader into this shared experience as each family prepares and travels across a continent and ocean. Exhausted, they arrive in fog-shrouded China, and together board the “White Swan Express” to Guangzhou, where all foreign embassies are located. The anticipation builds, as the families get closer to meeting their daughters. While they anxiously wait, “their hearts thumped like drums and fluttered like the wings of a bird.” And one by one, they meet their daughters for the first time. Each family’s joy in the shared experience is clearly expressed through smiles and tears of joy. After signing all the papers, the fog is lifted, symbolizing good fortune for all.

*The White Swan Express* is based on Aoki’s real life experiences in adopting a child. Okimoto is the daughter of an adoptee. Together, they have co-chaired the Seattle reading awards. Aoki is a well-respected reviewer of Asian American children’s literature and was co-editor of *Kaleidoscope*, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) review of multicultural literature. The authors’ note in the afterword provides the reader with relevant background information that lends to cultural authenticity. Specific details, such as the gift of silver bracelets given to a Chinese girl at birth so parents can keep track of her, and the carefully chosen Chinese phrases, add to the accuracy and believability.

The illustrator, Meilo So, enhances the experience for the reader through vibrant watercolor illustrations. Throughout the book, her illustrations enhance the mood of the story, even through the use of weather elements such as the sun, moon, and fog. The detailed illustrations draw out the personalities of each individual family member and deftly portray the cultural subtleties in a respectful manner.

Over the past several decades, adopting children from Asian countries has become increasingly common due to economic, cultural, and demographic factors such as large numbers of Asian adoptees, U.S. couples who are unable to bear their own children, and the small numbers of children

available for adoption in the U.S. A number of authors have written picture books that can be paired with *The White Swan Express*. Written in simple language for young children, the picture book *I Don't Have Your Eyes* (Carrie A. Kitze, 2003) recognizes physical differences but celebrates the commonalities that all people share because "We don't look the same on the outside, but in our hearts, we are the same." *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes* (Rose A. Lewis, 2000) is based on the author's own experience as she travels to adopt a baby girl from China and expresses her deep love and joy that the child has brought into her life. Teachers can explore themes with children that respect differences and celebrate universal emotions. Children can discuss how these parents felt about their adopted children or if it mattered that the parents in the stories looked different. Another good resource for adoption stories can be found at <http://sarahpark.com/>. These stories are an important addition to children's literature, sharing common stories for the increasing number of Asian children adopted by U.S. couples.

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