



Linda Sue Park

Author Program In-depth Interview

Linda Sue Park, interviewed from her home in Rochester, New York on April 24, 2007.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your Newbery Medal-winning middle grade novel, *A Single Shard*, as well as *Seesaw Girl*, *The Kite Fighters* and *When My Name Was Keoko* are all historical fiction books set in Korea. In *A Single Shard* and *Seesaw Girl*, you use very evocative, symbolic names such as “Tree-ear” and “Jade Blossom.” How did you select these names?

LINDA SUE PARK: When writing historical fiction books set in Korea, I face the choice of whether I’m going to use Korean names or transliterations. Seventeenth-century Korea is the time and place where *Seesaw Girl* takes place. At that time, Korea was a satellite state of China, and among the aristocracy or the nobility, the idea was to create a culture and a lifestyle within your home that was as Chinese as possible. I named the main character “Jade Blossom,” which is a much more Chinese-sounding name than a Korean name because that’s what wealthy families (like hers) at the time were doing.

In *A Single Shard*, there was a similar issue. I wanted Tree-ear to have a ludicrous name. If I had used a Korean name, an American reader would not have known on sight that it was ludicrous. I wanted a reader to look at that name and say, “What the heck kind of name is that?” Nobody names their kid Tree-ear — here or in Korea. Of course, it was just a nickname — almost derogatory, but kind of affectionate — that Crane-man gave Tree-ear, when he got him as a young child.

In both cases, I hope the names are evocative of at least a mood or a tiny sliver of a way of life I’m trying to recreate.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books are filled with characters who have rich inner lives and who struggle with ethical/moral/racial issues.

LINDA SUE PARK: I think that’s what is interesting to me about writing for middle grade readers. If you’re fortunate enough, as a baby, to have stable adults in your life, things are more or less black and white: “do what mom says, don’t do this, this is good, this is bad.” Then you reach age eight or nine, where you have more contact with other people and the outside world, and you start to have questions.

For example, “You told me not to lie, but then you told me to tell Aunt Sara I loved the hat she gave me when I don’t like it all....” and simple moral dilemmas arise and the world becomes more complicated.

As a young person, I spent a lot of time on that in my head, thinking, “They say this, but then they do that.” I think that it’s a huge part of what most kids are going through as they grow — inside their heads, there must be just one huge jumble of questions.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please provide an example from one of your books where the character is taking on his or her own jumble of questions.

LINDA SUE PARK: In *Project Mulberry*, Julia asks herself, “Is my mom racist?” Then, she goes further, asking, “Am I racist? If I am, or if I have some tendencies that are like my mom, what can I do about that?” A question leads to another question, which leads to another question — that eventually leads to something that the character can actually make a choice about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Project Mulberry*, why are there sections between chapters containing dialog between you (the author), and Julia (your main character)?

LINDA SUE PARK: It all began when I was stuck — I was stuck in my writing of the book. And Julia began talking to me. She was talking to me so much that I began typing what she was saying — usually questions — as a way to help me become un-stuck. She would ask, “Why does this have to happen?” and I was typing answers back to her. And as I did this, all of a sudden, I would get unstuck, and I would know what I had to do next with the story.

These conversations between Julia and me began to feel like they were part of the story, and I had to come to really enjoy writing them. There was a different aspect of Julia’s personality, where she could let go and say what she really thought — rather than being the good girl that she generally is in the story. So, I included them as their own thread throughout the book, occurring between chapters.

Some have said that the conversation sections play a role in the book similar to the extra features you get on a DVD.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Have other characters talked to you while you’re writing their stories?

LINDA SUE PARK: Yes, Sun-hee in *When My Name Was Keoko* spoke to me once. *When My Name Was Keoko* was by far the most difficult book for me to write to date, and part of the difficulty was the technical challenge of writing from two points of view.

I wrote the entire first draft from one point of view: that of the girl named Sun-hee. And then I ran into a problem: I couldn’t easily include her brother Tae-yul’s kamikaze mission. I couldn’t figure out how to get that into the plot. I tried a number of different ways, but everything I tried wasn’t working. My editor thought Sun-hee was telling Tae-yul’s story, and she did not have a story of her own.

So, I scratched that version entirely and began writing the book again from Tae-yul’s point of view. I wrote about three chapters, and then one night in bed, Sun-hee started talking to me. She was very angry, and she said things like, “This is just so typical! You’re taking the story away from the girl and giving it to the boy! I do have a story to tell; you just didn’t get it right the first time around. I need to have this story back! You can’t just take it away from me!”

She was so insistent that I got out of bed, went down to the computer, and typed a note to myself, which was something I often do just to remind myself. That is the point at which the story became a dual narrative with alternating chapters, and I gave Sun-hee a much more active role — not active in the same way as Tae-yul, but fighting the way in her own way.

That’s the only time she spoke to me, and then she never said anything more.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was it like to write a book with two distinct points of view, as you did in *When My Name Was Keoko*?

LINDA SUE PARK: I went back and forth many times over how to construct their distinct voices and make it clear who was telling the story. I ended up having Tae-yul sometimes think in a stream of consciousness and in more sentence fragments than Sun-hee. Sun-hee is the writer, and is more lyrical. The final step was to put all of Tae-yul's chapters in present tense to show that he was more action than thought — where Sun-hee was the opposite — to distinguish the two voices.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What advice do you have for aspiring young writers?

LINDA SUE PARK: The first advice I give to writers of any age is to read. I consider that the most important part of my work. It's like training for writers. It's like an athlete who wants to go to the Olympics. If you want to write something really, really well, it's the same as wanting to win a gold medal in the Olympics. What athlete would say, "Oh, no, no, I don't have time to train."

However, the actual daily work of writing is so personal. I write every day that I'm not on the road or doing school visits. When I'm home, I am writing.

I have to break the writing of a novel down into tiny, tiny tasks. I think novels are really intimidating; they're so long and complicated, and there are so many characters and story threads. I really don't know how anybody can ever write one.

So, I have a story in my head, and I say, "Today, I have to write two pages of it. I just have to write this scene today. That's the only thing I have to do today." If you do that day after day after day for a year, sometimes — if you're lucky — you end up with a novel.

I'm always shocked when it happens, and I'm also always sure that it's my last novel. I'm not one of those authors who has a million ideas and can't wait to get on to the next one. I always have quite a lull between novels — usually two or three months.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your characters seem to all have skills or aspects of their lives that they are proud of.

LINDA SUE PARK: I try to give my characters something that they can be passionate about. I think that it is important for everybody to be good at something they can be proud of. If it's a collection of bottle caps, that's great, if it's something you're excited about.

Everyone doesn't have to be good at a sport, or a musical instrument, or smart in school. It can be an interest in steam engines or baseball cards, or anything else. Whatever it is, that passion can be a source of tremendous pride, because it allows you to know things other people don't and allows you to share information and discover things. When I meet or see young people who don't have a passion like that, they seem quite lost to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell teachers?

LINDA SUE PARK: My goal when I visit a school is to get kids excited about reading. It's such a crucial skill, and it's getting more crucial because young people are communicating more in words than any other generation before them. They are emailing and text messaging, and everything else. They're actually doing more writing, not less. In order to communicate reasonably well in writing, I think you have to be good at reading.

I think it is really hard to get students excited about reading if there's always a test attached. I just wish somehow that there were more opportunities for kids to read all sorts of stuff

without any expectation of a grade being attached to it. I know that there are teachers who do it, and it's a lot more work for them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your picture book *Yum! Yuck! A Book of People Sounds* includes a story that's played out in pictures and only alluded to in the text.

LINDA SUE PARK: Yes. One of the things that is important to me in a book for very young children is interactivity. By interactivity, I mean that I want the reader to have something to do — some kind of response to the book — because books are interactive. I think there are too many video-raised children who think of books as passive. I want young readers to get into the habit, from the time they're very tiny, of thinking that books are something you respond to, and I want that habit to continue as they get into books that are all text.

Like *Mung-Mung: A Book of Animal Sounds*, I knew its companion book *Yum! Yuck!* was going to be published in a gatefold format. We knew that there was going to be something readers had to guess at before they opened the gatefold.

Yum! Yuck! co-author Julia Durango and I conceived of the storyline in one marathon session where there was wadded-up paper up to our ankles all around us. We went over and over and around in circles, and finally decided that we would rearrange the multi-lingual expressions in an order that would go with a story that would not appear in the words but in illustrations. Sue Rama, the illustrator, just came through magnificently. I really think the illustrations of that book are just perfect.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you get started writing books for children?

LINDA SUE PARK: I was teaching English as a Second Language full time at a local university. I was teaching at the graduate level, so I had mostly graduate students. One spring, the department head asked me to decide how many hours I wanted for the summer. So I told my husband, and he said, "You keep talking about wanting to write, and I'm really, really tired of hearing you talk about it. I want you to not teach this summer, and I want you to get serious about writing something."

I realized there are a lot of people who talk about writing something, but never actually do it, and I did not want to be one of those people. I knew that I might never get published, but I didn't want to have never finished something. So it was my husband's kick in the pants and support that actually was the turning point where I actually sat down and I wrote the story that eventually became *Seesaw Girl*, my first book.

However, I did not know I was writing a book for young people. I thought I was writing a short story that would get published in *The New Yorker* or something like that. When I finished the first version, I wasn't happy with it at all, and I went back and wrote it again. That happened several times, and each time I rewrote it, the story kept getting longer. When I was finally finished with it, I thought, "This is not a short story anymore. But what is it? It's not a novel either." And I realized that what I had done was written a novel for young people.

In hindsight, that should not have been a surprise, because middle-grade novels are my favorite genre to read, along with many other favorite genres, but I never stopped reading them, even as an adult.

The pacing, structure and way that a middle-grade novel is put together is really sort of innate for me. So when I realized that that was what I had written, I thought, "Of course, that's what I wrote, and of course, that's what I want to write!"

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did the writing of what became *Seesaw Girl* come naturally to you?

LINDA SUE PARK: Yes and no. Writing is never easy, and some days, or moments, or sentences might come easily, but as a whole, it doesn't. But I got the idea for *Seesaw Girl* when I was ten years old. As a child, I read about the tradition of wealthy families keeping their girls behind the wall, and it was shocking and horrifying to me. Immediately, I wanted to try to imagine a life like that: How would you live like that and not go out of your mind? When I sat down to write that story, I knew exactly what it was going to be about — I think that my subconscious was working on the story for 27 years. Likewise with *Kite Fighters*, for which I had thought of an idea perhaps 10 years earlier.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

LINDA SUE PARK: The first thing I do when I get up in the morning is e-mail and other business-related stuff, organizing my trips and visits, and answering many emails. I probably do that for the first hour or so.

Then, I will open the electronic file for the project I'm working on and edit the two pages I wrote the day before. With the distance of a day, I review what I've written, and sometimes I completely throw it away. Usually, I can salvage something, but I will edit and fix it, and then fix other bits that have to be revised because the new part I wrote means something else 10 pages before has to be changed. That will take another hour or so.

Then I'll write two new pages. I try to finish those two pages with a line in all caps that says, "Now Tiger comes in," or something — a note for the next day's work, so that I have something that I know I can sit down and do.

My work usually gets done over a period of three or four hours during the morning, so I can spend time with my family starting around 1:00 or 2:00.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

LINDA SUE PARK: I get stuck about four times a week, and when I'm stuck, I hate just sitting there staring at the computer screen. I like to be typing something. I have all sorts of little exercises that are never intended to go into a book, but I do when I'm stuck.

I make myself just write something, anything. It usually has to do with what I'm working on, or perhaps a speech I'm preparing to give. I do a lot of thinking about a story when I'm driving, when I'm in bed or wherever, and I get ideas that I want to work out in writing. But it's while I'm actually keyboarding that I get my best ideas.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Food is always prevalent in your books.

LINDA SUE PARK: I love food. I love to eat. I love to cook. Food has always been an interest of mine. A novel is supposed to be a chunk of the person's life, so I can't see a novel in which a character doesn't eat. They have to eat. Besides, I find food just such a wonderful opportunity to portray a character.

For example, in *Project Mulberry*, Patrick loves spicy kimchee, so that shows that he is a little adventurous and open minded. It helps me see him better, and helps me write him better.

In books like *A Single Shard* and *When My Name Was Keoko*, food is much more than just part of the characters' personalities. It's actually a part of a setting; hunger was part of their lives and the time period. Food is woven into the fabric of a culture. It is so basic to a culture that I think it's hard to write about people without writing about food.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Archer's Quest*, about a present-day teenage boy who is visited by an ancient Korean, seems to be a book written for mainly male, perhaps reluctant, readers.

LINDA SUE PARK: Well, the writing of *Archer's Quest* actually started with my son when he was 16 years old, when *A Single Shard* won the 2002 Newbery award. He said, "Gosh, Mom, think of all the kids all over the country who are now going to be forced to read your book."

And it's true of any Newbery award-winning book. A great many of my readers come across *A Single Shard*, which is not a book they would pull from the shelves on their own. They come across it because they're made to read it in school, and a great many of them like it, but I also get letters, such as the one that read, "Dear Ms. Park, I'm sorry because I'm sure you're a very nice person, but *A Shingle Shard* is the boringest book I ever read."

I think if readers of *A Single Shard* hang on until Tree-ear's journey, then they'll enjoy it, but I do think that the opening part of the book is quite slow. I think of it as a book for readers — those who are willing to go through the part about the pottery-making process without a whole lot of wham-bam action.

So, one seed for *Archer's Quest* was that I was thinking about those readers, usually boys, who hated *A Single Shard* and had to read it. I wanted to make it up to them.

Also, many years ago, the very first thing I ever tried to get published were three retold Korean folktales about the legendary leader of ancient Korea: Chu-mong. I had read the folktales as a young person. Then I read them to my own children, but I was not happy with the versions that were available. So I retold them, but they were never published. However, I was very fond of them, and I never let them go. When I wrote *Archer's Quest*, I had the opportunity to have Chu-Mung himself tell these three stories throughout the book.

Finally, all of my novels have taken place over long periods of time. I think perhaps *Project Mulberry* occurs over the shortest time span, which is a matter of months, but most of my novels take place across many years. For example, *When My Name Was Keoko* took place over four or five years.

I became determined to create a novel that takes place in the shortest possible amount of time. *Archer's Quest* happens in one afternoon, more or less.

I thought to myself, "What could happen to a kid in one afternoon that could make a whole novel — something completely out of the ordinary?"

So my hindsight best guess is the writing of *Archer's Quest* was about wanting to write a story that takes place in one afternoon, including the folktales that I had never gotten to tell, in a story for boys with a lot of action.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your most recent book is called *Tap Dancing on the Roof: A Collection of Sijo*. How does sijo differ from haiku?

LINDA SUE PARK: The Japanese have haiku, and Koreans have their own form, called sijo. Like haiku, sijo also has three lines, but the lines are much longer. Sijo is very strict structurally, but fun.

Sijo can be written about any topic. The first line introduces the topic. The second line gives further details, and describes or develops the topic. And the third line has to have a twist.

I hope that through my collection of sijo, young people will be introduced to a new form, and teachers — who are maybe tired of teaching haiku — will want to try a unit on sijo instead.

Books by Linda Sue Park

- TAP DANCING ON THE ROOF: A COLLECTION OF SIJO (illustrated by Istvan Banyai), Clarion Books, 2007
- ARCHER'S QUEST, Clarion Books, 2006
- BEE-BIM BOP! (illustrated by Ho Baek Lee), Clarion Books, 2005
- PROJECT MULBERRY: A NOVEL, Clarion Books, 2005
- WHAT DOES BUNNY SEE? A BOOK OF COLORS AND FLOWERS (illustrated by Maggie Smith), Clarion Books, 2005
- YUM! YUCK! A FOLDOUT BOOK OF PEOPLE SOUNDS (co-written by Julia Durango; illustrated by Sue Ramá), Charlesbridge, 2005
- MUNG-MUNG: A FOLDOUT BOOK OF ANIMAL SOUNDS (illustrated by Diane Bigda), Charlesbridge, 2004
- FIREKEEPER'S SON, THE (illustrated by Julie Downing), Clarion Books, 2003
- WHEN MY NAME WAS KEOKO, Clarion Books, 2002
- SINGLE SHARD, A, Clarion Books, 2001
- KITE FIGHTERS, THE (decorations by Eung Won Park), Clarion Books, 2000
- SEESAW GIRL (illustrated by Jean and Mou-sien Tseng), Clarion Books, 1999

This In-depth Written Interview is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies.

Questions regarding this program should be directed to info@teachingbooks.net.

Copyright ©2007 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.