Grace Lin

Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth Author Interview

Grace Lin, interviewed in Boston, Massachusetts on May 23, 2011.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have won a Newbery Honor and a Geisel Honor. Do you view yourself as a writer or an illustrator? How do you describe what you do?

GRACE LIN: When I first started, I really thought of myself as an illustrator that happened to write. Then, things started slowly to change, and now I almost think of myself as an author who illustrates. It changes through each project.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you draw often as a child?

GRACE LIN: Yes. I loved fairytales and folktales. I loved Trina Schart Hyman's illustrations, and before that, Richard Scarry. I used to trace their pictures over and over again and redraw them and retrace them. I really loved the art of children's books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did you write stories as a child?

GRACE LIN: Whenever there was a classroom project, I made a book. When there was a science project on clouds, some people would make a diagram or dress up like a cloud, but I always made a book.

I always made books as projects, because I loved them so much. There's a scene in my book *The Year of the Dog* where the main character writes and illustrates her own book and enters it into a national book contest. That really happened to me. In sixth grade, I wrote and illustrated my own book and entered it into a national contest. I won fourth place and $1,000.

I was so excited and happy that I decided then and there I wanted to make books for a living. That's what I wanted to do, and that dream just never died. I kept thinking about it and wanting that, and even when I graduated from high school, that's what I wanted to do. That's why I went to the Rhode Island School of Design to study children's book illustration—it had such a great reputation based on the children's book illustrators who graduated from there.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your father was a doctor, and your mother was a scientist. Did you think you were going to head that direction, or did you always think you would pursue art?

GRACE LIN: When my parents learned that I wanted to go to art school, they tried their very best to persuade me against it. I don't blame them—they were immigrant parents

who worked so hard to get where they were. They couldn't imagine how going to art school would create a very stable base.

I think in some ways, their opposition just made me more determined to succeed. I was really stubborn, and I think it served me well in some ways. After I graduated I strived to make becoming an author and illustrator work and make that dream happen.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did your parents react to your success?

GRACE LIN: That *Tiger Mom* book that was in the news recently brought back a lot of bad memories, because I remember when my parents finally said, "All right, I guess you can go to art school," I didn't even feel triumphant about it. I felt relieved but kind of sad because when that news reached our Asian family and friends, they called asking, "How could you let your daughter do that? She's going to disgrace the whole family."

It sent out a very big shockwave. Friends of the family were saying things like, "If my son or daughter wanted to go to art school, I would disown them or kick them out."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What did your sisters end up doing in adult life?

GRACE LIN: My older sister got a Ph.D. in chemistry and teaches at Skidmore College. My younger sister went into computer science, and she's a webpage designer.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What were you doing prior to your first book being accepted by a publisher?

GRACE LIN: After I graduated, I sent out thousands and thousands of promotionals to all the publishers. I didn't really hear too much except for an editor named Harold Underdown, who was at Orchard Books. He sent me a little card that said, "I like your work, send more." That was really nice, but it didn't pay the bills.

So for a while, I worked at a giftware company on the computer. It was completely just to pay the bills. Then something wonderful happened—I got laid off from that job and got a very small severance package. With that severance package, I decided I really had to make my dream of becoming a children's book author and illustrator happen. The whole time I was working at the giftware company, I was still sending out promotional pieces, but now I felt like I really had to go.

I went to New York, and I hit the pavement. I brought my portfolio and did everything that I could. I still didn't hear from anyone until the severance package was pretty much out. Then I got a call from Harold Underdown, and he said, "I'm senior editor at Charlesbridge Publishing now. I've got your new sample, and I really like it. I've always really liked your work, but I've never been able to find a story that goes with any of your work. Do you have a story that goes with this new sample?" I said, "Yes, I do," even though I didn't. He said, "Great, send it along."

So I looked really hard at the sample, and I spent a long time trying to figure out why I had painted the picture. I realized it was based on a memory of my mother and me and how she used to grow Chinese vegetables in the garden—while everybody else in the neighborhood grew flowers—and how I was very embarrassed about that. So I wrote

that into a story, and that became my very first published book. It took lots of revisions back and forth, but it was my first published book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Since then, you have illustrated other people's stories. What have you enjoyed about illustrating stories written by other authors?

GRACE LIN: Sometimes it's really good, because it stretches you out in ways that you don't really think about. When I illustrated *Round is a Mooncake*, *Red is a Dragon*, and *One is a Drummer*, the publisher had a very strong idea for the art direction and the design. It was a really great learning process and helped me grow as an artist.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You wrote a trilogy of novels about your life: *The Year of the Dog*, *The Year of the Rat*, and *Dumpling Days*.

GRACE LIN: With the novels, I stretched my creative muscles towards writing. The novels became a creative challenge. It's been such an interesting way to express myself in a different way. I actually quite enjoy it.

I wrote *The Year of the Dog* kind of by accident. After my first picture book, *The Ugly Vegetables* was published, everyone but my mom was kind of upset with me. They said, "Hey, how come it's just you and Mom?" My two sisters said, "When did you become an only child?" And Dad said, "Hey, how come I'm only in the background?" My mother said, "You should write a sequel."

So I kept trying to write a sequel—trying and trying to fit it into a 32-page picture book. I tried for many, many years until finally one day, I said I'm just going to keep writing it and not worry about if it fits into that format and see what happens. I started writing and just kept going and going. It became the novel *The Year of the Dog*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What I love about your novels are the side stories. The trilogy has the main plot stories, and those are the chapters of what's going on in your lives, and the friendships and everything else, but then it's got the illustrations.

Additionally, the books have these stories about your culture that stand alone but also somehow weave into context. These seem respectful and honoring of an oral tradition past.

GRACE LIN: Yes. My art style has patterns and layers of patterns over and over each other. I guess that was just a really easy method to transfer to writing—little stories layered on top of each other.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your trilogy also incorporates a lot of little illustrations throughout the books. Did you make the illustrations during or after you wrote the stories?

GRACE LIN: I did just a couple of them during my writing, but most of the time, after the story was done, I'd go back and do all those little pictures.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Had you already started *The Year of the Rat* when *The Year of the Dog* was published, or were they written as separate books at separate times?

GRACE LIN: They were written at separate times, but I had the idea for *The Year of the Rat* after *The Year of the Dog* came out. I had it in the back of my mind, but we were waiting to see how well *The Year of the Dog* did before we went on to the second one.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And what's different between those two books for you?

GRACE LIN: I really wanted to write *The Year of the Rat* because one of the things that I felt was a loose end in *The Year of the Dog* was Pacy's relationship with her two Caucasian friends and how when Melody came around, those friends kind of disappeared from her life. That was very realistic—that's really what happened in my life, but it's really sad. It's not a very good lesson to teach kids or a really good thing to show. So I wanted to write *The Year of the Rat* kind of to address that a little bit.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The third book in the trilogy, *Dumpling Days,* much more directly explores the culture in Taiwan.

GRACE LIN: Yeah, *Dumpling Days* is very different. I'm always thrilled when readers say how much they liked *The Year of the Dog* and *The Year of the Rat*, and they want to know if *The Year of the Dragon* or *The Year of the Tiger* is going to come out. I was interested in writing more about Pacy and her life, but I wasn't really sure if I wanted to do another *Year of*… I felt like it might get redundant, and I wanted to do a different part of Pacy's life.

My first visit to Taiwan was a very important time of my life, so that's why I wanted to write about it. For the first time, Pacy looks like everybody else around her, but she's never been so foreign before in her life as when she goes to a place where she looks exactly like everyone else.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Dumpling Days*, Pacy is so aware when people don't know that she's Taiwanese American. It's an interesting struggle.

GRACE LIN: Yes. In the first two books, the stories are all about her being Asian American and her talking about the Asian part of her Asian-American equation. When she goes to Taiwan, she realizes how American she really is.

When I went to Taiwan I realized how really American I was and how foreign I was there. When you get racist comments from people saying, "Go home," or "Go back where you came from," it's just a weird idea that the place where they think I should go back home to is really not home.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk a little about the contemplation you have given to culture and yourself and identity and multiculturalism.

GRACE LIN: I grew up in upstate New York where there were very, very few minority families. Except for my sisters, I was definitely the only Asian in my elementary school. That gave me kind of a weird sense of identity, though when I was younger all I did was try really hard to forget that I was Asian. I wanted to forget that I was different from everybody else as much as possible, and I did a really good job of that. I remember walking down the street when I was young and seeing my reflection in a window and saying, "Oh, there's a Chinese girl there." I completely forgot that I was Asian because I had done such a good job forgetting all about that. My Asian heritage was something that I purposely tried not to know anything about until much, much later. Then I realized what a shame it was and how sad it was.

I remember the first time I really, really felt that tragedy. I was in Rome, Italy. I went to Rome as part of the Rhode Island School of Design's European honors program. I studied in Rome for a year, and the Italians immediately thought that I was Chinese or Japanese. The idea of me being an Asian American was not their first thought. They would talk to me and ask me all these things about China or Taiwan in Italian, and I knew nothing—but I could speak to them in Italian. I realized how strange it was that I knew Italian, but I didn't know any Chinese—my parents' native tongue. I knew no Chinese at all, yet I knew all these things about Italy. I knew about Michelangelo's girlfriends and where he bought his tomatoes, but I didn't know anything about my own family. I didn't even know why my parents moved from Taiwan to the United States, and all of a sudden I felt really ashamed. That was probably the first time I realized how much I didn't know and what I was missing out on. That was the start of trying to embrace my roots more.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There's a real relationship between your unearthing your own culture and the stories you're telling—you are unearthing for others.

GRACE LIN: That first book I wrote and illustrated was about my mother and I and her Chinese vegetables. Right away it was a multicultural book, and I didn't even know what that term was. So then, the manuscripts I was getting were multicultural manuscripts. At first I didn't really mind it, but then slowly I started learning more about the multicultural label, and it started making me feel very worried.

On one hand, I also had friends who were struggling to get into children's books. I remember one colleague saying to me, "Oh, it's good that you're writing and illustrating about your culture, because that's what's getting you published," and I remember feeling really strange about that. I thought, "Am I only getting published because I'm Asian? Am I selling my culture for a book contract?" It was a very unsettling feeling.

On the other hand, I had publishers and successful people saying, "Oh, you better not get stuck into being a multicultural author, because you'll never get on the New York Times Bestseller List. That's a very small niche market. You'll never achieve grand success if you stay in that little niche; you'll get pigeonholed." I remember feeling like there's really no way to win. It was a very, very hard thing to come to terms with.

I did a couple books that are out of print now with monkeys and hippopotamuses, trying to get out of that multicultural stereotype. But, I realized that I had to do books that were most important to me instead of trying to prove to people I was good enough to be published.

Even though I do think about my audience and career success, in the end it always comes down to what's the most important thing to you that you want to write and illustrate about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Linda Sue Park once said she has never met a character in a book she can trust unless she knows what they eat.

GRACE LIN: My mom was very upset that her daughters are very uninterested in our culture, but I guess the food was the one way we stayed interested. That was the one thing that I definitely had that I did not retract.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You received the Newbery Honor for *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*.

GRACE LIN: Up to the point when I wrote *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, I had been writing personal narratives. I hadn't tried to write something outside of my knowledge base. By the time I finished *The Year of the Rat*, I started to feel more comfortable and more confident about my writing skills, so I thought I would try something new and different. At that point, my late husband, Robert, who had been fighting cancer for many years, was going in for another big battle. We all kind of knew it was a losing one, but we were still going for it.

When you go through chemotherapy, there's only so much TV you want to watch, and he didn't really have the energy to read himself or do other things. So one of the things I would do was read the things that I wrote. That was always fun; he would critique it, and it was kind of a bonding thing that we did.

He said to me, "For your new book, why don't you write a fantasy?" He wanted me to write a fantasy so he could pretend he was somewhere else. He was a big fantasy lover, and he thought I was going to write *Lord of the Rings* or something. Of course, I had to write the fantasy my own way.

I was always interested in Chinese folktales. In the back of *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, I talk about how my mom snuck in the culture by placing these Chinese fairytale books on the shelf and letting me find them and read them.

When I went to China and Taiwan and Hong Kong, the fairytales that I had read when I was a kid came back to me. I just needed that extra push from Robert to actually make me put it on paper.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How would you describe *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*?

GRACE LIN: A lot of people have been calling it a Chinese *Wizard of Oz*, which is fairly accurate. I love the *Wizard of Oz*, and I'm actually honored that people think it's kind of a Chinese *Wizard of Oz*. But as much as I love the *Wizard of Oz* (I actually have a bit of a Dorothy fixation), I had not thought about the *Wizard of Oz* when I wrote it.

In the book, there's a girl that goes on this great journey trying to find the old man of the moon to change her fortune. She meets all these different people and creatures, and each person she meets tells her a different story. Each story that she hears affects her journey, even though she doesn't know it until the very end. Each story kind of builds on the one before. People also called it the book a tribute to storytelling.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you get the most pleasure out of as a book creator?

GRACE LIN: I think that's changed over time. In the beginning it was just the project—the creation—then slowly, it changed. I put my heart and soul into a book, and when I went to school, that was enough. You just poured your all into a project, and then project was done.

But over time, that became not enough. It became sad when I put all my passion into a project, and then nobody else in the world cared. What's been wonderful has been putting all my effort into a project and then having it reach the public and having people actually be touched by it. That is the best part to me now.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you think about your readership when you're writing a book? Are you thinking about the young children that are reading it?

GRACE LIN: I think all projects have to begin with what you're passionate about. I know a lot of authors and illustrators that only write for themselves. I feel like I do both. I do write for myself: all of the books that I write are Asian American, and that has a lot to do with the fact that when I was younger I was uninterested in my Asian heritage. Writing about Asian culture is kind of my way of trying to get it back. Yet, it's also really important to me that these books reach readers that would be interested in it; hopefully it will broaden their horizons.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You really seem to love the Web and seem to play with it very comfortably and fluently. What are your thoughts on the Web as a way to reach your readership and control how you're seen?

GRACE LIN: Over the years, I changed from viewing having a presence on the Web as a self-promotion tool—which I found inappropriate for children's book authors—to seeing the many things I'm now doing online as a way of connecting or sharing with my readers.

When I look at all the amazing books out in the world, and I realize that people have actually found and read mine, it's really quite a humbling feeling. So instead of seeing it as me selling myself or selling my work, I feel like it's more like connecting with and thanking my readers for allowing me to be a part of their reading life.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What project are you working on now?

GRACE LIN: I'm working on a picture book that has a very interesting story behind it. I was in Taiwan, and I got into a taxi, and there was this big, beautiful lily in the taxi driver's cup holder. I said, "Oh, how beautiful," and the taxi driver kind of harrumphed. I said, "You don't like it?" He said, "It's the stupidest thing in the world." I asked him why, and he told me there's a Chinese proverb that says, "When the lily blooms, fortune comes to you." The owner of the taxi company was superstitious, and he wanted fortune to come to his company. So he mandated that all the taxis must have a lily in their taxicab.

I said, "Well, isn't that nice? It's nice." The taxicab driver said, "No, it's stupid." He said, "I'm this old man, and I have to carry this. When I go on lunch break or I take a

break, I can't leave the lily in the car, because it'll die. I have to carry it with me. Everybody makes fun of me and says, 'Who's your girlfriend?' and all these things."

I just thought that was so hilarious, so my picture book is about a taxicab driver who has to carry a lily with him.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you speak Chinese now?

GRACE LIN: If people ask me, I say no, because I don't want them to be horrified by my bad Chinese. But I am taking lessons and trying to learn. If somebody were to speak to me very slowly, I could understand them. They could probably understand me, but they'd have to have a lot of patience, too.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I saw that you're helping raise money for the Foundation for Children's Books with what look like illustrated proverbs.

GRACE LIN: I just love Chinese proverbs. I guess it's left over from my love of fortune cookies. There's a part of me that finds fortunes hokey but also really wise. I love to read them and think about them. I've been wanting to do a picture book on Chinese proverbs.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You seem to have great fun with so much of what you're doing, and it comes across in your books.

GRACE LIN: I feel like the reader can tell if the author or illustrator doesn't care about what they are writing about or what they are painting about. If you're not having fun with it, then the reader is not going to have fun with it; and if you don't care about it, then why should they care about it? So it's really important to me that I enjoy and care about what I work on.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You worked at a children's bookstore once upon a time—Curious George—is that right?

GRACE LIN: Yes. When I got the contract for *The Ugly Vegetables*, it was not a lot of financial compensation, but I felt like I was on my way to the dream of being a children's author and illustrator. That's when I took on all these very, very odd jobs, like designing beer menus. My best and most long-term job during that time was working at the children's bookstore in Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Working at Curious George was an amazing education for me. It was a very different type of education than being at the Rhode Island School of Design, because I really started seeing what other people were doing and what the industry was about, and what was important and what was being sold, and what kids were really enjoying.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What book are you most proud of?

GRACE LIN: I guess the book that I'm probably most proud of in a weird way is my early reader, *Ling and Ting*. The hardest thing to write is the early reader because of the limited vocabulary and trying to keep it so funny and interesting yet following all those early reader rules.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Will you be writing more early reader books?

GRACE LIN: Yes, I have contracted for two more early reader books. I am also writing the companion book to *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

GRACE LIN: When I get stuck in writing, I usually start another project. By the time I get stuck on that one, hopefully the solution will have come for the first project.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's a typical workday like for you?

GRACE LIN: It depends if I'm doing a school visit or not. If I'm doing a school visit, the day is full of traveling and trying to be as outgoing as possible. If the day is a home day where I'm working, it's usually a lot of fighting my urge to just surf on the Internet and eat bad things all day rather than actually work.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How do you balance your illustrating and writing? Are you mostly spending your time writing?

GRACE LIN: These days, I'm spending a lot of time writing, mainly because I happen to be doing a lot of school visits lately, and you cannot illustrate on the road. However, I have been able to write a little bit on the road.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to share with students?

GRACE LIN: It depends on their age group. I create everything from picture books to early readers to novels, so I get to talk to different age groups about different things. I enjoy just talking to older students about the background of the books and multicultural issues. I like to talk to younger students about the writing process to show them how much work and effort and love goes into a book—hopefully making them value and love their books more.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell educators and librarians?

GRACE LIN: One of the things I talk about in my presentations is how people thought that my multicultural books were doomed to have a poor readership—that only Asian girls would want to read my books. I remember a prominent author saying multicultural books

never get on *The New York Times* Bestseller List. And, yet, *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* did hit *The New York Times* Bestseller List.

I use that story not to brag about the success of the book, but to show gatekeepers that there's no limit—there's no stereotype, really, to what kids will read. Don't let preconceived notions fool you: boys will read girl books if it's the right book, and girls will read science books if it's the right book. Caucasians will read about other races; it's just a matter of getting the right book in their hands.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is there something else you would like to include?

GRACE LIN: Before my husband died, I had been very career-oriented. I wanted to write bestsellers, and I wanted to have a very good career. I had to prove myself on this path that other Asian Americans don't tend to take.

After Robert died, I started realizing that was perhaps not the most important thing to be pursuing. I started realizing that my work is really more to share with people, not to impress them. That changed everything for me—how I felt about connecting people and how I felt about my work. I hope that that's what my work gets across.

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