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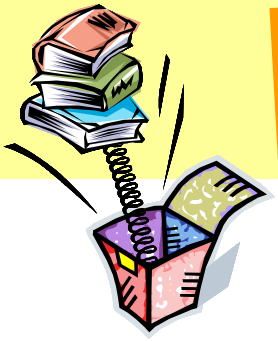

Book Club in a Box

Dragonwings

Sponsored by the Friends of the Whittier Public Library

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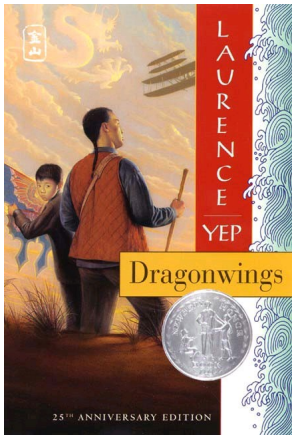
About the Book



A flying machine, a reincarnated dragon, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, a young boy growing up - if this sounds like an unusual combination, it all fits together in the story of *Dragonwings.* A 1975 Newbery Honor book written by Yep after six years of research, Moon Shadow's story comes to life. As a boy of eight, he comes to America to live with his father, Windrider, in Chinatown. An interesting dream sequence is related by Windrider in his effort to explain his actions to Moon Shadow, his newly arrived son. Windrider is driven to build and fly his own airplane. Clear pictures are depicted about life for the Chinese people in and around Chinatown during the early 1900's, many not pleasant. Forced to leave the familiarity of the clan, Moon Shadow and his father board with a white family as Windrider plans and corresponds with the Wright Brothers about airplanes and flight. Moon Shadow grows up quickly as he takes on more jobs as head of the household. The devastation of the earthquake is portrayed with power but not dwelled upon greatly. A trust and friendship develop between cultures as differences are seen as minimal and similarities greater.

About the Author

I was born in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1948, but grew up in a black neighborhood. During elementary and middle school, I commuted to a bilingual school in Chinatown. So I did not confront white American culture until high school. Approaching that culture as an outsider, I have been fascinated by all its aspects — from its great novels to its children's literature, comic art, and science fiction. Thus, I am able to pursue the figure of the "stranger" both in my studies and my writing. While I was in high school, I discovered and began writing science fiction. At 18, my first short story was published — I was paid a penny a word by a science fiction magazine. I continued to write and five years later I published my first novel, *Sweetwater*. In 1966, I attended Marquette University and graduated from the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1970. I received my doctorate in English from the State University of New York at Buffalo, where I wrote my dissertation on William Faulkner's early novels. I now live in San Francisco with my wife, Joanne Ryder, and write and teach. Probably the reason why much of my writing has found its way to a teenage audience is that I'm always pursuing the theme of being an outsider — an alien — and many teenagers feel they're aliens. All of my books have dealt with the outsider — from the aliens of *Sweetwater* to alienated heroes such as the Chinese-American aviator in *Dragonwings.*Today Laurence Yep is known as a premier Asian-American writer. His books have earned many accolades, including Newbery Honor Awards for *Dragonwings* and *Dragon's Gate.* **-Scholastic**

Interview with Laurence Yep

http://www.mousecircus.com/mousecircus/flash/mc_flash.html

1. When you first began writing the Golden Mountain Chronicles, did you have an idea of the whole story in your mind, or have the stories and the characters evolved as you wrote?

"No, there was no plan originally. I had wanted to write a story based on a real-life Chinese American aviator. However, I had to put him in his proper context which was the Chinatown of the 1900's. In the Chinatown that I had known as a child, everyone knew one another; and the same thing happened in my fictional Chinatown. He kept introducing me to friends and family until I wound up writing about seven generations and covered 150 years of American history."

2. Do you enjoy the research that lies behind your novels, and where do you go to do it?

"Research is a lot like a treasure hunt for me. When I visit a city, I try to check out the library and local historical museum to see what either might have. Writing a novel is a bit like building a house of toothpicks; but before I can begin building, someone has scattered the toothpicks around the country and I have to pick them up one by one until I have enough to start."

3. What other qualities, in addition to courage, do you particularly admire - in both fictional and real people!

"I like people who are curious and who can adapt. To do that, they have to keep open minds about other cultures and the world in general. In another words, they love learning things and they never stop doing that. I like to think my friends are the same way as the characters about whom I read and write."

4. What do you hope readers will take away with them ?

"I would like them to see the power of hope. I grew up in an Afro-American neighborhood and went to school in Chinatown so I saw that power first hand. My friends in the projects of both areas were like flower seeds trapped underneath heavy stones and struggling to find the sunlight. Hope is the fuel for that struggle."

Critical Praise

--Laurence Yep's Newbery Honor book (HarperCollins, 1975) offers insights into the lives of Chinese-Americans in early 20th century California. The story begins as eight-year-old Moon Shadow Lee journeys across the Pacific to join his proud and clever father at the family-owned laundry in San Francisco. The boy recounts their problems with prejudice, as well as the kindness of uncles and cousins. Father and son must leave the protection of the family to move out of Chinatown, but they find refuge with a generous and friendly landlady. Once they have successfully established a repair business, they turn their attention to making a flying machine. Though it's a modern invention, part of their motivation is the elder's belief in his own previous dragon existence. Yep draws heavily on his own heritage, but also includes figures such as Teddy Roosevelt and the Wright Brothers, and historic events such as the San Francisco Earthquake. The result is a heartwarming story set in a familiar time and place, but told from a new perspective. The quiet intensity of B. D. Wong's narration enriches the text as he creates memorable voices for a large cast of characters. Wafting, ethereal music signals the end of each side of the cassette, and the cover art is attractive. The only problem is the lightweight cardboard package, which is not sturdy enough for heavy circulation. That shouldn't deter libraries from purchasing this fine recording which will provide upper elementary and middle school listeners with lessons in history, and a gentle reminder of the value of a loving family and loyal friends.

-School Library Journal

Barbara Wysocki, Cora J. Belden Library. Rocky Hill, CT

Further Reading

Other Works by Laurence Yep:

Child of the Owls

Dragon's Gate

Dragon War

Tiger's Blood

If you liked *Dragonwings*, you might like:

An Ocean Apart, A World Away by Lensey Namioka

Jesse by Gary Soto

Six Out Seven by Jess Mowry

Discussion Questions

1. Family - Who are the families? What important role does each play in the novel?

2. Pride - What major characters (at least 3) are proud and what role does that pride play in the novel?

3. Greed - How does greed direct much of the decision-making in this book?

4. Materialism (a primary concern with money and material things) - How does materialism motivate many of the actions in this book?

5. Human Spirit - the human spirit can be defined as those traits which all human beings have in common. Define 3 of these traits as they appear in the novel and discuss the importance of each.

6. Freedom - what are the elements of freedom which appear in the novel? Which characters represent these? How is freedom limited? How can it be exercised?

7. Growing Up is learning to act independently - what actions did Moon Shadow take in the novel which helped him to grow up? What decision was involved in each?

8. Dragonness - what are the elements of dragonness which Windrider discovers? Follow them in the order they appear in the novel and discuss how each helps him to grow as a human being.