

Why Couldn't Snow White be Chinese? - Finding Identity Through Children's Books **by Grace Lin**

When I was in third grade, the class decided to put on a production of "The Wizard of Oz". The news spread across the playground like an electrical current, energizing every girl to ask, "Who will play Dorothy?" The thought was thrilling and delicious, each of us imagining ourselves with ruby shoes. I whispered to my friend Jill, "Do you think I could be Dorothy?"

Jill stared at me in shock, "You couldn't be Dorothy. You're Chinese. Dorothy's not Chinese."

And then I remembered. I was different. I felt stupid for even thinking I could be the star of a play. That Dorothy, like everyone and everything else important, was not like me.

And what was I? Jill had bluntly termed me Chinese. But I didn't feel Chinese. I spoke English, I watched "Little House on the Prairie", learned American history and read books about girls named Betsy and boys named Billy. But, I had black hair and slanted eyes, I ate white rice at home with chopsticks and I got red envelopes for my birthday. Did I belong anywhere?

The books that I loved and read did not help me answer that question. Betsy and Billy were nice friends but they didn't understand. Neither did Madeline, Eloise, or Mike Mulligan. Cinderella, Snow White? I didn't even try to explain. Rikki Tikki Tembo and Five Chinese Brothers tried to be pals, but really what did we have in common? Nothing. And so I remained different from my friends in real life, different from my fictional friends in stories... somehow always different.

I'm older now, and wiser, and I appreciate that difference. Instead of the curse I had felt it was during my childhood, I now treasure it. I realize the beauty of two cultures blending and giving birth to me (!), an Asian American.

When I decided to create children's books as my profession, I remembered my own childhood. I remembered the books I wished I had had when I was a child. Books that would have made me feel like I belonged, that there was someone else like me out there, and that who I was, was actually something great.

So with this in mind, I create my books. I try to make books that make readers appreciate Asian American culture. I try to make books that the contemporary child can

relate to. I try to make books that encourage Asian American children to embrace their identities.

For example, "The Ugly Vegetables" takes place in a suburban neighborhood and deals with one child's chagrin of having a Chinese vegetable garden while the rest of the neighbors grow flowers. "Dim Sum for Everyone!" takes place in Boston's Chinatown and shows a modern family enjoying this unusual cuisine. "Kite-Flying" shows the same family, driving a car, making and flying their own Chinese dragon kite. They are depictions of a present-day Asian American child's life.

Do these books make a difference? I think so. In my life, moments of insecurity and isolation could have been magically erased simply by having a book transform into a friend that shared what I saw and what I am. And, perhaps, if these books had been generously spread, exposing children of all races to the Asian part of the melting pot, perhaps then my childhood friend Jill would not have said, "Dorothy's not Chinese," but rather, "Sure, Dorothy could be Chinese."

Why not? I'd click my heels three times to wish that.

*[Grace Lin](#) is the author and illustrator of more than a dozen picture books, including *The Ugly Vegetables* and *Dim Sum for Everyone!* Most recently, Grace's first children's novel [The Year of the Dog](#) was released with glowing praise. While most of Grace's books are about the Asian-American experience, she believes, "Books erase bias—they make the uncommon everyday, and the mundane exotic. A book makes all cultures universal." See [more about Grace](#) and her work at [her website](#).*