

“Writing Questions: Approaching Mixed-Race Asian American Narratives through Fiction”

In the afterword to his 1997 book, *The Thief of Hearts*, Laurence Yep writes about his mixed-race protagonist, Stacy, and reflects on the changes he has witnessed in his own Chinese American community. Yep writes: “Living in San Francisco and visiting schools, I can see that there is a new generation growing up with its own unique questions, when we have only started to answer the old ones.” *The Thief of Hearts* was the first time I saw myself in a book, and it profoundly shaped my own writing career. As a mixed-race child, it was the first time I considered that my own experiences were worthy of story and narrative. At the same time, rereading Yep’s work as an adult pointed me to the reality that the “questions” Yep identifies are still just being explored. While more books featuring mixed-race protagonists have been published since Yep wrote, the opportunities for mixed-race children to see themselves in books remain relatively limited. It was this confrontation with the continued lack of representation that prompted me to write my own book, *Cilla Lee-Jenkins: Future Author Extraordinaire*, which features a mixed-race protagonist. Drawing on these experiences, in this paper I unite a creative and academic lens, examining the critical evolution of mixed race Asian American narratives alongside my own experiences as an Asian American children’s book writer. Throughout, I consider the impact of the creative “waterings” that writers like Yep provide — as mirrors and windows offer readers the tools, community, and creative nourishment needed to write themselves into fiction. At the same time, I consider how writing itself acts as a “nourishment,” offering a way to ground marginalized and often-erased narratives through story, and giving readers and writers alike permission to voice and assert the validity of their own “unique questions.” Books discussed include *The Thief of Hearts*, Allan Say’s *How My Parents Learned to Eat* (1984), Madelyn Rosenberg and Wendy Wan-Long Shang’s *This is Just a Test* (2017), and my own fiction, *Cilla LeeJenkins: Future Author Extraordinaire* (2017).