

Mini-Tasks #6-13 - TEDTalk Transcript: The Windows and Mirrors of Your Child's Bookshelf**By Grace Lin**Source Link: <https://ed.ted.com/on/a0o0BODb>

I'm going to bet that one of the first things you did today was to look out the window. Maybe you looked just to check the weather. Maybe you look to see the Sun. But what you really saw was the world. That's what a book does. A book can show you the world. But here's the thing about your window. When the light hits it just right, you don't just see the world outside. You can also see your reflection. So the window becomes a mirror. That's also what a book does. A book can show you the world but it can also show you a reflection of yourself.

But what happens if you never see anyone in a book that looks like you? When I was a child there were two things everyone knew about me. One was that I loved books, and the other was that I was Asian. Everyone knew I was Asian because, well, look at me. My family was one of the few Asian families in our town so that meant that except for my sisters, I was the only Asian girl in my elementary school and I did not like that.

I decided early on that I was just going to pretend that I wasn't Asian. I refused to learn Chinese. I ate McDonald's and I curled my hair. I remember in third grade I was walking down the street and I saw my reflection in a store window and I said, "Hmm there's a Chinese girl there. And then I thought, "Oh wait, that's me." I had spent so much time pretending that I wasn't Asian that I really did forget that I was. And in a lot of ways it was really easy to forget. It seemed like there was nobody that looked like me anywhere. There was nobody that looked like me in school; there was nobody that looked like me in the movies; there was nobody that looked like me and TV or in the magazines; and most importantly, there was nobody that looked like me in the books that I loved. In fact, the only book I ever saw with an Asian person in it was this one.

One day, my elementary school librarian took this book out and she said today we're going to read *The Five Chinese Brothers* and all of my classmates turned to me and said "Chinese just like you!" Have you ever been horrified by your own reflection in a mirror? Because that is how I felt every time I was reminded of my ethnicity. In fifth grade, my class decided to put on the play "Returned

to Us,” and all the girls wanted to be Dorothy, me included. So, every day at recess, all the girls who wanted to be Dorothy would stand in a circle, and we would all sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” over and over again, practicing for the audition. Until on the day of the audition I turned to the girl next to me, and I said, “Today’s the audition. Do you think they might choose me to be Dorothy? And she looked at me and she said, “But you can’t be Dorothy! Dorothy’s not Chinese.”

When she said this, I felt so stupid. It was that horrible embarrassment where you get hot and red and sticky, as if even your skin is crying tiny boiling tears. It’s that feeling when someone says to you “Who do you think you are?” and you feel like you’re nobody. I felt like I was nobody. I felt like I could never be Dorothy. I could never be anyone important like that.

But I still loved books. I loved books so much that I even made books in my spare time just for fun. Some were magical adventures. Some were fairy tales. But the heroines were never, ever Asian.

This love of making books stayed with me so much that as I grew older I decided that I wanted to be a children’s book author and illustrator. I went to art school and I even studied in Rome, Italy. There in Rome, I drew and painted the landscape and the architecture and many more pictures of beautiful fairy tale princesses. But one day I was at a cafe with an Italian and he turned to me and said, “so you’re Chinese. How do you say coffee in Chinese?” And I told him that I was American and I didn’t know how to say anything in Chinese. As I explained it to him, he nodded but he was still pretty confused. And he said, “So your parents moved from Taiwan to the United States. Why?” And it was then that I realized I did not know the answer.

I realized that here I was in Rome having a conversation in Italian yet I could not speak one word of my parents’ mother tongue. I realized that I could tell him how long it took Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel. I could tell him what the mascot of Rome was. I could tell him how ancient Italians dyed their hair. But I could not tell him why my own parents immigrated to the United States of America. And for the first time, I was ashamed for the right reasons, because here I was trying to be an artist. And when you’re trying to be an artist, what you’re really doing is trying to create a vision to share with the world. But how could I create any vision to share with the world when I had never even looked at myself?

It was an epiphany after a lifetime of denying my heritage. I was suddenly starved for it. I began to look at Chinese art and I fell in love with Chinese folk art, especially its bright colors and patterns. And I began to paint the same way. When my books were finally published, they featured Chinese culture and Asian characters.

Teachers always tell you to write what you know, but I wasn't doing that. I was writing what I wanted to know, because my books are the books that I wished I had when I was a child. Knowing this, I really should not have been surprised when people called my novel, "Where the Mountain Meets the Moon", a "Chinese Wizard of Oz" because the main character, Minli, is on this journey to find the old man of the moon. Well, Minli is really an Asian Dorothy, a girl that my fifth-grade self would have loved to see.

"Where the Mountain Meets the Moon" won a Newbery Honor, which is kind of like being nominated for an Oscar in children's literature. And because of this, the readership exploded. Teachers put the book on their summer reading lists. Whole communities read it. And you wouldn't believe how many kids sent me letters telling me how much they loved it. Schools even produced plays of it, with my Asian Dorothy becoming a coveted character. In fact, a third grade teacher told me that they ended up having four different Minlis in their play because so many kids wanted to be her! Can you imagine that? Can you imagine creating a character because you felt like an outcast only to hear that that character was the one everyone wished to be? It was amazing and surreal, and the surprises continued.

Because of the book's popularity, librarians from all over the world - from Iowa to Hong Kong - invited me to speak to their students. And it was at one of these schools that a librarian took me aside and she said, "I have to tell you, this year we had a new student, an Asian girl. And I'm ashamed to say that some of the kids made fun of her. But after we read your book, all of a sudden all the kids thought that being Asian was kind of cool. It really made them look at her in a different light." And this made me realize that as much as kids need books to be mirrors, they also need books to be windows. Kids who always see themselves in books need to be able to see things from other viewpoints. How can we expect kids to get along with others in this world, to empathize and to share, if they never see outside of themselves? Because if they did, don't you think that the girl

who stood next to me in fifth grade might have answered a little differently? Don't you think she could have said, "Sure, you could be Dorothy. Why not?"

So tonight, when you go home, please look at your bookshelf. Are all the books mirrors, or are they all windows? Make sure that you have both. Because if you do, you're setting a path for self-worth and empathy and that is a brick road worth following.