



Children's Literature Legacy Award Acceptance Speech



Grace Lin received the 2022 Children's Literature Legacy Award for her significant and lasting contribution to literature for children. She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Banquet held Sunday, June 26, 2022, at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

First, the thank yous. Thank you to:

My agent, Rebecca Sherman, whom I have forgotten to mention in the past, so your name goes first this time!

My family—my parents, my sisters and of course my husband Alex and our wonderful daughter Hazel.

All the publishing people—Harold Underdown, the editor who acquired my first book *The Ugly Vegetables*, all the way back in 1997 at Charlesbridge Publishing and the people I still work with there, like Yolanda Scott and Alyssa Pusey. Also, all the other editors who pushed me on my way—Tracy Gates, Nancy Siscoe, and Christy Ottaviano. And, of course, everyone at my publishing home of Little, Brown Books for Young Readers: especially Publisher Megan Tingley, School & Library Marketing Director Victoria Stapleton, the entire art department—especially Senior Art Director Saho Fujii, who has designed most of my books, and, most importantly, my childhood friend as well as editor Alvina Ling—we truly grew up in publishing together!

And now all my friends. I have always considered myself a bit of a social misfit as well as an introvert, so I am kind of surprised how long this list goes. Ready?

Thank you to:

My blue rose girls: Anna Alter, Libby Koponen, Elaine Magliaro, Linda Wingerter.

My Hi-Yah sisters: Janet Wong and especially Justina Chen, to whom I am forever in debt for helping me with this speech.

My Northampton squad: Jarrett Krosoczka, Mike Curato, and Lisa Yee.

My writing quad: Jonathan Auxier, Kate Milford, and Laurel Snyder.

My Pink Ladies: Shannon Hale, Mitali Perkins, Renée Watson, Kekla Magoon, Linda Sue Park, and Jenni Holm.

My Mojo women: Jackie Davies, Molly Burnham, Leslie Connor, Ali Benjamin, and Lita Judge.

And so many more—my friends of the Hotel Bar; my visits coordinator Aimee Maclagger; Kirsten Cappy of Curious City; Alison Morris of First Book, the people at the Carle Museum, my Kids Ask Authors team and all the authors and kids who have been on that podcast; all the teachers, all the librarians, schools I have visited; and, of course, the Children’s Literature Legacy Award Selection Committee: Brian E. Wilson, Susan Dunn, Nick M. Glass, Ms. Denise Rae Lyons, Mrs. Lucinda S. Whitehurst, Deanna Mae Romriell, and Jordan Dubin; and the American Library Association.

I’ll apologize right now to the rest of you whom I did not mention by name, but I hope you know how much I truly appreciate you.

After I got off the Zoom call with the Legacy Award committee and the news sank in, I was seized by a bad case of imposter syndrome. And throughout my recurring doubts, I remembered a story my mother had told me long ago, a story I had forgotten.

When my parents first moved to the United States, they were poor and struggling. They took the only apartment they could afford in New York City—a small and dark and grimy place that no matter how hard my mother cleaned, it remained dirty. And, even worse, the place had bugs. Small, gross bugs that swarmed in the night—the stuff of nightmares and horror movies.

So, as soon as they could, my parents left that apartment. They moved to a better place, a bit larger, a bit cleaner. But the bugs followed them, swarming again at night. “You dirty Chinese,” the landlord yelled at my mother. “You brought bugs to my building!”

They moved again, this time to a house in the country. But before they moved into the house, my mother hung all their belongings out on a clothesline. All their possessions—everything they owned: pillows, slippers, underwear—she left outside for days, for all the world to see. It was the only way, my mother told me, to get rid of the bugs.

Since remembering that story, I feel like the thoughts that make up my imposter syndrome are just like those bugs. They swarm late at night and multiply and seem impossible to get rid of. While most of those thoughts are better spoken with some sort of therapist, I thought for my speech I would talk about a few of the more persistent bugs that I suspect I share with many of you in this very room—my fellow book creators, my fellow Asian Americans, and our much-appreciated educators.

But first—as I do at my school visits—let’s enjoy a drawing break. Please follow along:

[Step 1: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 2: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 3: Grace Lin provides instructions]



Okay, pencils down. Curious? Don't worry, we'll come back to this.

So, this first story is for the book creators, which includes the publishing people. Many years ago, at a big holiday dinner that included parents, a brother-in-law, and extended family, the topic turned to favorite movies. I am not a big movie buff, but I had seen one movie, *Rudy*, that came up in conversation. For those who do not know, it is about a boy who desperately wants to play football for Notre Dame. Despite not having the talent or physique, Rudy overcomes the odds and plays for the team. My relative waxed poetic about this movie, elevating it to masterpiece status. But I only lukewarmly agreed.

“Yeah, it was great that he worked so hard to accomplish his dream,” I said. “But I guess I wish his dream had been something other than football.”

“What?” my relative spat out in scorn, and then sneered, “Like children’s books?”

It is hard when your life’s work is disparaged. All of us have experienced the disdain, the

contempt for the work we do for children—we are all constantly asked, “So, when are you going to write a real book, one for adults?”

We shoo these bugs away, without realizing the microscopic eggs they have left behind. We don't realize that they have made us see ourselves as small. Because many authors and illustrators often say to themselves or to others: “I'm just telling a story or I'm just drawing pictures. It doesn't mean anything!”

Sometimes I've said this to myself to relieve the pressures of creating—because if it's not important, then the stakes don't feel as high, right? But I've also found myself saying this in the face of criticism—as a way to relieve myself of responsibility. And while both reasons are understandable, the danger of diminishment is that we start to believe it. We start to believe that what we do has very little purpose and impact, that we are just creating meaningless amusements for children. And when we start to believe that, we also start to believe that we, ourselves, are not important.

But, in truth, we are not just creating books. We are helping to create a better human society.

Because for many children our books are their first experience with art and culture. So, it is our books that plant the seeds of what is considered beautiful and what is considered ugly. It is our books that help establish when it's okay to laugh and when it's okay to cry. It is our books that support their beliefs of what is fair and what is unfair. And it is our books that tell them who heroes are and who heroes can be.

So, we are the ones who are actively advocating what we as a society value. We are showing what our culture wishes to pass down to future generations. We are physically creating what humanity treasures.

So, remember—what we do is important.

Drawing break 2! Pick up those pencils:

[Step 4: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 5: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 6: Grace Lin provides instructions]



Okay, pencils down again!

For my fellow Asian Americans: We all have that story. Usually, many of them. Here are some of mine. When I was in first or second grade, my elementary school librarian held up a picture book and said to the class, “Today we are going to read *The Five Chinese Brothers*.” At that, my whole class turned, pointed at me and said, “Chinese! Just like you!”

And as I stared at the cover, at the illustrations of the yellow-faced, pig-tailed, and slanted-eyed Chinamen, I felt a wave of revulsion and horror. This was not “just like

me.” Or at least not how I wanted to be. And it was not how I wanted to be seen.

Let’s move forward to 1996, just around the time when email was starting to be used. I was graduating from art school and aspiring to become a children’s book illustrator. Since this was pre-internet, I had to set up meetings with art directors and editors at publishing houses to get them to see my work. This was often a quick ten-minute meeting in the lobby of a tall, imposing building. At one such meeting, I met with an editor who quickly flipped through my portfolio and then handed it back to me. “I like your stuff,” he told me. “But I already got an Asian guy, so I don’t need you. Sorry.”

Now, let’s go to Jan 24th of this year, the day of the ALA Youth Media Award announcements. After the Legacy Award was announced, I received messages from all over, which I tried my best to respond to. One exchange went like this:

Person: Congratulations on your award. How exciting for you, and so well earned!

Me: Thank you!

Person: I have asked Terry at Holiday House for a review copy, and as soon as I get it, I would love to interview you for the blog.

Me: Oops. I think you have the wrong author. That’s Andrea Wang.

What makes these stories so remarkable is really how unremarkable they are. Almost every Asian American can instantly rattle off their own. These incidents are like ants, so many of them, everywhere. And just like how one ant is fairly harmless—you flick it and it’s gone—it’s when they multiply and set up colonies in your home and head that you realize how very harmful they are.

Our country is so used to seeing Asians as caricatures or sidekicks, as nonexistent or exactly the same, and almost always as a foreign “other.” Asian Americans have paid a

steep price for that otherness throughout history and today. From the Chinese Exclusion Act to Japanese American internment to the recent violent anti-Asian attacks—to be seen as a foreign “other,” whether consciously or unconsciously, is harmful. It is demeaning and damaging. For our children, for everyone.

So, for the past twenty-four years I have deliberately created children’s books showing that Asians are not “other.” That Asians are people. That Asians are people who have best friends, who have families, who have holidays, and who eat at restaurants. That Asian people have myths and delicacies and jokes and love. Creating these books—these books that show how human we all are—has been my life’s work. Sometimes, I admit, I did this work with resentment; other times I did it with pride; but I have always done it with conviction. From books ranging from gardening to flying dragons, from dumplings to moon phases, my message has always been the same: We are your classmates, we are your friends, we are your families, we are you. We are us.

So, remember—we belong here.

Drawing break 3!

[Step 7: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 8: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 9: Grace Lin provides instructions]



Okay, we're not done yet, but pencils down. We still have one last important thing to add, but we'll do that right after this last story.

For our much-appreciated educators. This past presidential election was a bit of nail biter. You may be trying to forget the whole ordeal, but remember: we did not officially know who had won the presidency until days after the election. Many days. Now, my husband and I were particularly passionate about our preferred candidate, and our enthusiasm, for better or worse, was passed on to our young daughter. So, on the morning after Election Day, my daughter woke up and looked at me with much anxiety. "Who won?" she asked me. I hesitated. It was just all so confusing. But then, perhaps, maybe it wasn't.

"We don't know yet," I said. "But no matter what, we're going to keep working hard to do good things."

And that answer—which came to me from some divine Mom guardian above—was so exactly right, so amazingly simple yet so incredibly difficult to actually do.

Because it's hard to keep working to do good things. It's hard to flood kids with diverse books when you are being flooded with COVID protocols. It's hard to acknowledge everyone's humanity when laws are being written that won't even let you say the word *gay*. It's hard to share books with new ideas and different viewpoints when you are accused of indoctrination. It is hard when politicians compare you to cockroaches and threaten you with fines and imprisonment for doing your job. For doing your life's work.

Yet you are still working hard. You are still doing the good things—fighting book bans

and advocating for new books and leading protests against censorship—and you are doing the so-very-important, small things, too. You are remembering to say *friends* instead of *boys and girls*, you are sharing diverse books every day—not just during Lunar New Year and Black History Month, and you are quietly retiring old, outdated books from the reading rotation and replacing them with new books that reflect our present-day world. You keep opening those sliding glass doors for the next generation.

My much-appreciated educators—you are not vermin, you are vital. For you are true essential workers—you are essential workers of the spirit. Because it is your hard work and your good things—from your biggest advocacy and your smallest affirmation—that foster the humane part of humanity.

So, remember—you are needed.

Drawing break 4! The last bit:

[Step 10: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 11: Grace Lin provides instructions]



[Step 12: Grace Lin provides instructions]



Ta-da! We have drawn a firefly!

So, why did we all draw fireflies? Well—in that very first story that I told you when my mother put out her possessions for the world to see, to get rid of the bugs—I realize that the stories I create and put out in the world to see, I do it with that same hope. I do it with the hope that my books will get rid of the bugs.

Because the most harmful bugs in that story were not the actual insects, but the ugly ideas that the landlord spoke and spread. These days, there are many people, too many people, who choose to see us not as humans but as bugs. Insignificant. Other. A pestilence.

Yet we are important, we belong, and we are needed.

Because when I think about how things were when I began publishing in the 1990s—when diverse books were called “multicultural,” when books with Asian characters were only for Asian readers and books with Black characters were only for Black readers and all of them were always written by white people; when the very idea of a BIPOC book hitting the bestseller list was completely unbelievable—I just don’t know how I got here. I don’t know how I managed to cobble together a catalog of books, much less a career, even less a legacy.

However, I realize now that I am here today because of all of you. It is because of you—my fellow book creators, my fellow Asian Americans, and the much-appreciated educators. It is because of all of you who care about children and who are passionate about children’s books, all of you who have read and have shared my books, all of you who believe that the work of literature can make a better, kinder, and more compassionate humanity. You—every single one of you—have changed the landscape of this world.

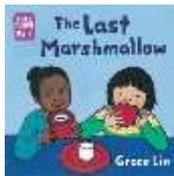
It is your lights—big and small, steady and flickering—that are breaking through the monotone of children’s literature, creating constellations that others can follow and join. It has been your lights that have glinted through my moments of despair, your lights that

gleam hope for a better tomorrow; it has been your lights that have led me here.

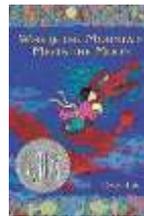
So, when others choose to see us as bugs, I want us to show them that we are fireflies. We are the fireflies that can change the landscape of the night, transforming a landscape of depressing gloom into one of twinkling, magical hope. That is our legacy. Because when humanity is ugly and dark, it is our lights that will remind the world that humanity can also be beautiful.

© Grace Lin, 2022. Used by permission.
Grace Lin photo © Danielle Tait

Select Titles by Grace Lin



The Last Marshmallow
Charlesbridge, 2020



Where the Mountain Meets the Moon
Little, Brown, 2009



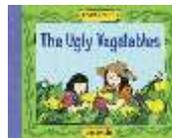
A Big Mooncake for Little Star
Little, Brown, 2017



The Year of the Dog
Little, Brown, 2006



Ling & Ting: Not Exactly the Same!
Little, Brown, 2010



The Ugly Vegetables
Charlesbridge, 1999