

# Wilder Medal Acceptance

*Laurence Yep*

First, before I say anything else, I want to thank my wife, Joanne Ryder, because I wouldn't be here tonight without her guidance and support. She was the one who first asked me to write for children and then made sure that my writing kept to a high standard. Even when I decided to concentrate on my writing instead of accepting a tenured professorship at a university (along with a beachfront condo), she did not argue. She simply said it was my decision to make.

I also want to thank the American Library Association, which has been so generous to me in the past. When I work in the solitude of my study, I can never tell how people are going to react to what I've written. Each Newbery Honor has been a surprise, and this award was an even greater one. I never expected to be in such company as the previous winners

my way to give a speech at UC-Davis, so the news reached me belatedly, and it was only later, as I sat on the train en route to the university, that the news finally had a chance to sink in. I want to assure the committee members that even though I didn't get a chance to speak to all of them, I felt just as much excitement and pleasure as if I had found out immediately, and it was only because we were in a crowded train car that my wife and I had to restrain our outward celebration.

However, Joanne and I did say to each other that we have taken a strange, wonderful journey together, and there have been so many others besides her who have helped me along that path that I can't name them all in the short time given me. Over the years, I have worked with so many marvelous people at HarperCollins, Putnam, Scholastic, and Hyperion. But I need to single out three of them: Charlotte Zolotow, Toni Markiet, and Phoebe Yeh. Thank you for putting up with me all these years. I also want to thank two people from Harper who are present with us only in spirit: Frank Scioscia, who taught me how to tie a windsor knot at my first ALA (up until then I'd always worn clip-ons), and, of course, Bill Morris, who did so much for both writers and librarians.

My paternal grandfather, Lung—or Dragon, as his name means in English—would have been amazed to see his grandson speaking to so many people tonight. He was a humble man who, all his life, cleaned people's houses and cooked their meals, and his ambition was to have his children lead better lives. My father was well on his way to achieving my grandfather's dream when the Depression hit and my grandfather lost all his hard-earned savings.

My father had to drop out of college and was reduced to menial work, including picking fruit. But as he gathered peaches from the trees with aching arms, he promised himself that his sons would get the education he never had. He and my mother taught me to work hard, by word and by example, and my parents made many sacrifices to put my brother and me through school so we both could receive our doctorates.

of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, and I especially want to thank the committee for including me in that illustrious group.

I'm afraid that I missed the initial call from Janice Del Negro and her committee because I wasn't at home. I was on

*Laurence Yep is the winner of the 2005 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago on June 26, 2005.*



And so tonight, through your kindness, you've let me live out something beyond the wildest dreams of my grandfather and parents.

I grew up in an African American neighborhood and went to school in Chinatown, so my whole life has been a process of trying to understand my own place in America as well as the place of my family; but in the late sixties, when I first began searching for answers, there were only a handful of Chinese American writers, no Asian American studies programs, and one single Chinese American history textbook. I quite literally had no map for where I was, where I had been, or what lay ahead of me in that unknown territory.

However, as landmarks for my journey I had my memories of Chinatown and the stories of people like my paternal grandfather and his friends in Chinatown, my paternal grandmother in China, and my maternal grandparents in West Virginia.

And they have led me along two parallel paths. One has been the historical research that became the basis for the novels *Dragonwings* and *Dragon's Gate*. But these novels were never meant to stand alone. The Chinatown that I knew as a child was small and intimate, where everyone knew one another, and it was the same way with the Chinatown that I created in my imagination. The characters from *Dragonwings* and *Dragon's Gate* introduced me to their friends and family, and their stories have grown into the Golden Mountain Chronicles—the record of seven generations of Chinese Americans and their adventures through 150 years of American history. America changed the first Chinese who came here as much as they changed their new country; and America has continued transforming their descendants in ways that I'm still trying to comprehend. And along the way, I have encountered true stories buried by time that were real treasures. A cook in a Montana stagecoach station

may turn out to be a circus juggler. A Chinese American grocer may once have been a professional basketball player.

However, Chinatown is full not only of history but of legends, and I could not understand Chinese American history without understanding the myths that shape and continue to shape a people. So my other path has taken me into a mythology in which four thousand years

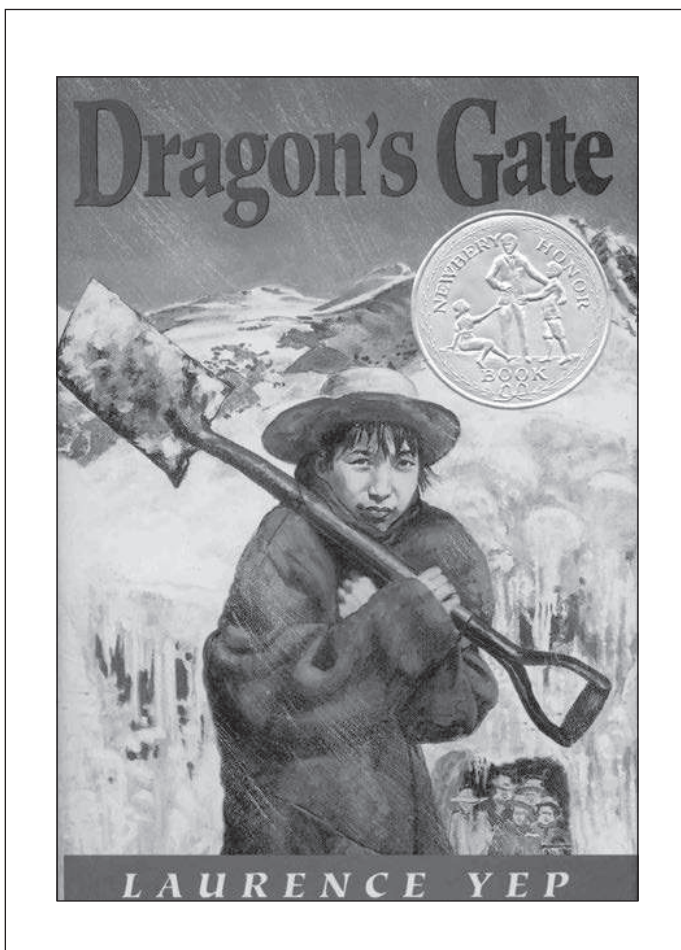
in China who are both more noble than humans but also more arrogant, and who, when I put them into books such as the *Dragon of the Lost Sea* series, have always taken me where they want to go rather than where I tell them to.

But the magical, shape-shifting tigers of Chinese legend have also fascinated me; for these tigers are not only almost as deadly and powerful as dragons but also more accessible, willing to live among humans with whom they can form bonds that reach beyond bone and blood to the very soul. And I've begun to explore that special link in a fantasy series about a tiger wizard and his troubled human companion, beginning with *The Tiger's Apprentice*.

But whether it's science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, mysteries, or contemporary realism, I have one main theme in my writing, and I learned that lesson both in my African American neighborhood and in Chinatown: A person's true value can be measured neither by a bank account nor by titles but by that person's heart; and I have been privileged to meet people, both in person and in books, who have led lives of quiet heroism and who rose to the occasion when challenged.

Nor are my family and their friends that exceptional. The details may vary, but their stories are the stories of your own grandparents and parents who dreamt the same things for your families and then worked just as hard to make them happen.

As a person and as a writer, I have been shaped by many people, so I accept this medal not just for myself but on behalf of my wife, Joanne, my parents, my grandparents, my family, and the "oldtimers" in Chinatown. It will encourage me to continue on this strange journey into those uncharted territories of history and legend. ☸



of Chinese legends and stories lie on top of one another like the layers of an archeological dig. And just as there were gems to be found in Chinese American history, there were also treasures to be discovered in the folklore—sometimes hidden in the tiniest type in the dullest of scholarly footnotes—such as the story of the boy who escaped deadly, magical snakes not by fighting them or fleeing but by the uniquely Chinese strategy of eating them for dinner. Or the story of why human spit is the secret terror of all ghosts.

And, of course, I have learned some of the marvelous tales of proud, willful dragons