

# The AACCP Newsletter

Since 1970

Asian American Curriculum Project, Inc.

March 2010

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## How I Came to Write *Almond Cookies and Dragon Well Tea*

By Cynthia Chin-Lee

My first children's book, *Almond Cookies and Dragon Well Tea*, came out in 1993. I wrote it in response to an announcement in a newsletter about a multicultural children's book contest. I grew up in Washington, DC in the 1960s and 70s. My parents were both born in the US, the children of Chinese immigrants. My grandparents on my father's side owned a laundry and my grandparents on my mother's side owned a small grocery store and later a restaurant.

I felt qualified to write a multicultural book, having had both Chinese and American culture in my childhood and the sting of racism that went both ways. People I met in the non-Chinese world could be rude and hateful because I was not like them. The Chinese community, including my family, would question why I wasn't more Chinese.

I wrote a story with autobiographical elements that came from personal experience. In the story, Erica, who has European roots, is excited and nervous about visiting the home of her friend, Nancy, who has Chinese origins. When I was in elementary school, I had invited a friend to my house. Naturally, she asked her parent's permission. Her mother, however, first came to visit our house before she would allow her daughter to play with me.

My mother thought that was because my friend's mother was curious, possibly distrustful. She might have expected that we lived in an opium den? What sort of exotic or dangerous things would there be? Firecrackers? Dragons?

I sent my manuscript into the publisher, only to find that the newsletter had printed incorrect information. The contest had been over the previous year and they rejected my story anyway. Undaunted, I sent the manuscript to a Macmillan editor who had been listed in a directory as being interested in "multicultural" books. That editor, Harold Underdown, sent me a personal letter, saying he liked the story but wanted a re-write. I revised the story, but he still rejected the manuscript. I mention him because he later bought two of my books (*A Is for Asia*, *Amelia to Zora: 26 Women Who Changed the World*.)

By chance I read in the now-defunct Asian Week newspaper that Polychrome Publishing was looking for Asian American children's stories. Ever hopeful, I sent them my story and even got to recommend my illustrator, You Shan Tang.

The book has done moderately well with mostly positive reviews. I recall one review criticized the book for being set in a Chinese laundry, thus perpetuating the stereotype. But, if you read my biographical note, you'll see that my grandparents owned a laundry. I've always been proud of my family's modest beginnings. Even in fiction, writers try to choose details that resonate with meaning for them.

Cynthia Chin-Lee is the author of six books, one for adults and five for children, including the best-selling *Amelia to Zora: 26 Women Who Changed the World*. Her website is [cynthiachinlee.com](http://cynthiachinlee.com) and her blog is [cynthiachinlee.blogspot.com](http://cynthiachinlee.blogspot.com).

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## Excerpt from an Interview with Ruthanne Lum McCunn

Interviewed by Terry Hong

Through the decades, Ruthanne Lum McCunn has built a lauded career giving voice to spirited, groundbreaking heroes of Asian descent. Growing up in a large, extended family in Hong Kong, McCunn, who is half Chinese and half Scottish American, was surrounded by strong, independent women to inspire her. Her titles include *Sole Survivor* (1985), about a Chinese sailor who miraculously survived 133 days adrift in the Atlantic Ocean after his ship was sunk during World War II; *Wooden Fish Songs* (1995), in which three very different women present the life of a Chinese American immigrant to whom they are somehow related; *The Moon Pearl* (2000), about a group of brave young women in 1830s China who refused to accept arranged marriages and vowed to live independent lives as spinners; and her latest *God of Luck* (2007), which tells the story of one Chinese man among

thousands who were kidnapped and sold into slavery in the mid-19th century to work in the deadly guano mines in faraway Peru.

More than merely appreciating McCunn's many titles, I also owe her an unrepayable debt of literary gratitude. Decades ago, her children's classic, *Pie-Biter*, was the book that sparked my initial interest in Asian American literature. I can't emphasize enough just how important finding *Pie-Biter* was to my literary development. As the first bona fide children's picture book by an Asian American author that celebrates the Asian American experience, *Pie-Biter* is based on a real-life Chinese immigrant boy who arrives in the American West in the late 1800s to work on the transcontinental railroads and, as tall tales go, gets his strength from eating pies.

(Continued on page 3)

## Give Us Your Feedback

Please feel free to send us your reviews, comments, and book suggestions. You can contact us at -  
aapinc@asianamericanbooks.com

### Up Coming Events

Here are some events that AACCP will soon be attending. Invite us to your events.

Date/Time	Event	Location
Apr. 9-11	National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education (NAAPAE) Annual Conference	Burlingame, CA
April 24-25	Los Angeles Times Festival of Books with author Eugene Lee at the AACCP booth	UCLA Los Angeles, CA
April 24 8:30-12:30pm	Asian & Pacific Islander American Heritage Workshop and Crossing Boundaries Book Launch	Francisco Middle Sch. San Francisco, CA
April 25 11-3:30pm	Nikkei Matsuri - Suzume no Gakko hosts a special kids arts and crafts event within the wider celebration	Japantown San Jose, CA
May 22	The Asian Pacific American Heritage Authors Celebration	Foster City Library Foster City, CA
Other Event of Interest that AACCP May Not Attend		
Apr. 7-11	Association for Asian American Studies National Conference	Omni Austin Hotel Austin, TX
Apr. 8-10	Nat. Assoc. for Ethnic Studies Conference	L'Enfant Plaza Hotel Washington, DC
Apr. 9-11	The Chinese Education Conference 2010	Westin Hotel San Francisco, CA
April 10-11 17-18	Northern CA Cherry Blossom Festival	Japantown San Francisco, CA
April 24	41st Annual Manzanar Pilgrimage	Manzanar National Historic Site, CA
June 1-5	23rd Annual National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) in American Higher Education	National Harbor, MD
June 17-20	OCA National Convention	Houston, TX
June 19	Japanese Cultural Fair	Santa Cruz, CA
June 23-25	2010 Advancing Justice Conference - Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders Building New Foundations for Civil Rights	Alexandria, VA
June 30 - July 4	JACL National Convention	Chicago, IL

## Editor's Message

Hello Everyone,

This is our first AACCP newsletter during our hiatus. For those of you that did not read the editor's message from last month, we're trying out a new format that allows our readers and friends to help write the articles and book reviews.

This month we were able to get contributions from our author friends Cynthia Chin-Lee and Ruthanne Lum McCunn. Thank you so much for your help. Thank you also to Terry Hong for allowing us to use parts of your interview.

We weren't so successful in getting original short descriptions for the new books listed below. Sorry about that - hopefully we'll have better luck next month. If you do click on "View Additional Information," you will get the standard information that you'll find on the book.

Okay everyone, jump on the bandwagon - give us your articles and reviews for April. I'm especially hoping some students would be interested in taking up the challenge of at least writing some original short book descriptions.

Don't forget our offer - if we accept an article, editorial, or book review of yours, you can have any book that you desire at our cost plus shipping and handling.

If you are getting the emailed version of the newsletter, just reply to this email with your interest in contributing to our newsletters and I will write to you with more instructions. If you're reading this on our website, email us through our online form on our contact page.

If you are interested in doing an article or book review, but need some help with ideas and suggestions, contact us and we may be able to work with you on finding something. I have a big list of books that I'd love to have reviewed.

The deadline for letting me know that you are interested in contributing for the next newsletter is April 14th and the deadline for actual submissions is April 21.

A quick announcements - the San Mateo Asian Pacific American Heritage Celebration (SMAPAHC) has also gone on hiatus for this year. However, the organizers of SMAPAHC (AACCP, San Mateo OCA and JACL) in cooperation with the Foster City Library are instead hosting the Asian Pacific American Heritage Authors Celebration.

This is shaping up to be a great event. So far we have Judy Yung, Eddie Fung, Hiroshi Kashiwagi, Cynthia Chin-Lee, Frances Kakugawa, Ann Bowler, Grace Takahashi, and Rick Rocamora among our guest authors. Stay tuned for more news on this event in our next newsletter.

For any authors that may be reading this, write to me about your interest in joining us. My apologies for not inviting you yet.

Bye.

Leonard Chan  
**Executive Editor**

## Excerpts from an Interview with Ruthanne Lum McCunn

(Continued from page 1)

Even though I'm not Chinese American (although the Hong side of my family originated in China 46 generations ago), and even though I don't have direct ancestors who built the transcontinental railroad, *Pie-Biter* offers a collective historical past with which I can identify as an Asian American today. Stories like *Pie-Biter* allowed me to voice my discomfort about growing up without books that spoke to my own experience. Contrast McCunn's book - her very many books, actually! - to something like the still-popular *The Five Chinese Brothers* which is all about the exotic and foreign. Instead, *Pie-Biter* is a piece of genuine history with none of the cloying made-up exoticism seen through someone else's eyes.

Of all of McCunn's many books, her debut novel *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (1981) remains her signature work. Based on the life of a 19th-century Chinese American pioneer woman, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* is almost three decades old, has had countless printings, has never been out of print, is available in eight languages, is ubiquitous on high school and college reading lists, and has even been made into a PBS film of the same name.

So when a galley arrived late last year which seemed to be about Polly Bemis, said Chinese American pioneer woman, I immediately thought of McCunn's now-classic. I ended up reviewing Christopher Corbett's *The Poker Bride: The First Chinese in the Wild West* for a major newspaper, and will admit reading it to be a frustrating experience. And so I contacted McCunn, and we started chatting about history, authenticity, writing, and so much more...

**Let's go back to your first novel, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*; some might also call it your signature title. What's the back story of how you came to write that?**

I was a teacher and want-to-be writer researching Chinese in the West when I stumbled upon a sketch about Lalu Nathoy, who was sold by her father to bandits during a drought in 1870s northern China, then shipped to San Francisco and auctioned off to a saloon keeper in an Idaho mining camp, where she was renamed Polly and won her freedom through a poker game. I instantly knew I had to find out more and write a book about her. After all, how many writers are gifted with such an incredible plot? Better yet, Polly was an amazing human being whose spirit and generosity were legendary. She reminded me so much of my own great-grandmother who was also born in northern China and sold into slavery.

**Why didn't you write about your great-grandmother?**

As a girl dreaming about becoming a writer, I'd actually intended to write about her. Living in America, however, the mythology that passes for American history was driving me crazy, and by writing about Lalu/Polly, I could reveal a part of American history most people don't know about as well as tell a terrific story.

Maybe there were other forces at work, too. Before I began working on *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, a fortuneteller told me Lalu/Polly was holding my hand, and I certainly felt that as I was researching and writing about her. Then, after *Thousand Pieces of Gold* came out, I learned that my father, who'd died when I was a girl, had met Polly when he was a teenager working summer jobs as a fire watcher in Idaho.

**Holy moly! Your father's the one who sent that story to you! His afterlife gift for sure!**

I like to think so, too. Although I never had the opportunity to know him, I've been told we're very much alike. He loved books and history. In fact, he apparently took the job as fire watcher so he could curl up on his perch and read!

**I can just imagine him on his (now heavenly) perch mesmerized by *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, maybe even reading to Polly herself (since she was illiterate ...)! They met in this life... absolutely believe they're hanging out in next, right? What I can't believe is that almost 30 years have passed since the book was first published! How has it changed and morphed since then? Do you feel differently about it now than when you started the project?**

As part of my research for *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, I went to Idaho and interviewed people who had known Polly. But after the book came out, I was contacted by more people who'd known her and shared more anecdotes. Also, an archivist who read *Thousand Pieces of Gold* noticed documents with her name on them in the National Archives. They'd been misfiled, so for all intents and purposes, lost, and the archivist gave me copies at a book signing.

There've been many translations of *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, and Tsoi Nuliang, the translator in China, did additional research through a contact at Beijing University and learned *Lalu* means either "Islam" or "long life" and her origins were most likely Daur, a minority in Mongolia that had settled in northern China and adapted to Chinese customs. Astonishingly, none of these discoveries contradicted the analyses and judgments I'd made about Lalu/Polly as a person for the novel, and I was able to add all the new information in an Afterword for a new edition which came out a few years ago.

Best of all, the Chinese and Mongolian translations of *Thousand Pieces of Gold* gave Lalu/Polly the opportunity to go back to where her life began, and her final cabin on the Salmon River is now a museum. Thousands of river rafters stop there each summer, so Polly, who was renowned for her hospitality, is still opening her home to visitors almost 80 years after her death!

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**So let me bring up that problematic concept of authenticity. Remember how bestselling author Changrae Lee (*Native Speaker, A Gesture Life*), who is Korean American, ruffled some feathers with his critically-acclaimed *Aloft*, in which his main character is a white man? But Professor Jeannie Pfaelzer has won awards writing about the Chinese American experience in her *New York Times* Notable Book *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans*. What do you think about an author writing outside his/her ethnic box? Is it possible for an author to write "authentically" about an experience not his or her own?**

If authors could only write about their own experiences, they'd be awfully limited! I wrote *Wooden Fish Songs* with three very different first person narrators -- Chinese, White, and Black -- although all women and all outsiders in their communities. *Sole Survivor* is from the point of view of a Chinese man who holds the Guinness World Record for survival at sea. The *Moon Pearl* is about girls in 1830s China who rebelled against marriage. *God of Luck* is about a couple who've been torn apart by the Pacific slave trade so the husband is digging guano in Peru and the wife is raising silkworms back home in China. None of these are my experiences any more than *Thousand Pieces of Gold* was, but that's what I love about being a writer and reader: I get to immerse myself entirely in different worlds through compelling characters and stories.

Clearly I've written outside my ethnic box -- and outside my gender! And, since I mostly write historical novels, outside of my centuries!

**Okay, so I have to get a bit pushy here... what about Arthur Golden, who got sued for stealing /maligning someone else's life with his bestselling (overwrought, exoticized) *Memoirs of a Geisha*? He's just one of a very long list of authors who have usurped someone else's culture, some else's history, and written**

some spectacle. Your writing outside of your experience as a hapa Chinese Scottish American capturing different moments in Chinese/Chinese American history, is very different than, say Claire Huchet Bishop, who wrote the still available, still cringe-inducing *The Five Chinese Brothers* -- which makes me have to thank you again for *Pie-Biter* -- which also brings me back to the "authenticity" question...

When I came to America, I knew nothing about the country except what I'd seen in the movies, and we all know how authentic they are! I took American history in college, but everything in the textbooks and lectures was about White America. Not surprisingly, then, nobody I met knew much about the history of their particular ethnicity either. In graduate school, I finally learned the history of African Americans because I was in a progressive training program for people who wanted to teach in inner city schools. Then I happened to be living in Santa Barbara when the first Chicano Studies course in America was offered, so I signed up. The reason why I was researching about Chinese in the West was because there was nothing in my students' textbooks.

As for culture, I don't think being born into a particular group automatically confers cultural knowledge. Also, cultural norms vary widely. To write *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, for example, I had to research life in northern China which I knew nothing about -- and

which is as different from southern China as American northern states are from the southern. Sure, my great-grandmother was from northern China, but she'd moved to Hong Kong when she was in her 30s, and the family I grew up in was completely southern. I can't begin to count the number of hours I spent studying about northern Chinese -- and I was thrilled that when the Chinese and Mongolian translations of *Thousand Pieces of Gold* came out and I was invited to visit, no one would believe it was my first trip.

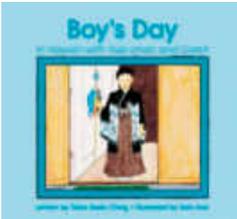
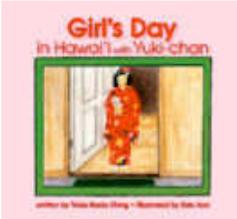
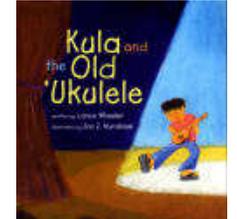
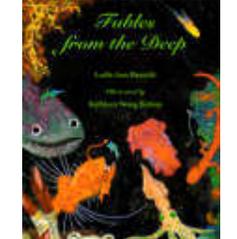
Anyway, to be perfectly honest, the most challenging hurdle for me in my books hasn't been history or culture or gender but class. One of the women in *Wooden Fish Songs* came from a privileged New England family, and it literally took me YEARS to come to grips with her character! In large part, because I had to overcome long-held prejudices.

But that's exactly why I love to write -- and read. I get to go on voyages of discovery that gift me with new insights.

The entire interview can be found at --  
<http://bookdragonreviews.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/2010-03-01-bookslut--an-interview-with-ruthanne-lum-mccunn.pdf>  
 Terry Hong's Blog is at --  
<http://bookdragon.si.edu/>

## ADDITIONS TO OUR WEBSITE

The following books are discounted for subscribers to our newsletter. The discounts on these books end April 19, 2010.

	<p><b>Boy's Day In Hawai'i with Yuki-chan and Grant</b></p> <p>By Tokie Ikeda Ching          Illustrated by Sets Arai          2008, 32 pages, Hardback.</p> <p>Item #3598, Normally \$12.95 ... for newsletter subscribers <b>\$10.36</b></p>
	<p><b>Girl's Day In Hawai'i with Yuki-chan</b></p> <p>By Tokie Ikeda Ching          Illustrated by Sets Arai          2007, 40 pages, Hardback.</p> <p>Item #3599, Normally \$14.95 ... for newsletter subscribers <b>\$11.96</b></p>
	<p><b>Kula and the Old Ukulele</b></p> <p>By Lance Wheeler          Illustrated by Jon J. Murakami          2007, 29 pages, Hardback.</p> <p>Item #3600, Normally \$12.95 ... for newsletter subscribers <b>\$10.36</b></p>
	<p><b>Fables from the Deep</b></p> <p>By Leslie Ann Hayashi          2002, 39 pages, Hardback.          Kathleen Wong Bishop</p> <p>Item #3601, Normally \$14.95 ... for newsletter subscribers <b>\$11.96</b></p>