

Laurence Yep

The Outsider in Fiction and Fantasy

For Laurence Yep, the outsider is a dominant theme in writing and life. Whether writing historical and contemporary fiction, science fiction, or fantasy, he hopes that readers will see the magic and wonder in the world that can be found by shifting perspective and seeing “things instead as outsiders.”

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hether I was visiting an elementary school or teaching at UC Berkeley, I would encounter a few students who were like limpets hiding in their shells, and this mindset expressed itself in two forms. Whether they were eight or eighteen, they would insist they had nothing about which to write. Furthermore, they did not see why they needed to learn about other cultures because they were “American.” They had sealed themselves not only against other cultures but also against the world itself.

First of all, I would try to show them that they did not need to travel to Paris or be shipwrecked before they could begin to write. They only needed to pay attention to the world around them because good writing brings out the specialness of ordinary things. (As one of our exercises, we would create a science fiction story based on a list of objects in the classroom.)

Second, I would also try to show them that American culture was actually a blend of many cultures—just as English is a fusion of many languages. Moreover, American culture is in a process of continual transformation because it is constantly adapting to new circumstances so that it is more like a living organism rather than a permanent stone monument. It is because America has been able to draw from many cultures that it has been able to revitalize itself for decade

after decade. *Multiculturalism* is more than a buzzword; it is the dynamo that drives America forward.

Good writers have an enormous appetite for learning about the world, and its cultures are part of the menu. Travel is broadening because, upon our return, we look at America from a different perspective. The same thing happens whenever we learn about other cultures: We look upon our own with new eyes.

I was taught that lesson as a child. Though I lived in an African American neighborhood, I went to school in Chinatown and did not really confront White American culture until I went to high school.

As a result of these experiences, I became fascinated by the figure of the outsider and have pursued that figure both in my studies and in my writing. Encouraged by my high school English teacher, the Reverend John Becker, SJ, I started sending out stories and sold my first one, a science fiction novella, when I was eighteen, and it was subsequently anthologized in *World's Best Science Fiction of 1969*. Though I piled up more rejection slips than acceptances, I sold a number of other science fiction stories. When I look back at them now, I see that there was a common thread to them: They were either about alienated heroes or they were the first-person narratives of aliens themselves.

Since then, my writing has followed two parallel paths. On the one hand, I've continued to write science fiction and fantasy. On the other hand, in my

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historical and contemporary fiction, I've been charting the adventures of a group of Chinese American outsiders, the Young family and their friends, as they journey through the American hopescape—to borrow Virginia Hamilton's phrase for that vast psychological wilderness created by American dreams.

For the Young family and their friends are not only exploring America physically but psychologically as well. Two cultures could not be more disparate. Among other things, Chinese culture emphasizes tradition and the group while American culture stresses innovation and the individual. With each new generation of the Youngs, the dilemma increases in intensity as they are caught between the opposing cultures, sometimes serving as a bridge, sometimes as a battleground.

HarperCollins has reissued the adventures of the Young family and their friends in a series called the Gold Mountain Chronicles, which includes the Newbery Honor books, *Dragonwings* and *Dragon's Gate*. The nine novels span 150 years of American history as six generations in turn leave their mark on America. Their story is the story of America as they build the Intercontinental Railroad, mine coal in Wyoming, fly rickety airplanes and barnstorm the country as members of a professional basketball team (the novel will be based on a real Chinese American basketball team that toured America in the thirties, playing against the Harlem Globetrotters among others).

My narrators serve as lenses that focus on the personal experiences of the characters and the more general problems of a time period. Joseph in *Dragon's Gate* is an outcast who wants to be accepted by the America that rejects him. His Americanized great-granddaughter Casey has the reverse problem in *Child of the Owl*: She wants Chinatown to accept her as a Chinese.

My interest in the outsider stems not only from my personal history but also from that of my family. On my paternal side, my grandfather was born in San Francisco in 1867. Though his parents took him to China when he was a teenager, where he married and started a family, he returned to America almost as soon as he could and that was where he lived most of his life.

On my maternal side, my mother was born in Ohio and grew up in West Virginia like any of her white classmates—which I wrote about in two novels, *The Star Fisher* and *Dream Soul*. As a young girl,

my mother searched for arrowheads in the “crick” and performed theatricals written by her sister, Mary, wearing costumes borrowed from the trunks in her landlady's attic. As an adolescent, my mother moved with my maternal grandparents to San Francisco's Chinatown, where the children not only made fun of my mother's limited Chinese but even the way she spoke English with a West Virginia accent.

If the response from readers of all my books is any standard, I think the theme of the outsider appeals to them as well. By definition, adolescence is a period of feeling like an outsider. Teenagers are literally outsiders in their bodies because they are unable to stop or control the physical changes that are happening. They are also starting to develop their separate identities as individuals—which is a frightening, anxiety-generating enterprise. (When I once taught Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to a group of first-year university students, I was surprised when they identified not with the Faustian Dr. Frankenstein but with his monster.)

I've continued to write about outsiders in my science fiction and fantasy as well. My Star Trek novel, *Shadow Lord*, is about Mr. Sulu and Mr. Spock, and I've centered my fantasy novels also on people and creatures who are on the margin of society.

In my first fantasy series, I wrote about an exiled dragon, Shimmer, and her pet boy. Actually, she didn't appear in the first six drafts, which were a conventional fantasy novel in which children from our world are taken to an imaginary world based on Chinese mythology. However, in the seventh draft, I happened to write a chapter in which Shimmer appeared. Though it was supposed to be a walk-on role, she was such a vivid character that she stole the scene. I wound up discarding everything I had written before and started over again, focusing exclusively on her.

This brought up another problem because Shimmer complained to me that her flight scenes were too similar to the flight scenes in *Dragonwings*. (I know a novel is beginning to shape up when the characters take on a life of their own in my imagination.) To satisfy her and to improve the story, I wound up hiring a pilot to take me up in a glider so I could write about flight from a fresh perspective. That novel eventually became *Dragon of the Lost Sea*, the first of four books about her. Since then, I have come to think of dragons as symbols of my creativity

because dragons, like my creativity, take me where they want to go rather than where I tell them.

While the end results may appear dissimilar, the process of writing fantasy is not that different than writing realistic fiction. As I used to tell my students, there is no great secret to fresh, vivid prose. It simply requires viewing an object or person from a slightly different angle—in other words, looking at things like an outsider.

By transforming the familiar into the unfamiliar, writers can also change the ordinary into the extraordinary. Take one step to the side and authors can create lively stories; but if they take an additional step to the side, they begin to think in terms of fantasy, for example, why couldn't a dapperly dressed

elderly man be a tiger wizard in disguise? And what is really happening in the shadows? After all, if humans could emigrate from China for America, why couldn't all sorts of magical creatures and monsters as

well—and more importantly, why couldn't these creatures also bring along their ancient feuds?

In part, I also wanted to re-create my grandparents' Chinatown, for the Chinatown that I knew as a child was, I suspect, different than the one they experienced. Though my grandparents wanted me to think of them as modern Americans, there were times when their superstitions came into play and I would catch glimpses of another Chinatown—one that was filled with magic and not a little fear.

So I began to write *The Tiger's Apprentice* about a shape-shifting tiger wizard and the human boy who reluctantly becomes his apprentice and finds himself drawn into a shadow war fought in the alleys of San Francisco, a savage war that was begun thousands of

years ago in China. Perhaps because Miramax has optioned it and the two sequels, it might be the first of my books to reach the screen sometime.

The new fantasy series has also given me a chance to work with some of the earliest Chinese myths. When I was trying to understand my Chinese roots, I researched not only Chinese history but mythology as well. I came to realize that the Chinese legends that I had learned in Chinatown reflected only the surface of that mythology, which is over four thousand years old. There were many layers to that mythology, like the strata of an archaeological dig, and the deeper I went the bolder and more vibrant the myths became—the god who created weapons had a bronze head and created a head-butting dance that was performed as late as the Han dynasty. These mythic heroes were not the scholarly saints promoted by Chinese bureaucrats, who wanted spirits who mirrored themselves, but rather reflected the primitive peasants who worshipped them.

In general, I hope my readers take the same message from all my books—be they historical, contemporary fiction, or fantasy—that I hope my students took from my classes. There is a sense of magic and wonder to the world if we only know how to look at it—whether it is a desk in a classroom or a table of statistics in a textbook. It simply requires a slight shift in perspective—a shift that enlivens and reanimates the world because we drop our normal mental filters and see things instead as outsiders. Above all, I would hope my readers and students could experience the same emotions I felt as a child when I received my first library card in Chinatown. When I began to read about other cultures, I felt doors opening on a world that was far greater than I had realized.

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Laurence Yep has a PhD in English from SUNY at Buffalo and has taught at UC Berkeley and UC Santa Barbara. He has published over sixty books for children and adults. His plays have been performed at the Kennedy Center and Lincoln Center and he has been an NEA fellow. He is currently finishing *Tiger Magic*, the third book in his fantasy series.