

## The 'Other' in the Novel Multi-Cultural Middle Grade Adventures

There's been a drive for more diversity in children's literature, and over the years there has been a noticeable increase in Asian characters in middle grade novels. This is a welcome change for children of multi-cultural backgrounds to begin to see 'themselves' in the novel. It's still rare though to find Asian and Jewish characters together in one story, but *Asian Jewish Life* recently found a couple of books that feature both.

Pauline Chen's novel, *Peiling and the Chicken-Fried Christmas* (Bloomsbury, 2007), may not seem like a Jewish story at first glance given its title and focus on a Chinese American family. The book centers around Peiling, a pre-teen girl who immigrated with her family from Taiwan when she was very young. Every year at Christmas, Peiling feels left out, especially as her arch-nemesis Laura ridicules her for not observing the holiday—or receiving an abundance of toys like most Americans receive. Children who don't celebrate Christmas will be able to relate to Peiling's feeling of otherness.

During the year in which this story takes place, Peiling's family decides they will have a Christmas dinner. That's also the year Peiling has a teacher who doesn't celebrate Christmas, too. Ms. Rosenweig asks the students in her class to complete a project that shows how children around the world celebrate the winter. For once, Peiling doesn't feel left out. She later learns that Ms. Rosenweig is Jewish and, like Peiling, doesn't celebrate Christmas either.

When it comes time for Peiling's family to cook their Christmas dinner, Peiling finds that they don't roast a turkey or ham like most Americans, but rather cook a chicken with Chinese flavorings. Their side dishes are also cooked in the Chinese fusion style.

The biggest surprise for the Wang family is that Peiling's Uncle Samson, a single man in his twenties, rejects the Chinese woman his family tries to set him up with that winter. Uncle Samson attends Peiling's winter performance at school and when the family sits down for their Christmas dinner, Ms. Rosenweig attends, too—as Uncle Samson's date! It turns out to be a happy holiday for Peiling after all.

While *Peiling and the Chicken-Fried Christmas* is slated for children eight to twelve years old, there's another middle grade

novel targeted at kids in the nine to thirteen age range. *Mira in the Present Tense* (Albert Whitman, 2013) by Sita Brahmachari is set in the UK and tells the story of a pre-teen girl whose grandmother is dying of cancer.

Mira Levenson's mother is half-Indian and her father Jewish, and the author implies that the family is raising Mira and her brother Krish in a Jewish home. Mira's paternal grandmother, Nana Josie, is a constant presence in the Levenson household. She even plans her own funeral, down to her coffin, which she asks Mira to paint in vibrant colors. But when Nana Josie's health starts to deteriorate and she's sent to hospice, Mira spends a lot of her time visiting her grandmother and starts to feel more distant from her best friend, Millie.

But the two friends do see each other in the mornings after they enroll in a small writing group before school with a famous writer, Pat Print. In the class are two boys, Jidé and Ben. The girls find they can comfortably talk about family issues in their writing class, as do the boys.

Sita Brahmachari tackles mature issues in *Mira in the Present Tense* and has been hailed as the multi-cultural Judy Blume. Mira and Millie talk about puberty and boys, while Mira and Jidé start a budding pre-teen romance. And because of Nana Josie's declining health, the theme of death resonates throughout the story.

What Brahmachari doesn't do is to show how her characters are Indian or Jewish or both. Mira doesn't attend Hebrew school and there's no talk about becoming a bat mitzvah. The family doesn't celebrate Jewish holidays in this book, but they also don't observe Hindu ones. Mira mentions to other kids at school that she's Jewish, but the rest of the story doesn't take on any Jewish themes. When Nana Josie orders her own coffin, she chooses a simple wooden one, but it's not specified as pine, the material from which traditional Jewish coffins are made.

Both *Peiling and the Chicken-Fried Christmas* and *Mira in the Present Tense* are great examples of Asian-Jewish stories in middle grade fiction. The introduction of new multi-cultural characters is very much welcome in the 'kid lit' scene as they help bridge cultural differences. Although these books are marketed to pre-teens, the stories are enjoyable for adults too. They are also, in addition to being well-crafted stories, wonderful conversation starters to topics of multi-culturalism and diversity. ¶

