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Books

Artist, author Belle Yang crafts tales of immigrants' hopes, hardships

By Tyrone Beason

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ILLUSTRATION FROM "HANNAH IS MY NAME" BY BELLE YANG

It was entirely fitting that Belle Yang — the Carmel, Calif.-based author and visual artist — would experience a career-changing "light bulb moment" after a power outage back in 1990.

That's when she started jotting down the stories her father, Joseph Yang, told her about life in Manchuria during pre-communist China, stories that now serve as inspiration for the books she writes and illustrates.

Yang's whole life is an interplay between color and darkness, humor and sadness.

So are her books, which are narrated and vividly illustrated in a style appropriate for children but which involve depictions of Chinese and Chinese-immigrant life that are meaty enough for adults.

Her latest book, "Hannah Is My Name" (Candlewick Press, \$16.99), follows a little girl whose family immigrates to the San Francisco Bay Area from Taiwan and anxiously awaits the government green card that will reward the frustrating journey. Yang will read from the book tomorrow at the Seattle Public Library's Beacon Hill branch.

The book mirrors Yang's own childhood experiences observing her mama, Laning Yang, and "baba," or father, adapt to their new lives in the states after fleeing communism in China. The family fled Taiwan by way of Japan.

Yang was 7 — a quiet, artistic only child — when the family arrived here in 1967.

"We want to become Americans more than anything in the world. We want to be free," Hannah, the little girl, says at the beginning of her tale.

For Hannah and her family, America isn't just a destination. It's an achievement. Painful as it is to leave behind your native land, there's no turning back from the freedom and promise America offers.

"A lot of Americans don't understand that to achieve the United States and be able to live here is kind of a trophy," Yang said by telephone from the home she shares with her parents in Carmel.

"This has always been the place of opportunity and freedom. It's such a cliché, but it's what people strive for."

Learning Chinese

It wasn't until Yang moved to China for three years beginning in 1986 to study art, flee an abusive boyfriend and reconnect with her roots that she finally appreciated the bittersweetness of her nostalgic father dreaming and remembering in a language he no longer needed in daily life.



I wanted to basically tell stories about men and women who were at a very dusty level of history.
... My father lent a voice to them, and I gave a voice to my father.
— Belle Yang, artist and author

And it wasn't until 1989, when she witnessed firsthand the government crackdown on student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, that she appreciated the value of free speech, and of fearlessly telling your story.

The experience of traveling China's countryside, where she sipped traditional cups of hot water with villagers on 80-degree days and swam with water buffalo, also taught Yang the charm of Chinese rural culture.

"By nature I'm kind of quirky," Yang said. "I come off as a very nice Chinese girl if a person doesn't know me. But I like the rambunctiousness of Chinese folk art.

"The perspective is totally free — no Western perspective where everything goes to one vanishing point," she said. "Everything goes. It freed me up."

Yang's career since that dark and stormy night in 1990 would not have been possible had she not seized the opportunity to understand what it meant to be Chinese, in all its delightfulness and darkness. The experience abroad drained her, but it helped deepen her own sense of perspective.



ILLUSTRATION FROM "HANNAH IS MY NAME" BY BELLE YANG

"I sat down after the power came back on and started writing a story," she said, recalling crawling under the covers with her parents during the outage and listening to her baba's stories. "From that story, I did a painting to go with it. When that was done, I asked for another story."

"I wanted to basically tell stories about men and women who were at a very dusty level of history — those people who didn't have a voice."

"My father lent a voice to them, and I gave a voice to my father," Yang said.

Yang's first three books are the acclaimed adult titles "Baba: A Return to China upon My Father's Shoulders" (Harcourt Brace, 1994), and "The Odyssey of a Manchurian" (Harcourt Brace, 1996), and the children's book "Chili-Chili-Chin-Chin" (Harcourt Brace, 1999).

Author Amy Tan ("The Joy Luck Club"), whom Yang credits for discovering her, writes in the preface to "Baba" that "Belle Yang is an American writer who writes in English and thinks in Chinese. It is as though we, the readers of English, can now miraculously read Chinese."

Yang's playful use of color and her childlike painting style offset the tough realities of Chinese and immigrant life.

"I wanted to juxtapose the humor in those paintings and the humor of those stories against the darkness of history. You want something to lift you out of that darkness."

No more fear

Yang's confidence as an artist and writer has been hard-earned.

In the late 1990s, she was diagnosed with a mysterious condition that left her bedridden for about four years. Her body stopped making red-blood cells. She wasted away to 80 pounds and had to walk with a cane. Her parents became her caretakers.

But then on March 8, 2000 (her birthday, no less), Yang's body started to produce red-blood cells again. She grew stronger, and eventually resumed writing and painting, assertively charting her own artistic path.

"People always want to pigeon-hole me: Are you a painter or a writer?" she said. "I just slip all over the place ... "

"I feel like I'm reaching my stride at 44 because I don't feel like the 'good little Chinese girl' that I used to be even in my 20s. I feel that I can break rules and ask for things. I'm no longer a linear thinker — I go around."

"At 44, I'm not reticent anymore," she said. "I don't have to be nice anymore — even though I am a nice person."

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