



Mirrors and Windows

Kathleen Bailey, editor

Parallel Worlds in *White Jade Tiger* and *Dragon's Gate*

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It's a curious fact that novels on similar themes often are published within the same year. No matter how long they have been percolating in their creators' imaginations, they tend to emerge at the same time. Recent examples are Susan Cooper's *The Boggart* and Peni R. Griffin's *Hobkin* which both focus on brownies turned boggarts as central characters, and were published in 1993.

White Jade Tiger by Julie Lawson and *Dragon's Gate* by Laurence Yep are two recent novels which illuminate times when railroads were being built in Canada and the United States. Just as railroad tracks run in parallel lines off to the horizon, seeming never to touch, so these stories deal with similar experiences for Chinese immigrants. Brought in as labourers to do backbreaking work on the railway, the Chinese entered the Western world, yet were not accepted in it.

As Canadian readers look across the 49th parallel, musing on similarities and differences in Canadian and American children's literature, we see ourselves in a world which often mirrors U.S. culture. Yet our novels occasionally provide windows on another world.

Julie Lawson's multi-layered novel, *White Jade Tiger*, shows Jasmine exploring the world of Chinese-Canadian culture, which lies close to her world. As she voyages into the past, Jasmine realizes that Chinese culture and the Western world exist side by side, and rarely touch edges. At times Jasmine, who is perceived as a Chinese immigrant, discovers that the Chinese see the Western world through a one-way mirror, moving almost invisibly through a country which used their labour, yet did not see it as individual human beings with their own needs.

Similarly, *Dragon's Gate* mirrors the isolation of Chinese immigrants in the West. Otter, a teenage boy has come to Gold Mountain in search of his father and Uncle Foxfire. Blocked by racism, Otter only finds one friend, Sean, who serves as a tie to the strange new culture.

Yep's novel is a typical immigrant survival story, as Otter fights to stay alive physically and emotionally in the harsh winter of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Otter finally reaches manhood when he dynamites a huge snow overhang which threatens to bury the railroad workers' camp. Otter now sees himself as a strong individual, with the power to make decisions which will affect his life. Just as the myth promised, Otter, who has fought his way upstream against the strong current of an alien culture, has passed through the dragon's gate, and is now transformed into an adult.

In contrast, *White Jade Tiger* is a far more subtle tale of survival. Layers of time wind together as Lawson creates three interconnected stories: the present-day scene of Jasmine's battle for emotional survival after her mother's death; Keung's struggle to survive as he helps to build the railway in the Fraser River valley in 1882; and a quasi-mythological figure in Bright Jade, the Emperor's favourite concubine during the Qin Dynasty in China, 201-206 B.C.

In this powerful time travel tale, Jasmine bridges the gap between her familiar Western world and the painfully isolated world of Keung, who suffers racist taunts from whites. Jasmine's isolation from her father, who has travelled to Beijing, and Keung's search for his father run in parallel lines. Both Jasmine and Keung are on quests to define themselves as individuals. Their drive to persevere mirrors the historical details of the Chinese immigrants' courageous struggle to complete the railroad and as railroad tracks appear to converge as two cultures meet, and understand that though they are different, both carry very human yearnings to live in community, and connection with others.

Both Lawson and Yep have attempted to create stories with powerful ties between the old world of China, and the new world of Gold Mountain. In the end, Lawson's tale leaves the reader mulling over



the nature of prejudice both in the past and in modern-day Canada. Yep's novel ends in a burst of optimism, with Otter promising himself that he will continue to learn in the new culture, so he can bring ideas to his people. But Lawson's novel is much more multi-faceted, making the reader consider what ideas each culture could exchange and blend into a richer whole. *White Jade Tiger* opens up a window onto another world, and allows recognition of the riches inherent in another culture.

Bibliographic Information:

Lawson, Julie. *White Jade Tiger*, Victoria: Beach Holme Publishers, 1993.
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