

Laurence Yep

Author Laurence Yep grew up in a world of cereal



boxes, raw liver, pickles in a barrel, soda bottles, and penny bubble gum. His parents owned a grocery store in San Francisco. Everyone in the family worked long hours in the store. Laurence and his older brother, Thomas, stocked shelves, sorted bottles, and flattened boxes. They had to mark prices on the groceries, too. The Yeps lived very close to where they worked. Their apartment on the corner of Pierce and Eddy Streets was directly above the store.

The grocery store was open seven days a week, but when they could get away from the store, the Yeps enjoyed picnics and other outdoor activities together. Mr. Yep made butterfly kites for them to fly, or they would go to the beach to wade in the water and gather sand. Mr. Yep had built a sandbox on the roof of their building. That sandbox is where Laurence created his first imaginary kingdoms.

The Yeps were a Chinese American family. Laurence's father was born in China. He came to the United States at the age of ten. Laurence's mother had always lived in the United States. She was born in Ohio and was raised in West Virginia and California.

Many Chinese Americans in San Francisco lived in the Chinatown district, where the Chinese language and Chinese customs were part of everyday life. Because they lived so traditionally, however, people from Chinatown weren't always welcome in other parts of San Francisco.

The Yep family did not live in Chinatown. Their store was in a different part of the city, and many of their neighbors were African Americans, rather than Chinese Americans. Although his family frequently visited friends and relatives in Chinatown, and Laurence even went to school there, he still seemed to feel more American than

Chinese while he was growing up. Often, he felt as if he didn't belong in either culture. Many of Yep's stories reflect those feelings. The stories are about people who must learn to adjust to new places and to people who have different customs.

Yep's passion for stories and books began long before he started writing his own. Because his parents felt that education was very important, they read stories to their children and had the children read to them. Laurence's favorite stories took place in the Land of Oz. He searched for books about Oz in the library and read them all. Next, he read every science-fiction book he could find.

Laurence understood how the characters in the Oz books and the aliens in science-fiction stories felt. They were thrust into strange worlds where they didn't belong, which was how he felt about being Chinese and American. While he was going to school in Chinatown, Yep excelled in most subjects, especially science, but he didn't like learning Chinese. Most of his schoolmates spoke Chinese at home and were in the advanced classes. Yep's family spoke only English at home, so the Chinese class that Laurence had to take was for beginners, and he was often made fun of or felt left out.

When Yep started high school, his parents wanted him to have more time to study, so he stopped working long hours at the grocery store. His favorite classes were in science. He planned to study chemistry in college. But he did well in his English writing classes, too. Before he graduated high school, English had won out over chemistry, and Yep decided to study journalism in college.

Yep left California to attend Marquette University in Wisconsin. Although homesick for San Francisco, he did well in all of his classes except journalism. One of his teachers suggested that he might do better writing fiction than reporting facts. That teacher was right, and Yep's career as a published writer began with the first science-fiction story he wrote. The story was "The Selchey Kids." It was published in *If* magazine, and Yep was paid a penny a word.

At Marquette, Yep met Joanne Ryder, a student editor for the school's literary magazine. Ryder introduced Yep to children's books, and when she later became a children's book editor for a New York publisher, she asked Yep to write a children's book and send it to her. Yep wrote the science-fiction story Sweetwater. It was his first novel, and Ryder was his editor. The novel was published in 1973.

Yep continued to write books for children and young adults and has won many awards for books about Chinese Americans. Today, Laurence Yep and Joanne Ryder are married to each other, and both are well-known authors of books for children and young adults.

**A Selection of
Young Adult Novels
by Laurence Yep**

Sweetwater (1973)
*Dragonwings (1975)
Child of the Owl (1977)
Sea Glass (1979)
Dragon of the Lost Sea (1982)
Kind Hearts and Gentle Monsters (1982)
The Serpent's Children (1984)
Mountain Light (1985)
The Rainbow People (1989)
The Lost Garden (1991)
Tongues of Jade (1991)
Dragon War (1992)
*Dragon's Gate (1993)
The Ghost Fox (1994)
Later, Gator (1995)
Thief of Hearts (1995)
The Case of the Goblin Pearls (1997)
The Amah (1999)
The Magic Paintbrush (2000)
The Tiger's Apprentice (2003)
Dragon Road (2008)
City of Fire (2009)
The Star Maker (2010)

**Newbery Honor winners*

Questions About Laurence Yep

1. How did Yep's parents influence his eventual career as an author?
2. Why do you think that Yep felt more American than Chinese?
3. As a boy and as a young adult what kinds of books did Yep most like to read? Why?
4. Why didn't Yep pursue a career in journalism?
5. What was the name of Yep's first children's novel? Why did he write it?
6. Newbery Honors are awarded to books that are considered important contributions to American children's literature. Which books written by Laurence Yep are Newbery Honor winners?

Vocabulary

Match each word to its definition

an area within a city that has a specific use or purpose	1. custom
a person who gathers and reports the news	2. editor
put in a supply of goods	3. district
a strong attraction to or powerful feeling for something	4. literary
a practice or routine among people of the same culture	5. passion
relating to books or writing	6. journalist
a person who corrects and revises written materials	7. excel
to do something better than most others do it	8. stocked

Think About It

A. Imagine that you are a journalist assigned to write an article about Laurence Yep. On the lines below, write five questions you would ask Mr. Yep in an interview to find out information that was not in the story.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

*B. A character in Yep's book *Dragon's Gate* says, "You can learn to change the world..." Yep changed his world by creating new worlds as a fantasy and science-fiction writer. How could you change your world?*

Write About It

Laurence Yep created his first imaginary kingdoms in a sandbox. Later, he created them in his stories. Imaginary kingdoms or magical worlds in faraway places and distant times are key elements of fantasy. Other elements of fantasy include characters and objects with special powers and a conflict between good and evil.

Create your own imaginary or fantasy kingdom by describing each element below. Start by giving your kingdom a name.

Name of kingdom:

Description of kingdom (include time period and place):

Main characters and their powers:

Summary of conflict: