



Curriculum Connections

The Forbidden Temptation of Baseball

by Dori Jones Yang

SparkPress, 2017

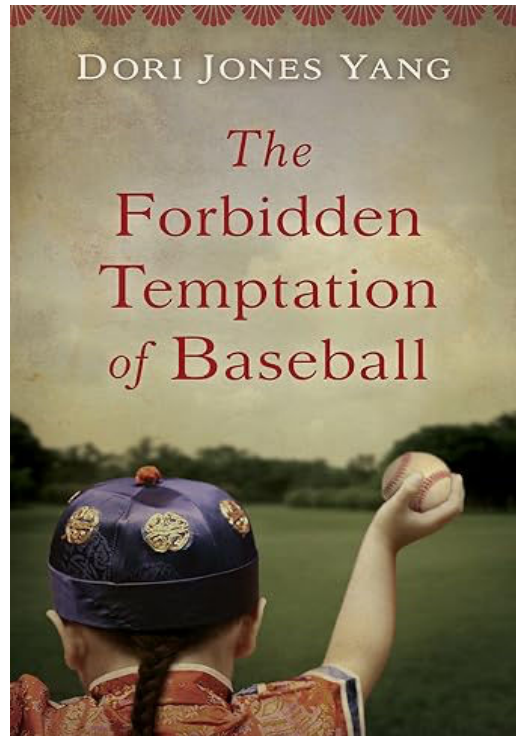
Fiction, set in China and the United States

2017 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

I am neither athletically inclined nor particularly fond of baseball, but I do love reading about the experiences of others, and I am always interested in finding new ways to engage my students. *The Forbidden Temptation of Baseball* by Dori Jones Yang is a gem, based on an actual initiative in which China sent 120 boys to study in New England in the 1870s. The story focuses on Woo Ka-Leong (Leon) and his older brother Woo Ka-Sun (Carson) and their first year with the Swann family of Suffield, Connecticut. This book does an excellent job illustrating the challenges of living in a different culture and using a different language.

My district is among the most diverse in Pennsylvania, with many students who are first-generation Americans. The questions that Leong ponders undoubtedly resonate with students and provide multiple opportunities for conversation: Why is this done this way? What is this that we are eating? How do I behave in this setting? For an adult reading this text, it seems impossible to expect that the Chinese boys can both live and learn in a new culture and language while simultaneously remaining “gentleman scholars” and not becoming “too American.” Yet throughout the text, that is what we see the brothers attempt; one has great success while the other ultimately fails.

This book’s short chapters will engage students in grades 7 to 10, whether reading independently or as a group, making this text an ideal book to integrate into class in small segments. This would be especially useful for teachers in either history or literature arts classes that use block scheduling; reading and short writing or discussion activities can be done to supplement classwork. Set in the nineteenth century, the book also examines American culture at this time, offering further opportunities for students to consider how life has changed over the 150 years. What would life be like for the characters Julia and Charlotte now? How would Charlotte’s physical limitations be perceived or addressed in terms of improving her mobility and independence? What rights would these women, Mrs. Swann included, have now that they did not then? It





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becomes quickly apparent that this text would ideally be supported by historical context provided through either discussion or short supplemental readings.

Having students research the dress and beauty ideals of the period, both in the United States and China, is also valuable. My students in a grade 10 art class were immediately intrigued when I showed examples of how these characters would be dressed. When they saw how young women their age dressed in the 1870s, they asked “How did these ladies move or, you know, walk around in that?” Much like the children in the book, my students had questions about the hairstyles of both Leong and Elder Brother. This led to a very interesting conversation about traditional dress in a variety of cultures, and these inquiries could set the stage for a meaningful project researching the traditions and dress of their own ancestors.

Within moments of arriving at the Swanns’ home, the boys’ names are anglicized. This is not done out of disrespect or to force assimilation, but rather, it is how their names sound to English speakers. Although Leong is pleased, he is also concerned, knowing that this was forbidden by his teacher in China and realizing that Elder Brother is also displeased. Here, too, my students openly discussed their experiences with well-meaning teachers who suggested nicknames instead of learning how to say their names correctly. We talked about how that felt, for both the student and the teacher. This also provided an opportunity to reflect and discuss the idea of how it looks and feels when an authority figure is mistaken. At multiple instances throughout the story, Leong must make important decisions regarding when to follow the directives of his elder brother, the Chinese teachers, and the American family with whom he is living, and when to make his own decisions.

Dori Jones Yang offers an insightful portrait of an American family in New England. It is important to note that Mr. Swann is a minister, and the church is a significant part of Swann family life. Since this is an important part of story, teachers working with this text will need to discuss the historical role of religion in both the United States and China. Yang does an excellent job describing the many questions and dilemmas these new experiences raise for Leong.

Although baseball is a vital part of the text, this book is less about the game and more about the opportunities it provides for Leong to make friends, feel comfortable speaking English, and become a valued part of the Swann family. Baseball is also the catalyst for Leong’s growing sense of independence as he navigates the expectations of his brother,



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the Chinese Educational Mission, and his American family. I would recommend this text to all educators in the humanities, even those with little interest in baseball.

This text would also be ideal for use in two areas of tremendous growth in education—English as a Second Language (ESL), and classes focused on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). In addition to offering unique ways to learn about the culture and history of China and the United States during this time, the book is very emotional. Not long after the boys arrive in Suffield, they learn from a letter from China that their eldest brother is ill, and he subsequently dies. The ball, glove, and bat that Leong finds in the closet of the room he shares with Elder Brother once belonged to the Swann family's only son, who died in an accident that also injured Charlotte, the daughter who now uses a wheelchair. And the death of Johnny's mother helps Leong to see that his initial ideas about people and situations are not always correct. Ultimately, Leong's thoughtfulness and willingness to re-evaluate situations are the key to his success; the inability of Elder Brother to do the same is his downfall.

Elder Brother is a complex character, and it can be challenging to feel sympathy for him, especially because of the way he physically abuses his brother. Although corporal punishment was not unusual at this time in either the American or the Chinese educational systems, the beatings that Leong endures are far too frequent and intense to be characterized as a method to correct behavior. It is unclear whether the head injury Elder Brother sustains in the opening chapter of the text is to blame for the way he takes his anger out on his brother; Leong ultimately forgives Elder Brother's behavior, even as he is perplexed by it. Educators working with this text should be aware that this subject could be upsetting for some students, and they should be prepared to address questions and feelings that arise from reading about cruelty. Because of this, I would not suggest that this book be read by students younger than twelve.

Ultimately, there is much to appreciate and enjoy in this text. It is educational without being dull, and it touches on a wide variety of topics including, but not limited to, baseball. Yang's writing style is engaging, and her story is based on historical events and real inventions. A tremendous number of historical and cultural connections can be made to enrich students' understanding of the novel and the world that Leong experiences.

Author: Kachina Leigh, studio art and AP art history teacher
2024