



Curriculum Connections

The Crane Girl

by Curtis Manley

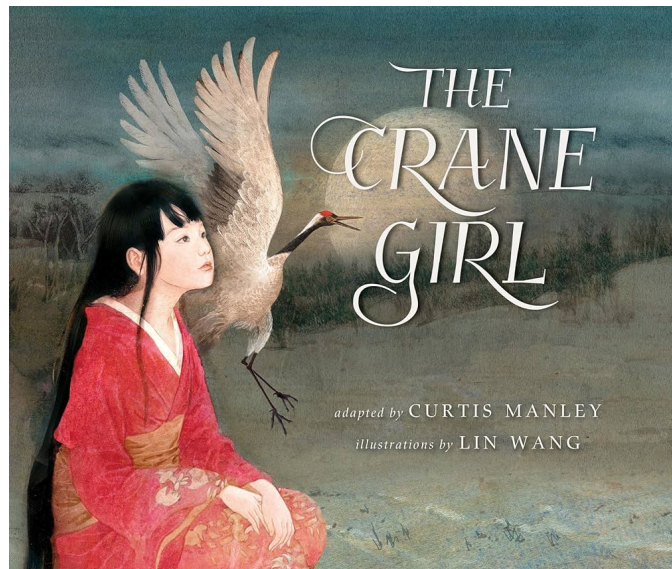
Illustrated by Lin Wang

Shen's Books, 2017

Fiction, set in Japan

2017 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Curtis Manley's *The Crane Girl* is an adaptation of several Japanese folk tales in which a crane in human form is taken in by a kind individual or family and weaves beautiful cloth in thanks. In this retelling, a boy named Yasuhiro rescues a red-crowned crane from a hunter's trap. The next day, a girl named Hiroko appears at his door. Seeing that Yasuhiro and his father, Ryota, are poor, she offers to weave silk for them to sell at the market. She weaves in secret, using her beautiful feathers to create the finest silk.



Ultimately Ryota becomes greedy and overworks Hiroko, and the story ends with Hiroko becoming a crane once more. Yasuhiro joins her and they live life happily together as cranes. The book combines a traditional storybook narrative with haiku written from the perspective of each of the three characters, adding poetry to the charming and detailed illustrations.

Manley's notes describe the folk tales that he combined for his retelling, referencing *The Yanagita Kunio Guide to the Japanese Folk Tale* as a source. In other versions of the story, the crane-turned-girl was rescued by a man or by an elderly couple. Other birds have been used in the folk tale, and even other animals, though the broad strokes remain the same. Manley's largest departure from tradition is Yasuhiro's transformation into a crane. Humans do turn into animals in Japanese folk tales, but much less frequently than animal-to-human transformations. He further explains the structure and influence of haiku and his decision to make the crane a red-crowned crane, a rare, endangered species of crane only found year-round in Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's four main islands.

As an art educator, I was drawn to *The Crane Girl* because weaving is central to the story. This book could easily be used in an art classroom to accompany a weaving



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lesson or a larger study of Japanese art. Younger students in second or third grade might weave paper while older students in fourth through sixth grade use cardboard or lap looms to weave yarn and fiber. I find weaving lessons to be engaging to students because woven textiles are not only an obvious part of everyday life, but weaving traditions are part of almost every culture. Students could try to imagine how it would feel for Hiroko to weave her own feathers into the cloth as they weave paper or textiles.

In *The Crane Girl*, Hiroko is weaving silk for kimono, so the book may lend itself to an art lesson about kimono as well. An art lesson about kimono for upper elementary students may include printmaking with foam stamps used to create a repeated pattern on textiles. For older students, research into the meaning of kimono may be appropriate. *Wagara* are traditional Japanese patterns in use since the Heian period that hold different meanings. The way a kimono is worn also contains information about the wearer that could be a subject of research.

The addition of haiku paired with the lush watercolor illustrations of Lin Wang also lend themselves to a lesson involving a pairing of art and poetry. While the medium of the image and the exact form of the poem are different, the pairing of art and poetry are reminiscent of *surimono*, privately published woodblock prints that were often paired with poems during the late Tokugawa period, also known as the Edo period (late 1700s through 1867). Older students might compose poetry following traditional Japanese poetry structures such as haiku (5-7-5 syllables) or *waka* (5-7-5-7-7 syllables). An interesting parallel can be drawn between Manley's love of haiku from being in haiku societies and the distribution of *surimono* in private societies and clubs in the nineteenth century.

In language arts, educators could use this book as part of a lesson on folk tales from many cultures. Students may draw parallels to Western European folk tales, such as the Rumpelstiltskin story from the Brothers Grimm, which also features magical weaving. Comparing similar folk tales across cultures can help students to understand the universal nature of human experience and shared values common to all people. In his notes, Manley mentions the Japanese concept of *on*, the obligation for the crane to



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repay the kindness of her rescuer. Students might compare the similar theme of repaying a debt through weaving in *The Crane Girl* and in Rumpelstiltskin. Celtic tales of selkies, seals who take the form of women, offers another interesting parallel. Much like Hiroko, selkies usually return to their animal form at the end of the stories. Discussing the similarities of folk tales across different cultures highlights the universal nature of human experience, even in different languages, locations, and time.

National Core Visual Arts Standards

VA:Cn10.1.4a

Create works of art that reflect community cultural traditions.

VA:Cr1.2.3a

Apply knowledge of available resources, tools, and technologies to investigate personal ideas through the art-making process.

VA:Re.7.2.5a

Identify and analyze cultural associations suggested by visual imagery.

Common Core Language Arts Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.9

Compare and contrast the treatment of similar themes and topics (for example, the opposition of good and evil) and patterns of events (for example, the quest) in stories, myths, and traditional literature from different cultures.

Works Cited

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1944.

Luu, Sophia, and Ellen McKinney. "Kimono: elucidating meanings of Japanese textile artifacts for a museum audience." *Anais do Museu Paulista: História e Cultura Material* 29 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-02672021v29e9>



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