

4.6 Andrea Wang's "How to Respond to Stereotypes Against Asians..."

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SPEAKERS

Jasmine Bradshaw, Andrea Wang

J Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00
Hi, Andrea, thank you so much for being here with me. I am so excited!

A Andrea Wang 00:04
Hi, Jasmine, I'm so happy to be back. Thank you for inviting me again.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 00:09
Well, as you know, we are obsessed with your books in my home. We have them all. We all read them and love them. And you just this last year have released two new books. One for younger kids and one for middle grade. Is that right?

A Andrea Wang 00:22
That's right. A picture book called "Watercress," from Neil Porter Books and Holiday House Publishing that came out at the end of March. So that was an interesting time to launch a book.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 00:35
Yeah, I can imagine!

A Andrea Wang 00:37
It's done really well. I'm really, really, happy with how it's being received by readers. It is a semi autobiographical story of a young girl who lives in rural Ohio, and her parents eat watercress growing by the side of the road. She is

story of a young girl who lives in rural Ohio, and her parents spot watercress growing by the side of the road. She is the daughter of Chinese immigrants, and they make her get out and make her and her brother stop and help them pick the watercress. And it sort of explores her embarrassment about that. But she also learns what this free food means to her parents, because her mother tells a story of her own childhood growing up in China.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 01:20

Yeah, yeah. Oh, that book is powerful. The first time I read it, I had tears in my eyes. I'm like, "Oh, the family history and the world history and everything that's included is so amazing. And then your other book "The Many Meanings of Meilan," am I saying that? Right? I wanted to make sure because you explain in the book...

A

Andrea Wang 01:36

You are! It's perfect. It's a bit of a tongue twister, isn't it? "The Many Meanings of Meilan." That is my first middle grade novel. I'm super excited about it. That came out just about a month ago from Kokila books. And it is a story about a 12-year-old Chinese-American girl. She is also the daughter of Chinese immigrants from Taiwan. And she's grown up her whole life in Boston's Chinatown. And she's a storyteller. And she tells a story to her young cousin that she's babysitting, and it has these repercussions that she could never have expected. Her aunt overhears the story. Her aunt then causes this huge rift in the family, which ends with Meilan, her parents and her grandfather moving to a small rural town in Ohio. So you can see how these two stories are kind of linked, right? And Meilan is renamed Melanie by her principal at her new school. And she discovers that there are all these other homophones of her Chinese name. Her nickname in Chinese is Lan, which is the second syllable of Milan. And she decides that she's going to be these different meanings in different situations, kind of like code switching. But her identity and her sense of self sort of starts to fracture. And she has to learn how to bring it all together.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 03:03

Yes, and I won't give away the ending or anything. But oh, wow, it was such a good book. I read it in one weekend; I could not put it down. It was so good. For "I mean, I'm an adult and I'm like eating it up" imagine a middle grade child who it was actually written for, right? So I wanted to ask you "because we're definitely going to jump into more about the books" but the first thing I was hoping you could tell us is what do you want parents to keep in the front of their mind when they're reading these books with their children?

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 03:36

Both books have main characters who are Chinese-American, but I'd like, you know, readers to keep in their minds that we share a common humanity across races and, you know, to see that the themes in these books, the experiences are universal. We've all been embarrassed by our parents at one point or another. Or we've all, you know, sort of felt ashamed of our situation, perhaps, in life. And we've all felt like we don't belong, whether you know, we're because of our race, or identity, or gender, or religion, etc. These are all universal emotions. So to just keep that in mind that we all share a common humanity.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 04:27

I love that you bring that up. And I felt a huge connection to Meilan because of the code switching that she was having to do. And obviously, my experiences are not the same as someone who was moving across the country to a

prana new school when she's so young. Oh, that's hard. But people trying to give you your identity instead of feeling like you get to claim who you are is so so hard. And then with "Watercress," I was just talking to my father-in-law who is white, and I was telling him that I was going to interview you and he said, "Oh, my mom used to go out and pick watercress because we needed food." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, I had no idea." So it's so cool that you say that that's what you want parents to take away, because that's exactly the experiences that I've been having as a reader. And as talking to someone else, they're like, "I have a connection to this book."

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 05:18

It's been so wonderful to hear from readers of all, you know, backgrounds writing to me and saying, "Oh, my parents used to make me pick—it might not have been watercress, it might have been like walnuts or different kinds of fruits or mushrooms...although that's a dangerous one. Know your mushrooms before you pick them!" or all sorts of different foods. Foraging back then was not the hip thing that it is now, you know, and they all sort of felt they had feelings about being made to pick food from the wild.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 05:51

Yeah, definitely. Well, one of the things that I love about you, as a writer, and your books is that you are just such a masterful teacher. You teach these really big historical important concepts in ways that kids can digest them and get their arms around them. And that's why it's something that I love to have in my home. Like in Meilan, there's a whole just, it's like a few pages, but you do such a good job of—she's sitting in class with this little boy, Liam who loves to yank her chain and pick on her. And he asked her like, where she's from? And of course, we all know as people of color getting that question, Where are you from? Right? "Or, how did you get here," actually, is what he says. And then she explains like, "I drove here. Yeah, I drove here, from Boston." And then he goes on to say, "That's impossible," because he thinks that she's, you know, wasn't born in the United States. And then she goes on to explain that her parents are from Taiwan. But she was born here. And he thinks that his family has been here forever. And when he says that, then the kind of the rest of the class is laughing at him, because they're like, obviously, you're not Indigenous. So you weren't here forever. But just the fact that you took that huge concept as like, sometimes adults have trouble with that, and boiled it down to like a four page thing in action with these students is so powerful. So I'm wondering if you can describe to us, like, what tips do you have for parents when it comes to building these lessons into their everyday lives?

A

Andrea Wang 07:25

That's such a great question, Jasmine. That scene, took a lot of revision. We went...I approached it multiple ways. There was a time when I talked about boat people, or I talked about the Mayflower. And, you know, it didn't necessarily have that, you know, like it was problematic in its own way. So I really had to sort of think about what I was doing very consciously. We also did have an Indigenous expert reader come in to make sure, because I mentioned, you know, the mound builders, and the other Native peoples of Ohio, of which there were many. I mean, it was fascinating doing the research. But I think there are so many teachable moments in our everyday lives. It doesn't have to be this big, like, I have a lesson for you, you know? It can just be like a small thing, you know, like, we were not always here. Unless you're Indigenous, you know, we actually were not here, you know. Some of us have been here for a lot longer than others, but Chinese people have actually been to this continent since the 1500s. It's just not talked about. We can talk about, you know, there are things that the history books here don't actually mention. You know, there's a lot that went on that doesn't make it into the school curriculum. And I think an easy way that parents can talk about these things, if they want to, is to, you know, go out and get those picture books. There are lists and lists, lists of picture books that talk about these topics. There are more and more wonderful historical nonfiction books that are like narrative now. You know, it's not the dry facts that we all think of as history. And

picture book biographies, too, have really...you know, there's an explosion of wonderful picture book biographies, especially by you know, and about people of color. So, I think those are really easy ways. I always go back to the books, and then you know, parents can read the books on their own and then just sort of like, dole out little bits.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 09:39

No, I love that. And what I'm hearing you say is that it starts with us as parents that we have to work on our own, in deconstruction and understanding of what are the things that we learned in childhood that we can hold on to, and what are the things that we need to release in order to get better information in. So I love that you share that, and also, I feel like when I'm trying to learn something new I do turn to picture books, because they do such a good job of giving you the basics, and then you as an adult can take it from there and figure out okay, what do I need to still research and understand better? What do I want to know deeper? So I thank you for sharing that, because it's such a good point. And they're right at our fingertips for free at the library or, you know,

A

Andrea Wang 10:18

Absolutely. I just read "Unspeakable." Have you read that one? About the Tulsa race massacre? I mean, that one...tears to your eyes. It is amazing. And that is history that I never knew about until like, literally, I watched whatever TV show it was, I think was called "Watchmen." Like a couple years ago, I was like, Oh, so yes, there's, there's great info to be had in picture books. And it's easy for us as parents to digest, and then relate to our children. But yeah, I think just look for those small teachable moments when you know, when you can, and it doesn't have to be this big, long lecture, and probably better, you know, for the kid also, if it's not this big, long lecture. Then they won't tune you out. They'll just, you know, hear that little bit.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 11:09

Yes, totally. It's about building. It's like, I always think of it like the sand in the hourglass, like, a little bit at a time. So I know that there are so many stereotypes that Asian and Asian-American children are facing, and you hit on so many of them in both of your books and in all of your books, actually. And I wanted to break down two of those with you today, if that's okay. The first being the stereotype around Asian food. And this very much came up in "Watercress." And I'm sure you've seen, I mean, it's been a stereotype for a very long time. But also really recently, I feel like the resurgence has been really gross because I saw, was it James Corden? I don't know, it was on some tonight show where the people had to like tell, I think it was it was like truth or, or eat or whatever, they had to answer a question or they had to eat something. And all of the food that they were supposed to eat was supposed to be gross. And they're supposed to make them react, which they did. And so much of the food that they featured was Asian food. And I remember watching it thinking like, "I've tasted that it's actually really good." Like, it's just so frustrating that like, people are seeing this as entertainment when it's actually deeply harmful. So you talk about that in "Watercress." And I was just wondering if you can tell us a little bit, what is the history behind the stereotype? And then how can parents teach their children to fight back against it?

A

Andrea Wang 12:34

Okay, so I think with the history, there's a lot of factors. On the one hand, as with every stereotype, there's probably a tiny bit of truth to it. But you have to understand that in China, at the time, there was war, there was famine, you know, all of this stuff was going on. And when you don't have enough to eat, you will eat anything. I mean, we've seen that all over the world. It is not specific to Chinese people or Asian people. If you're hungry, you'll eat grass, you know, you'll eat leaves, you'll...you'll eat whatever you can. And so there's a little bit of that, right? And when Chinese

people started coming over to the United States to work on the railroads, they were brought over because they were cheap labor. And slavery had been mostly abolished at that time, not completely. This is pre Civil War. And, you know, I mean, the Chinese people worked on the railroad, but they were not paid the same as white workers. And after the railroad was finished, which they didn't get credit for, at the time, if you look at photographs, there are not any Chinese people in the photographs. They were not allowed to work in certain jobs, right. And the only jobs that they could get, were like doing the laundry, or cooking and having restaurants, because those were the jobs that the men, you know, the white men didn't want to do. So they got into the food business. But at the same time, they were also very, very poor. So again, they're just going to eat whatever they can and make the most of whatever they can. And at the same time, there was this huge upswing of anti-Chinese sentiment, similar to how it has been since the pandemic began, right? Or, you know, I mean, it's been ongoing, and it's just sort of come to the forefront again, because of the pandemic. But, you know, they were brought over because they were cheap labor. And then the white people were like, "Hey, you're stealing all of our jobs, and we want you to go away now." And so anything that they could sort of latch on to to cast the Chinese in a bad light, they were going to do that. And so actually, for another book that I'm researching right now, I was looking up old newspaper articles for the 1850s, so, can I read you this little snippet from this? This newspaper from 1855. And it's in the joke section, and it says, "the Chinese of California celebrated May Day in a high old style. Among the dishes prepared at the 'Bow Bow Hotel' was a potpie made of the following delicate viands: one doormat, two cats, three pairs of boots, one dog, four pole parrots (I don't know what those are; parrots, I guess), one pair of cotton socks, 16 snapping turtles, and the forequarter of a horse. The calls numbered some 600. That's a pot pie, as is a pot pie." I don't really understand this joke. Like I don't...

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 15:53

Yeah, what...?

A

Andrea Wang 15:55

...but still, you know, like, I don't understand the punchline of the pot pie thing. But it is perpetuating this stereotype that Chinese people eat all these really awful, inedible things along with, you know, animals that people here, consider pets.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 16:13

And like you were saying with COVID. I mean, that was one of the rumors swirling around at the beginning, that COVID started because someone ate something, someone Chinese ate something. And it was so dangerous, because, I mean, we see it over and over again, in terms of the way that people treat each other. And it starts with our little ones in the lunchroom. In the very first episode of "Fresh Off the Boat," Eddie, like, takes his lunch to school. And then he starts throwing his lunch away before school because he's embarrassed because people are making fun of him. And he's just, I think he's in fourth grade. He's so little. And we can see it already happening. Because our children are picking it up and it's in the water. We're all swimming in this same water of bias and our children are picking it up.

A

Andrea Wang 16:54

Yeah, absolutely. And everybody, you know, wants to feel like they belong. So they make people who look other, feel other, you know? And they really try pick up on what makes that person seem foreign, and make fun of them for it. And you know, that's something that we can definitely teach our children not to do; to celebrate our differences. You

know, where would we be without Asian food? You know, like, we'd still be eating, I don't know, whatever it is that the pilgrims and the Puritans ate.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 17:32

Yeah, no, thank you.

A

Andrea Wang 17:33

You know, and we, you know, can take our children to restaurants, from all different cuisines, you know, that serve all different cuisines, and talk about what they're eating and try to be adventurous yourself with the food that you eat. And you know, you can pick a different country to explore. I've known families who do that. And there are great kids' cookbooks that explore cuisines from all over the world. You can cook together and make it a fun project and activity and try new foods. You might, you don't have to like everything, but just, you know, tasting everything is a start.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 18:15

Exactly. And that's what I try to tell people too with other types of food. I mean, there is lots of stuff that I do not like. I love soul food, but I don't like mac and cheese. It's okay. I don't need to say that all soul food is bad because I don't like to eat mac and cheese. So yes, I love that. Tasting it, getting yourself out there, and being that model for your children of, I'm gonna try this new thing. Try it with me.

A

Andrea Wang 18:38

Exactly, exactly.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 18:41

Yes. So the second stereotype that I wanted to break down was the stereotype around Asian names. And we talked about this a little bit before, but this definitely comes up in "The Many Meanings of Meilan." And I was just wondering, what can parents do to be proactive with their kiddos, and help them in supporting and embracing people's given names and pronouncing their names the way that they were meant to be heard?

A

Andrea Wang 19:05

Yeah, I think that when we meet people, and hear their names for the first time, if it's a name that we're unfamiliar with, it's perfectly fine to say, "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. Could you repeat that for me?" Or "Could you pronounce your name for me?" if they've only seen it written? "What would you like to be called?" You know, each of these questions is, is fine. And, you know, people are more than happy, usually, to tell you how they want to be called. Because it also shows that you're being respectful of them. Right, rather than the principal, just saying, "I think your name is too unusual. I'm going to call you Melanie, and everybody's going to call you Melanie," and she basically has had her, you know, her connection to her identity and to her culture just severed, you know, in one quick action by the principal. So we can avoid doing that, avoid giving our coworkers, our friends, etc., nicknames that they haven't asked for. You know, because renaming someone is...

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 20:14

Yes.

A

Andrea Wang 20:15

...you know, really not your place.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 20:19

Oh my gosh, yes.

A

Andrea Wang 20:22

Their parents chose their names for them, or they chose their names for themselves. And it means a lot to them. So if they ask you to call them by a nickname, you might even want to stop and consider whether they're trying to make your life easier for you, because they want to avoid, you know, being seen as a problem. You know, they don't want to cause trouble. You can just say, "Are you sure? I mean, I'm happy to learn your name. It matters to me. You know, I want to say it right. I want to call you what you want to be called." There's this wonderful video of an actress. I think she's from Nigeria. Her name is Uzoamaka Aduba. Do you know her?

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 21:07

Um, yes. I know this clip.

A

Andrea Wang 21:10

She's talking to a group of young people, of girls I believe. And she's recounting this story about how when she was about their age. She went home and she told her mother, "I don't want to be called Uzoamaka, I want to be called Zoe." Her mom's like, "Why?" You know, like, she said, "Because it's too hard to pronounce. Nobody says it, right." And her mother basically said, "If anybody can learn to say, Tchaikovsky, or Dostoyevsky or Michelangelo, they can learn to say Uzoamaka." So, you know, I think there's this tendency to see foreign names as being more difficult to pronounce than they actually are. Which is why like, Milan doesn't look that difficult to pronounce, but people want to pronounce it, as, you know, they want to make it as difficult as they can. And the same thing with a lot of Asian names, right? When it's actually very, very simple.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 22:12

And if it's asked, they'll tell you. And the thing is, too, I like what you were saying about being cognizant of how the other person is reacting, because I was a teacher. And one of the things that I noticed was that my position of authority, a lot of the children didn't want to, you know, cause problems. This was the first day of school and they're anxious, I'm anxious, and they just want to make it as easy as possible. So they're telling me, "Oh, just call me this."

And I'm like, "Wait, but this my roster says this. What do you what do you prefer?" So understanding what's the power dynamic here between, especially if you're an adult, and the person you're talking to as a child, like you said, they might be just trying to make you comfortable? Which is, you know, not the priority.

A

Andrea Wang 22:52

Right, right. Let's take the focus off your comfort, and, you know, make them feel accepted instead.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 22:59

Yeah, definitely. And this next question is, it's totally selfish. I have to know because as I was reading "Meilan," I was like, "Okay, I remember that. She said that she lived in Ohio and, and that you came from the East coast and all these things." So I'm wondering, like, tell me a little bit about your creative process and how you decide, okay, "Here's where I'm going to infuse some of my own, like, personal story. And here's where I'm going to just make the story for the character."

A

Andrea Wang 23:29

So I think with "Watercress," it is semi-autobiographical, and it was a memory that I just couldn't forget. And I didn't understand why. Like, I don't know if you've ever had these memories that sort of just haunt you. And you're like, "Huh, I wonder what that means." So, I had been trying to write about it for a very long time. It started out as being a personal essay for adults. And I couldn't figure it out. Because you know, in a personal essay, you just I have this like moment of revelation at the end and what it all means to my life, and I just was like, "I have no idea." And then when I started writing for children, I rewrote it as a picture book, but in the third person, and I gave the kids names and it still really wasn't working. It didn't have that emotional heart to it. And then I read this picture book, by Bao Phi, illustrated by Thi Bui, who are, they're Vietnamese immigrants, and it's called "A Different Pond." And it's also a story about finding food in the wild. In this case, the father takes his young son before dawn to go fishing. And it's not fishing for fun. It's fishing for dinner. And it's just a beautiful, powerful, lyrical book, and I encourage everybody to read it. When I read it I was like, "Oh, this really reminds me of this watercress story I've been trying to write," and I found my way into it. You said you got teared up reading. I cried the entire time I was reading that book because I was reliving those feelings that I had as a kid, feeling ashamed of my family, feeling like I didn't belong. Um, so my process is definitely writing a lot about those emotions that I was grappling with when I was young. Whether I was seven or 12, etc., it is kind of like therapy. I know, there are some, you know, writing teachers that frown on doing that writing about, you know, your pain. I found it really helpful, as long as you can, while you're writing about it, also sort of see what's best for the story arc. So I say "Watercress" is semi autobiographical, because the events didn't all happen in that order at the same time. But, you know, so I took a little bit of creative license, my, my mother did have a younger brother who, who died. He did not die of malnutrition, he died of whooping cough, but again, there was no good health care in China at the time. So it served my story to have him, you know, die from hunger from the famine. And as for "Meilan," yeah, I took a lot of the microaggressions that I had coped with, in my own experience, as well as the experiences of my Asian-American friends, and tried to update them a little bit to suit the current climate. And, you know, talk a little bit about the previous administration. So we'll just leave that there. But uh, so as far as process goes, I do, you know, I try to take those things that are universal, those emotions, and then sort of, I can add those layers of what actually happened to me or to my friends, and then also take the history of it and layer that in as well to kind of give a different perspective, I hope, than, you know, readers might be getting in social studies class.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 27:11

Hmm. I love hearing the behind the scenes because as I'm reading it, I mean, I'm just thinking about, obviously, the story, but then I'm thinking about you and what you share with me. And I'm like, "I'm so curious, like, which part of this is true?" I told my mom, I'm like, "Do you think her family really had a bakery?"

A

Andrea Wang 27:27

I'm obsessed with baked goods. They did not own a bakery. I love to bake. I used to bake these really elaborate birthday cakes for my kids. But I also really, really missed the Chinese bakeries. I did grow up in Ohio, where there weren't any Chinese bakeries around. My family moved to Boston when I was 13. And so it was sort of the reverse experience of Meilan, right? I went from being the only Chinese person in my class to having many Chinese kids in my class and our family would go to Chinatown on the weekends and go shopping and go eat dim sum. And it was, I just felt this palpable sense of relief when I was in Chinatown. Like, "Oh, I feel much more at home here because they get me, you know?" And I wanted to sort of explore that fish out of water feeling in reverse. So Meilan's grown up feeling like she belongs and is accepted in her community. And, you know, moves to Ohio, where she's not.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 28:34

Yeah. Oh, wow. Thank you, cuz I was like dying of curiosity. Well, you are amazing. Your books, I'm telling you, every single one is an adventure in itself. And I'm wondering, do you have anything coming up that you can share with us? I know, sometimes it's secret. So just tell us what you can.

A

Andrea Wang 28:53

Okay, um, definitely can tell you about my next picture book coming up. It's called "Luli and the Language of Tea" — the drink tea, because I always have to talk about food somewhere. I had heard that the word for tea in many, many languages comes from the original Chinese word for tea, "cha," in different dialects. And I discovered that's actually true. So it originated in China, you know, hundreds and hundreds of years ago. And as it was exported around the globe, the word for it morphed, you know? And so it reminded me of kids playing telephone, you know, where you whisper something in the first kid's ear and it goes around the circle.

J

Jasmine Bradshaw 29:43

Yes!

A

Andrea Wang 29:43

And then at the end, it's not at all what you think. And it can be really fun. And in this case, I wanted to bring together a group of immigrant children from all over the world. The setting is that their parents are attending an English as a second language class at the community center. And so their kids are in the playroom next door getting free childcare while their parents are in class. But the kids aren't playing together because they don't all speak the same language. And Luli decides she's going to solve this by bringing them all together with a tea party. And it just so happens, you know, she gets up and she says the word for tea in Mandarin Chinese, and the heads all pop up, kind of like in telephone, and they all hear it in their own language and they repeat it in their own language. And they come together and share some tea and make friends.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 30:41
That is beautiful. The recognition just when she says the word...I have goosebumps. That isâ€œI'm so excited. And you were working on that when we talked like, two years ago.

A Andrea Wang 30:51
Yeah, it takes a while.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 30:53
It's amazing!

A Andrea Wang 30:54
Like a couple years. It comes out next April, April 2022. The illustrator is Hyewon Yum. She is amazing. So look up, you know, her artwork. She'sâ€œthe kids, you know, actually on my social media, I think I just did a cover reveal. So the kids in the book are just so adorable. I love her art.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 31:15
I love that. Speaking of social media, where can people find you?

A Andrea Wang 31:19
I am on Twitter occasionally. And Instagram occasionally. On Twitter, I'm @AndreaYWang. The Y is the letter Y. And on Instagram, I'm @AndreaWhyWang, but the Y is spelled W-H-Y, which is my nerdiness showing that I always ask questions. But I also have a novel coming out in 2023, I think. It's a standalone, contemporary, middle grade novel that also explores, you know, issues of identity and culture. And it takes place at a summer camp for Chinese kids. So cultural camp.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 32:00
Yay. Well, I'm always on pins and needles for your writing. Thank you so much for taking the time. I always learn so much from you, both from your writing and from talking to you. I feel so grateful that you would take the time to be with me. Oh, thank you so much for having me on. It's always so fun to talk to you, too.