

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Dragonwings

by
Laurence Yep

Book Information

Laurence Yep, Dragonwings
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This beautiful story is of Moon Shadow and his father Windrider, a Chinese immigrant who makes a flying machine in 1909.

Award: ALA Notable/Best Books; Boston Globe/Horn Book Award/Honors; Jane Addams Book Award/Honor Books; Misc./Other; Newbery Honor; Phoenix Award/Honor

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Main Characters

Black Dog Uncle's son, who is an opium addict and robs and beats Moon Shadow

Grandmother Moon Shadow's mother, who lives in China

Hand Clap Moon Shadow's cousin, a partner in the Company, who brings Moon Shadow from China

Lefty a worker in the Company, who cut off his right hand when he lost his money gambling

Miss Whitlaw a white woman, who becomes friends with Moon Shadow and Windrider

Moon Shadow a young boy who emigrates from China to live in San Francisco with the father he has never met

Mother Moon Shadow's mother, whom he leaves behind in China

Mr. Alger a white man who gives Windrider a job as a handyman

Robin Miss Whitlaw's niece, who lives with Miss Whitlaw

Uncle Bright Star Moon Shadow's Uncle and a partner in the Company, a laundry in San Francisco

White Deer a partner in the Company

Windrider Moon Shadow's father, who has a dream of building and flying an aeroplane and who believes he was a dragon in a previous life

Vocabulary

moronic feeble-minded

raiment clothing

shanghaier one who puts people aboard ship by use of force

whelped when a dog has given birth

Synopsis

Moon Shadow is eight years old when he sails from China to America in 1903 to join his father. His father, along with other male family members, operate a laundry (the Company) in San Francisco, earning money to send back to China.

His father tells Moon Shadow he acquired his new name of Windrider when he met the Dragon King. The Dragon King told him that in a previous life Windrider had been a dragon and great physician, and that Windrider must pass tests as a "softskin" before he can become a dragon again. Then he gave Windrider a pair of wings that allowed him to fly. Moon Shadow believes along with his father that these events were not a dream.

Moon Shadow ventures from the Tang people's town into the white "demons" city only to deliver and pick up laundry with his father. On one trip, his father helps a "demon" fix a car, and the white man offers Windrider a job as a handyman. Moon Shadow's older cousin, Black Dog, creates continuing problems with his opium addiction.

Two years pass. Black Dog beats and robs Moon

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Shadow to pay for his addiction. In a confrontation with Black Dog, Windrider kills another man and needs to leave Tang town. He takes the job previously offered by the white man. They live in a stable behind Miss Whitlaw's house and become friends with her and her niece, Robin. Windrider begins to design aeroplanes, having read about the success of the Wright brothers.

The 1906 San Francisco earthquake occurs. Moon Shadow, Windrider, Miss Whitlaw, and Robin help rescue neighbors and camp in Golden Gate Park. Windrider and Moon Shadow work to rebuild the Company, and Miss Whitlaw and Robin move to Oakland. Windrider decides to pursue his dream of building a flying machine, and he and Moon Shadow move to the hills above Oakland, too. For three years, they work to build "Dragonwings." Black Dog robs them, and they cannot afford to pay the rent and are told to move. They have no way to move "Dragonwings." Their relatives help drag "Dragonwings" to the hilltop. Windrider successfully flies "Dragonwings," but breaks his leg and ribs. He decides to rejoin the Company rather than try to build another aeroplane. The next summer, Windrider sails back to China to bring Moon Shadow's mother to America.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

When Moon Shadow, Windrider, Miss Whitlaw, and Robin were looking at the stars, Miss Whitlaw commented, "We see the same thing and yet find different truths." Why did she say this? What is the larger meaning of what she said?

She said this when she realized that the Chinese and western peoples assemble the same stars in different ways to form different constellations. In the same way, different people, especially people from different cultures, perceive realities and truths differently.

Literary Analysis

What did Uncle's comment to Windrider and Moon Shadow when they told him they were moving to Oakland indicate about Uncle's character?

Windrider and Moon Shadow moved to Oakland to build the aeroplane. Uncle told them to not expect to come back. Uncle considered their plan irresponsible toward the family back in China, who counted on the money they sent. He did not understand Windrider's need to pursue what he saw as an impractical dream. He was angry that Windrider would not listen to his advice. Uncle was a man of strong family values who was practical in nature and strongly believed he was right.

Inferential Comprehension

Compare Moon Shadow's thoughts and feelings about Miss Whitlaw in the beginning and end of the story.

Moon Shadow at first expected Miss Whitlaw to be a true "demoness." He thought she would be very tall, with blue skin, warts, and long earlobes. He thought she might have a potbelly, big sacs of flesh for breasts, and be wearing a loin cloth. He found out immediately that she looked nothing like this and that she was friendly. He began to wonder if they had known each other in a previous life. He found she had misconceptions about dragons, but because she had an open mind, he was able to dispel them. By the end of the story, he had learned that she was tough but gentle, and they were close friends.

Constructing Meaning

Why did Moon Shadow think that helping to rescue people after the earthquake was a little like playing jackstraws?

One had to remove the debris very carefully so that other debris did not collapse on the victims or the rescuers.

Teachable Skills

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Recognizing Setting Part of the story takes place during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Ask the students to research factual information about the earthquake and present their information in the form of a report, poster, or historically accurate story. Then hold a class discussion about how well the depiction of the earthquake and its aftermath in *Dragonwings* corresponded with the actual earthquake and its aftermath.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Dragonwings is rich in references to Chinese history and culture. Some examples are reincarnation, the Tang dynasty, the lives and work of Chinese immigrants, clothing, family clans, Chinese holidays, and San Francisco's Tang town. Ask the students to choose one aspect of Chinese history or culture that relates to the story and research it. Allow time for each student to make a short presentation of their findings to the class.

Making Inferences In *Dragonwings*, the main characters had to force others to help them rescue victims following the San Francisco earthquake. We sometimes hear in the news about people standing by when their help could mean saving someone's life. Initiate a class discussion about why some people choose to help others in an emergency while others do not. Ask them if they have ever been in a position to help in an emergency, what they did, and why.

Responding to Literature The author of *Dragonwings* stated that a Tang man can have several names during his life, such as a family name and a personal name given at birth, a name given when he comes of age, a nickname, and a pen name. He says that Tang people believe people should be able to change names as they change (p. 31). Ask the students to reflect on themselves, their past, and their future. Ask them to identify names that would have been appropriate for them in the past and the names they think might be appropriate in the future. Instruct them to prepare a poster presenting the names they might have if they were Tang people.