



Author Spotlight

With

Janet S. Wong

“What a Life”

An Interview with Author Janet S. Wong
by Mike Amato, Charlesbridge Marketing Intern

We have all heard about kids going nuts in a candy store, but what about an adult going crazy in a children’s bookstore—is there such a person? Yes, there is. Janet Wong: a California girl whose imagination knows no bounds and who found the perfect career: writing for an audience she admires, children.

Even at 47 Wong is still captivated by a good picture book. A wife and mother to a teenage son, she remembers that as a child she was no bookworm. She recalls, “I didn’t even like books! I felt that reading was too quiet and lonely.” This explains why she chose to pursue a law degree at Yale University. She was not a “mother goose” at first. In fact, Janet practiced corporate law where she had to fire people.

But Wong soon found that she was no big bad wolf, either. At the age of 30 she found her true calling—writing and making a difference in kids’ lives by captivating them with her stories. She explains, “I really love it when a child comes up to me to talk about how ‘all of a sudden’ they now like poetry, or writing, or books—or when I hear from a parent that a child was ‘writing just for fun’ at home.”

Wong found that she could illustrate characters and settings perfectly with words. The worlds she creates in her books are not distant parallel universes, but awkward elementary school dilemmas. In Wong’s newest book, *Me and Rolly Maloo*, which is due out in July, fourth-grade math ace Jenna Lee gets caught cheating on an algebra test. When her teacher Mrs. Pie catches her, Jenna quickly learns that cheating is not the answer. She realizes that Rolly Maloo, the most popular girl in class, was taking advantage her. Rolly wanted the answers to the test, not Jenna’s friendship.



Illustration © 2010 by Elizabeth Buttler

In the end Jenna learns what real friendship is. It comes in the form of people like Shorn L. Loop who advocates for Jenna, without expecting anything in return. “Nowadays we’re often too polite, worrying about imposing on each other,” writes Wong. “We’ve forgotten that going out of your way to help is part of friendship.” Jenna dives head first into a pile of trouble, but it is a

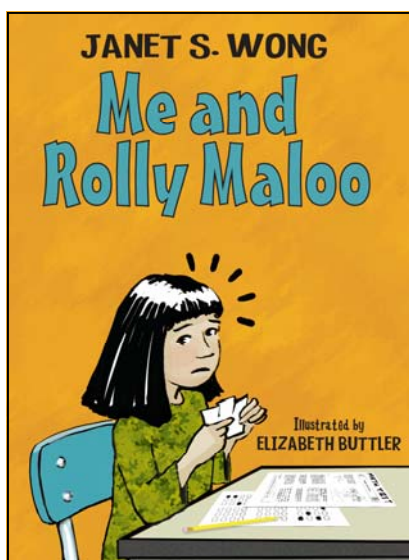
true friend who comes to the rescue and pulls her out. Shorn L. is a buoyant character and helps inflate a happy ending for Jenna.

As a child Wong also loved to draw, a passion she perfected when she studied abroad in France where she would *parlez vous* with the French who thought she was a native. She recalls, “I loved my year in Europe because it encouraged me to reinvent myself. Spending so much time in museums, I was inspired to learn to paint. I went there as just a regular student, and came back. . .an artist!” While she does not illustrate her books, she did do the cover for her book, *A Suitcase of Seaweed* (Margaret K. McElderry), and plans to do more illustrations in the future.

Wong’s mind is a pool and she is constantly fishing for ideas in her imagination. She is often inspired to construct fictional boys and girls that mirror her childhood—characters who catch lizards in San Anselmo, California, like in *Minn and Jake* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), for example. At first, Wong’s parents thought writing children’s books was a crazy profession. Just as Jenna Lee felt she had disappointed her mother after she was caught cheating, Wong felt she let her parents down too. But she explains, “I think we all let our parents down in one way or another—and then, hopefully, they get over it. I let my parents down when I quit my high-paying lawyer job—but they got over it (after my spot on *Oprah*).”

Janet Wong, the lawyer, found herself out of sorts—like salt in a sugar shaker. Her life took a turn when she stepped into a children’s bookstore. An idea hatched, creating a revelation. Wong was no lawyer, but a children’s book author instead. Her eye-opening experience led her on a path of endless opportunities—meeting Oprah, reading at The White House Easter Egg Roll, and most importantly, having the freedom to create happy endings. To Wong, all of this is as fulfilling as a slice of pumpkin pie—her favorite. Mmm!

By Janet S. Wong



978-1-58089-158-5, HC, \$15.95
Ages 7-10

Would you cheat to be popular?

When popular Rolly Maloo asks outcast Jenna Lee to help her cheat on a math test, Jenna doesn’t know what to do. Cheating is wrong—her mother taught her that. But maybe Rolly just needs a little help?

Janet S. Wong thoughtfully explores the issues of cheating, popularity, and integrity, while Elizabeth Buttler’s graphic novel-style illustrations skillfully depict the inner lives of the characters.