



## Author Spotlight with Natalie Dias Lorenzi

***Flying the Dragon* is your first novel. How long did you work on this book before it was published? How much did it change from the first draft to the finished book?**

I started this manuscript after we moved to Italy and I made the switch from teaching to staying at home with my kids. I wrote while my little ones napped, so it took about a year to complete a first draft. That early draft was quite different from what would become the final manuscript that my agent, Erin Murphy, submitted to Charlesbridge. Hiroshi was the only main character, and Skye (then called Susan) was just a mean girl in his class. Truth be told, it was a bit of a depressing tale—Hiroshi moves away from his home in Japan to the US where he feels like an alien, his grandfather is ill—there wasn't a lot of lightness to the story.

My agent and I later decided that the story needed a major revision, and that Susan was itching to tell her side of the story, because maybe she wasn't really the meanie I'd made her out to be. So Susan became Skye (a name that holds more significance in the story), Hiroshi's cousin who both wants to help him and yet is embarrassed by his lack of English and cultural missteps at school. She added a lightness and humor that the story needed, and Hiroshi became a more multi-layered character thanks to her influence.

**You've lived in various parts of the world—the US, Germany, Italy, and Japan. What was it about Japan that made you want to write a story with characters from that culture as opposed to any of the many other cultures you've been exposed to in your life thus far?**

Japan was the place where I felt the most foreign, if that makes sense. I lived on a US Air Force base in Germany as a child, but although we were in a foreign country, everyone on the base was American. When I lived in Italy as a young adult, I learned Italian fairly quickly because I was able to look up new words in my trusty pocket dictionary (and I fell for a guy—my future husband—who spoke no English!). But when I moved from Italy to Japan, I really struggled with the language and the culture. The Japanese are a lovely, polite people, but they are SO polite that I wasn't getting any feedback when I'd mess up a phrase or a word in their language. Whereas the Italians would cock their heads, squint and shrug whenever they couldn't understand me, the Japanese would always smile and nod, no matter what mistakes came out of my mouth.

I wanted to use those feelings of befuddlement and frustration that I experienced as a second language learner and transplant them into my main character so that his emotions would feel authentic to readers. So I created Hiroshi, brought him halfway around the world, and plunked him down into a class where he feels lost and confused. I hope he's forgiven me!

**What was the most difficult part about writing *Flying the Dragon*?**

We've all heard the "write what you know" adage, but with *Flying the Dragon*, I was definitely veering off into unknown territory. Having lived in Japan for two years, I had plenty of knowledge about how the Japanese interact with *gaijin* (foreigners, like me), but I didn't know anything about the ins and outs of a Japanese family's daily life—their routines, the way they interacted with each other, the way their roles play out in the family hierarchy. I had a lot of help from Japanese friends and colleagues, two of whom read the

entire final manuscript to check for cultural and linguistic accuracy. But even so, it was difficult to write scenes in which Hiroshi reacts to a situation differently than his American peers would. For example, there's a scene in which Hiroshi is angry with his grandfather. If Hiroshi were an American child, he likely would have raised his voice and shown more anger than Hiroshi does in that scene. I had to portray Hiroshi's anger in a way that American readers would understand, yet remain true to the cultural norms in which Hiroshi was raised.

The kite-making and kite-fighting scenes also required a significant amount of research. My experience with kites was limited to flying cheap kites in my backyard, both as a kid and with my own kids. Luckily, two kite experts were willing to take the time to read the kite scenes in my manuscript and were integral in guiding the details so that those scenes will feel authentic to anyone who knows a thing or two about kites.

### **How did you decide that you wanted to become an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) specialist? Are you fluent in any languages other than English?**

Prior to becoming an ESOL teacher, I had been an elementary classroom teacher for nine years. Most of the schools in which I worked were very multi-culturally and linguistically diverse. During the two years I spent at a culturally homogeneous school, I realized how much I missed teaching diverse groups of students. At around the same time, my first child was born, and my Italian husband and I knew we wanted to raise our children in a bilingual, bicultural home. My husband and I are both second language learners—I learned Italian and he learned English when we were both adults, so we know first-hand what it's like to muddle through those early months and years of acquiring a new language in a foreign land. Because of those experiences, I gained more empathy for my students who were new immigrants to this country. Although it was initially difficult for me to accomplish daily tasks like grocery shopping and navigating the public transportation system in Italy and Japan, I still got to spend my days in an English-speaking environment at the international schools where I taught. But my newcomer students have to spend all day in school where they don't understand a word of English, and I still can't imagine how they do it. I wanted to focus on helping them to make a smooth transition to life in a new place as they learn a new language.

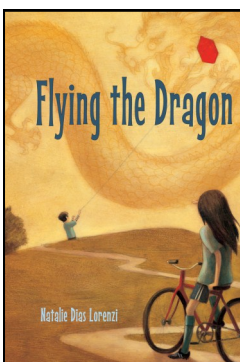
### **Are you working on any other books at the moment?**

I have several projects in various stages of development from picture books to a humorous (I hope!) middle grade to a young adult novel that I'm revising. As a teacher, I always look forward to summer when I have more time to write!

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By Natalie Dias Lorenzi

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American-born Skye is a good student and a star soccer player who never really gives any thought to the fact that her father is Japanese. Her cousin, Hiroshi, lives in Japan, and never really gives a thought to his uncle's family living in the United States. Skye and Hiroshi's lives are thrown together when Hiroshi's family, with his grandfather (who is also his best friend), suddenly moves to the US. Now Skye doesn't know who she is anymore: at school she's suddenly too Japanese, but at home she's not Japanese enough. Hiroshi has a hard time adjusting to life in a new culture, and resents Skye's intrusions on his time with Grandfather. Through all of this is woven Hiroshi's expertise, and Skye's growing interest in, kite making and competitive *rokkaku* kite flying.

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