



Title: Dragon Chica

Author: May-lee Chai

Description:

Nea, a Chinese-Cambodian teenager, flees to Texas as a refugee from the Khmer Rouge regime when a miracle occurs. Although her family has been struggling to support itself, they discover that a wealthy aunt and uncle have managed to make it to America as well. Nea and her family rush to join their relatives and help run a Chinese restaurant in Nebraska. But soon Nea discovers their miracle is not what she had expected. Family fights erupt. Then the past -- and a forbidden love -- threaten to tear them all apart.

Dragon Chica follows Nea, an indomitable character in the tradition of Holden Caulfield, Scout Finch and Jo March, as she fights to save her family and herself.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly:

In Chai's coming-of-age novel, 11-year-old Nea, who survived the Khmer Rouge with her scrappy mother, beautiful older sister, and younger siblings, leaves Texas for Nebraska to work in the Chinese restaurant owned by her auntie and uncle. But the miracle she'd hoped for is crushed upon arrival: auntie and uncle, once wealthy, are now struggling, and the locals are more bigoted than they were in Texas. It's the 1980s and the Japanese takeover of the U.S. auto industry looms large; though Nea is Chinese and Cambodian, she's still Asian, and treated as "other." Her relentlessly dour life is only occasionally broken by evocatively disquieting, often painful, dreams, memories, and myths that bring shifts in tone readers will welcome. Chai previously mined her own experience for the memoir, *Hapa Girl*, and the racism she has described enduring informs Nea and her family's experiences. But they are survivors, and as Nea matures she increasingly uses her wits for her own advancement, forging a path to college.

Dallas Morning News:

When a church sponsors an Asian refugee family and sets them up with a trailer in a small town west of Dallas, difficulties arise. The family has survived the Khmer Rouge, but now the children must endure nasty treatment from their new classmates, who at first think they are Native Americans.

It is the strong bond between the two Chinese-Cambodian sisters that makes *Dragon Chica* a tender story. Sometimes funny, always very much alive, this novel introduces yet another variation on the modern-day immigrant experience as the Chhim family continues to move on -- to East Dallas, where Ma gets a job in a Chinese restaurant, then on to Nebraska.

May-lee Chai creates a lively narrator in Nea Chhim, who goes from age 11 to 19 in the course of the novel, and never loses her willingness to defend her family -- especially

her much prettier sister, Sourdi, four years older. Nea is the scrappy Dragon Chica of the title. She remembers how Sourdi once carried her through a Cambodian minefield, finding safety by stepping on corpses. She would do anything for Sourdi. In the pattern of little sisters everywhere, sometimes Nea tries to do too much. In part, the book is about both girls' coming of age, and the different paths they take to happiness.

One thing that separates this immigrant narrative from many others is the skill with which the author describes how the kids are tortured by their peers. Naive brother Sam's wrestling teammates invite him to a party but then try to get him to cook the family dog "gook-style" and serve it to the others on the team. Such an act, they say, would show team spirit. The drama of the kids' problems in *Dragon Chica* suggests that this novel might also appeal to young-adult readers.

ThePirateTree.com:

Dragon Chica is a powerful and gripping story that offers a model of strength and survival to young people going through difficult times. Nea is far from a stereotypical good girl and her toughness and willingness to stand up to injustice add to her appeal. Although published as an adult title -- and certainly of interest to adult readers -- *Dragon Chica* belongs in teen collections. It is a story that transcends age, ethnicity, and immigration experience to cast light on all of us struggling against the forces that constrain our lives.

Nina de Gramont, author of *Every Little Thing in the World* and *Gossip of the Starlings*:

Eleven-year-old Nea has seen the very worst this world has to offer -- from civil war in Cambodia, to the rice fields of the Khmer Rouge, to the bullying hallways of American public school. Thankfully, her heart and imagination bloom wide enough to let her continue longing for the best. As she grows into a woman, Nea navigates her difficult life with clear-eyed and courageous idealism. May-lee Chai has written a brilliant and important coming-of-age story about a young refugee who refuses to give up her search for that promised refuge. *Dragon Chica* is an important and deliciously readable novel that will hold you in thrall; you won't be able to look away from these pages, even as your eyes fill up with tears.

Robert Olen Butler, author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*:

It is very rare that a coming of age novel transcends its inherent limitations and attains the complex emotional resonance of adult fiction. *Dragon Chica* does this with great aplomb. The book explores with subtlety and depth the mature, universal issues of identity and connection, but it also retains its direct appeal to younger readers. May-lee Chai has performed a remarkable act of literary magic.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee, author of *Somebody's Daughter*:

From the killing fields of Cambodia to a Chinese restaurant in the middle of the cornfields of Nebraska, *Dragon Chica* takes the reader deep into a compelling story about two sisters and the secret histories that surround them.

Alicia Erian, author of *Towelhead*:

Powerful, witty and profound, *Dragon Chica* introduces readers to a new kind of American

heroine.

Lac Su, author of *I Love Yous Are for White People*:

What does it take to survive *Dragon Chica* shows that you need courage, luck, cajones, a sense of humor, and a few miracles.

Walter Mason, author of *Destination Saigon*:

Dragon Chica is a beautifully nuanced work of enormous appeal, not just to its intended Young Adult audience, but to anyone interested in the themes of race, belonging and the mysterious dynamics of family. It is also an exploration of outsider-ship, that meta-theme of all young adult fiction. And while specifically (and masterfully) dealing with questions of racism and ethnic identity, it is ultimately much more universal in its story. It is about the great pain and torment of all adult awakening: the struggles with sexual identity, the search for a more strongly (and separately) identified self and the enormous resentment at family strictures and eccentricities. The dullness of a provincial teenage existence and the constant thwarting of adolescent fantasy are brought to life in the pages of *Dragon Chica* in a way that brought constant smiles of recognition (and occasional pangs of long-forgotten angst) to my reading face.

The characters are rich and complex in a way that would be enormously attractive to a YA reader. What it also does, with great sophistication and lightness of touch, is bring to life the rich, complex and shifting cultures of the Chinese diaspora, and the special (and harrowing) historical circumstances of the Cambodian-Chinese in particular. There is a magic in Chai's treatment of legend, folklore and superstition, and the characters -- especially the older ones -- occasionally lapse into a kind of dream-world of memory that is at turns whimsical and harrowing.

Dragon Chica is a beautifully written, clever and perfectly crafted novel, one that succeeds at every level without ever falling into the embarrassing and cringe-making didacticism that can frequently plague the "issues" novel, particularly one directed at young people. Chai speaks perfectly to her young readers, trusting in their intelligence, their sensitivity and their great desire for subtlety.

For me the most intriguing character was the tragic, scarred and monstrously selfish Auntie. She is almost an archetype, and a figure that is easy to recognise if anyone has had anything to do with migrant families. Auntie's is the life that is lived on the knife-edge of tragedy; she is the one who bears the pain of exile, lost forever in the old stories the others can't afford to recall.

It is May-lee Chai's genius that she delivers such a familiar figure so sensitively and, I should add, with a wonderful dose of mystery and intrigue that has the reader guessing right to the very end. The author's sympathy for the outsider is palpable, and allows each of the characters to be fully human in their greater or lesser alienation.

I adored this book, and would recommend it to any young person, particularly those with an interest in Asia and the Asian immigrant experience. May-lee Chai deserves to be better known in Australia, and *Dragon Chica* is the kind of book that almost any young Australian could identify with.

Bookish Blather blog:

This is definitely a novel with cross over appeal. I could definitely see this being one of those mother/daughter book club picks.

While parts of Nea's story are surely unique to the Cambodian immigrant experience, large parts of it also seem like they apply to all immigrants, and will be appreciated by anyone with close ties to another country and culture.

The Smithsonian Asia Pacific American Program's BookDragon blog:

Told with unflinching clarity and unapologetic determination, Nea's story is to be mourned, remembered, and ultimately lauded, not only as it bears witness to Cambodian American immigration, but as a commemoration of hard-won American rebirth.