

# California Readers

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**MEET ROSEANNE THONG**  
by Ann Stalcup

*Did you write stories when you were growing up? at school? Or at home as a hobby? As a young child, or as a teenager, or both?*

I started writing when I was 4 years old, largely because I was a restless kid, who was not allowed to get out of bed on weekends before 8:00 a.m. (so as not to wake up the rest of the family!) I had lots of creative ideas running through my brain at the time, so I kept a writing tablet by my bed, and jotted down poems and thoughts until it was time to officially 'get up.' Sometimes, if the wind howled late at night, or if there was a sweet scent on the breeze, I'd wake up and write a poem about it, before going back to sleep. When I was 5, my parents submitted one of these poems to a local newspaper, and it was published! This inspired me to keep writing poetry all throughout my elementary school years. I was also fortunate enough to have several excellent writing teachers in Middle School and High School, who encouraged me as well. Unfortunately, I got in the habit of sticking my work in a drawer...and keeping them there! After my daughter was born, I started writing short stories for her...still, keeping them locked up. Then, one day, I shared the idea for *ROUND IS A MOONCAKE: A BOOK OF SHAPES* with a colleague at the school where I worked. She liked it immediately, and invited me to join a writing group she was a member of. This was all it took--the connection with an active writing community, and a gentle push in the right direction, to get me started sharing my ideas with publishers. I guess the rest was luck.



Roseanne Thong

*When you were a child did you ever have a moment when you decided that you were going to be a writer when you grew up?*

Not really... I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up! Honestly, I never thought much about careers until reaching high school. During that time, news reporting was fashionable, largely due to the investigative work of Woodward and Bernstein who cracked the Watergate scandal a few years before I graduated. Therefore, I decided to study print journalism in university—it seemed like a 'glitzy' and interesting career. However, I later realized it couldn't afford me the kind of creative outlet I needed—in news reporting, personal feelings and biases must be kept under wraps. I later changed my emphasis to teaching (History, English and Asian Studies) a field where I could better share my outlook and philosophy of life—and took a job working in Taiwan. There, I kept writing poetry and prose, but still kept the work in drawers! If it sounds like I'm repeating myself, I am. Never keep your work locked in drawers!

*Have any of your books earned special recognition?*

My latest book, *WISH*, was named Best of the Best (2008) by Chicago Public Library and a recommended reading book by Smithsonian Magazine. It is also part of the 2010 Elementary California Collection. *THE WISHING TREE* won a Skipping Stones Honor Award (2008) for Multicultural Education, while *RED IS A DRAGON: A BOOK OF COLORS* received Best of the Year Award from University of Wisconsin-Madison's Cooperative Children's Book Center (2002), and was a Featured Reading Book by the Florida Reading Association and Florida Department of Education. Probably the biggest honor was for a piece of adult short fiction, entitled *YEAR OF THE PIG*, which was nominated for the Pushcart Prize for Literature in 1998.

***Do you work on more than one book at a time?***

I normally have 20 – 30 ideas for books written down at any given time, and work on 2 – 3 manuscripts simultaneously. I might write the ‘skeleton’ or ‘story arc’ for one, then give it a break for a week or two, skipping to a new idea before it slips away from me. Sometimes I just write down a phrase that might be rolling around in my brain like an echo. Other times, I might write down the refrain for a rhyming book, knowing that I can fill in the details later. For longer books, I like to write the first chapter, to make sure to capture the “voice” and “world view” I’m aiming for, and enough support details so that I have a feel for the main characters and setting. Otherwise, a month down the line, I may not remember things as intended. I’m currently working on 3 picture books, a middle grades reader, and a piece of adult fiction. I don’t know if this is particularly wise or not, but it works for me. I rotate them in ‘shifts,’ though I sometimes opt to focus solely on one title, if there is a deadline, or a nagging urge to finish.

***Do you write every day and do you have set hours that you work?***

I used to write six hours a day, from 8:15 a.m. (after an hour’s jog), until my daughter came home from school at 2:00 p.m. Although I rarely have that kind of free time anymore, I try to devote 2 – 3 hours a day to writing, any time I can grab it, and treat it as I would any job: seriously! I don’t answer phones, make appointments, eat snacks, or do anything distracting during my writing time—it is way too valuable! Once you take that first phone call, the concentration and magic is gone.

I believe is a strong connection between physical exercise and mental clarity. Jogging for 30 minutes before writing, allows me to feel centered and concentrate better. If I lose concentration mid-day, I take another 30-minute jog, which usually does the trick. Believe it or not, some of my best ideas have come from the treadmill, walks through the park, bike rides or hiking in the mountains. During that time, your brain is relatively free. There are no distracting conversations, emails, nagging family members, or other ‘interference’ blocking your thoughts.

***Where do you get your ideas?***

My ideas come from things as varied as unique phrases, a delicious smell, a certain angle of sunlight, or even a flashback to a childhood experience. But the idea from my latest book, *WISH* (Chronicle Books, 2008), came from children, themselves, during a school visit at the Canadian School of Singapore. At that time, I was reading one of my books called **THE WISHING TREE** (Shen’s Books, 2004), about a special tree used for making wishes in China. In order to connect with the students’ varied cultural backgrounds, I asked them how they made wishes in their own culture. The answers were fascinating. A boy from Russia said he threw stones at three dangling bells. A girl from India spoke of sticking peacock feathers in between notebook pages. A Japanese student mentioned tying wishes on to tall bamboo plants in a temple courtyard. And then, I heard myself asking the group, “What would you think if I wrote my next book about wishing traditions from around the world?” There was a chorus of agreement, and simultaneously, the first words of the book were chorusing in my brain: ***“How in the world do you make a wish? Come follow and you’ll see...the many ways to make a wish, wherever home may be!”***

***What do you most want the students to get out of your school visits?***

I love making school visits because I was an English and History teacher before I was an author, and miss the dynamics of shared teaching and learning. I learn as much from students as they learn from me, if not more! The most important thing I want students to get from my visits is to make a ‘connection’ from my books to their own world, and vice versa. I also hope they gain a love for literature and storytelling. Finally, I try to inspire students to read and write as if they were gobbling down a chocolate sundae—with gusto. I share with them my own experiences about reading and writing from childhood, and we talk about the myriad of ways that ideas can be developed and turned into writing—there is no one ‘set’ formula. I try to solicit and use examples from students’ own lives and interests...this will be where student success comes from...not from my world, but from theirs.