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Author provides lessons in shapes and numbers with a cultural twist



Read this enchanting interview Audra Rundle did with Roseanne Thong, the author of *Round is a Mooncake: A Book of Shapes* and *One Is a Drummer: A Book of Numbers* and learn what inspired her to write the books and her love of exposing young children to different cultures.

Audra Rundle (AR): You were born in California, but have lived in Asia for more than 15 years. What took you to Asia, and what kept you there?

Roseanne Thong (RT): Teaching and traveling are my two loves in life, so it was logical to apply for overseas teaching jobs. I first worked in Guatemala, where I learned Spanish and about the rich traditions of the Hispanic world. However, my university training was in Mandarin, so I started looking for employment in Asia. I soon found a position at a bilingual British school in Hong Kong, where Mandarin and English were taught. This launched my career for both literacy training and writing about Asian traditions.

(AR): What inspired you to write children’s books, and where do you continue to get new inspiration for upcoming books?

(RT): As a child, I kept a writing tablet by my bed, jotting down poems and thoughts late at night. Throughout school, I had several excellent writing teachers who encouraged me as well. I wrote many stories, but never shared them.

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 my school in Hong Kong. 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. The rest was luck.

My inspiration always comes from children I know, or places I have been. When I am excited about a topic, I assume everyone else will be as well. If I see children enjoying a tire swing on a lazy summer day, for example, I want to write about that experience.

(AR): What do you want to teach children about the Asian culture through your books?

(RT): My first goal is to teach children concepts like shapes, colors and numbers, or ideas like love, sharing, courage and hope. I take these universal ideas that all children can relate to and frame them in a way that both Asian and other children can enjoy—no matter where they are from. When I focus on Asian themes, I hope that children in other locations learn about Asian cultural traditions as well as the universal themes that the books convey.

(AR): What reactions from children inspire you to keep writing? What responses do you hope to receive from children reading or listening to your books?

(RT): When I make author visits, I often get detailed advice from students, in the form of fan mail or verbal comments, on what parts of my books they liked or didn’t like. Kids are honest. They also offer great advice. I once made an author visit promoting my book, “The Wishing Tree,” which talks about the Chinese tradition of attaching paper wishes to tree branches with large mandarin oranges and string. One student asked, “Why don’t you write about my wishing traditions. I’m from Russia, and we do special things there.” I said, “Great idea!” I interviewed the student, who told me about local wishing customs. He had a friend from Persia, who also shared her traditions with me. Before the day’s end, I had material for the book, “WISH” which focuses on wishing traditions around the world.

(AR): What are your thoughts on the illustrations in *Round is a Mooncake* and *One Is a Drummer*? Are they what you envisioned in your head, or would you have done anything differently if you were drawing them?

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(RT): Each person's imagination is as unique as a snowflake or fingerprint. While I did imagine bright, bold illustrations, my own ideas were different. But how lucky I was to be paired with Grace Lin, an award-winning illustrator, who interpreted my words in such a lively, colorful manner. The job of a good editor is to find a perfect match between words and pictures, and indeed, she did!

Roseanne Thong was born in Southern California, but has lived in Asia for more than 15 years. In addition to being one of Hong Kong's leading resident authors of children's books, she has worked as a journalist and teacher, and currently teaches English at Hong Kong University's School of Continuing and Professional Education. She previously taught elementary, secondary and university students in California, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Illustrator and author Grace Lin grew up in Upstate New York. After attending the Rhode Island School of Design, she quickly set out to achieve her dream of creating children's books. Grace has written and designed over a dozen books. She has received many awards for her books including a 2010 Newbery Honor and the Theodor Geisel Honor in 2011. Grace lives in Somerville, MA with her husband, Alex.

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The books sound fun. I'll have to check them out!

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