

Almost famous : Roseanne Thong

By **David Watkins**

Unable to find any decent children's books for her daughter, Roseanne Thong decided to write her own. "I'd always written fiction and poems, but it had never occurred to me to write children's fiction," she says. "I had mainly written for myself as a hobby. My daughter is half-Chinese - my husband is Chinese. When she was three, I wanted books with images that she would recognise from her life in Hong Kong. I was looking around for something covering different themes such as numbers or colours. There simply wasn't enough out there."



Photo: Ricky Chung

Originally from South Carolina, the 43-year-old has lived and taught all age groups in Hong Kong for 11 years, after a two-year stint in Taiwan and living in Guatemala. Her fluent Putonghua is the product of what she refers to as a "supportive learning culture" in Taiwan - something she feels is lacking here.

"Many expats beat themselves up about not picking up the local language, but motivation has to work both ways. It's not a supportive language-learning culture in Hong Kong. Everybody speaks English, and if you try to speak in Chinese you're answered back in English, implying that you don't need to speak another language. The learner isn't given a chance. In Taiwan, you get a round of applause if you can say two words."

What Taiwan does share with Hong Kong, however, is a lack of English language books for children that reflect the local culture. "It's a real shame," she says. "It's also a reflection on the government's attitude that English doesn't play a prominent enough role any more."

The idea to take matters into her own hands came during the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1998. The result was *Round Is A Mooncake*, published in 2002, which focused on shapes. She followed it up a year later with *Red Is A Dragon*, which dealt with colours. Her most recent effort, *One Is A Drummer*, covers numbers.

Each is lavishly illustrated by Boston-based artist Grace Lin, and their multi-racial - but essentially Asian - flavours have been especially embraced by parents in America, where there is a healthy market for her books.

"There's both the multicultural market and one I knew little about until a couple of years ago: the adoptive parent market. I started getting e-mails from parents via my publisher, Chronicle Books, asking me to write more stories geared towards Asian kids."

Thong's daughter, now seven, is also happy about it. "It gives her a lot of self-esteem seeing images she can relate to," she says.

"It's so important for a child's personal world to be validated through books. Recently my daughter said something to me that I thought was really worrying. We were playing with these Groovy Girls (a popular multi-racial doll set). She insisted on having the blonde doll, and so I asked her why. She said that 'the black-haired ones are always the poor ones'. I was shocked. My daughter pulled out a couple of picture books that were Chinese folk tales, featuring Chinese girls roaming barefoot in the rugged mountainside. Her comment really hit home.

"Folk tales are wonderful, but we need Asian characters in modern settings. We need big city girls with black hair. At school, kids are learning to describe western cultures in English, but not their own culture."

Thong says she hopes to change this, with local distributors PAL picking up the rights to her stories in Hong Kong. She'll be taking part in a reading and book signing session at Dymocks, IFC One mall, next Saturday, to celebrate the release of *One Is A Drummer*.

"I have so many ideas for local stories. I just know that it's not worth the trouble to go out and sell them. I can't get a wide enough readership in Hong Kong to warrant a publisher printing them. But who knows - maybe I'll get lucky soon."

Roseanne Thong will sign books on Jan 17, Dymocks, IFC One, Central, 2.30pm-4pm.