

Teaching kids that it's okay to be different

BY BRIGITTE ROZARIO



Adeline Foo, the author of 'Guai Wu the Chinese Elf'.

AS a child she suffered through years of being called “fatty bom bom”.

It may have upset her in her primary school days, but Singaporean author Adeline Foo used that experience to inspire her today to help other kids who feel “different” or are bullied for being unique.

Adeline, who has more than 20 books to her name, including *The Diary of Amos Lee* series which was on the Singapore's *Straits Times*' National Best Sellers' List for more than 84 weeks, explains that she was a bit chubby as a child.

“I overcame my fat phase as a child, and now, in my stories, I always write about a character who feels bullied because he's different. And I try to explain through my stories how hurtful children can be when they are mean with what they say.

“My kids, thankfully, are tougher than me. They've suffered being called ‘teacher's pets’ ... that's not a bad thing, right?”

Adeline advises parents to make time to talk to their kids and explore the topic of bullies with them.

“Explain to them that bullies are essentially insecure. I think most kids never see this side of kids who torment them. I like to find books or DVDs/movies about kids who suffer as victims of pranks or torment; these kids would always triumph over their bullies in the stories, and in the process, impart some story or learning experience that my kids would feel good about. It takes time to assure our kids... but it’s well worth the effort to make them understand that they can make a choice, stand up to the bully, or walk away and don’t let it bother them. When they are older and more confident, they will learn to deal with bullies in their own way. And that’s important, because when they overcome their fear of bullies, they become empowered, and the bullying will stop.”

Adeline’s latest book *Guai Wu the Chinese Elf* is set in old China, and is about a boy who looks different from the other kids. He has elf-like ears and is often teased and called names. Because he can climb trees to pick fruits, the children call him “wild monkey”.

He lives off the kindness of the people until one day when a widow takes him in and discovers his talent.

Adeline says she wrote this story in a couple of hours. In fact it is the fastest story she has ever written.

“It was inspired by Jim LaMarche’s *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. It was a fairytale that had resonated when I was a little girl. The story of how a pair of elves repaid the kindness of the shoemaker who had given them shelter and food really touched me. When I chanced upon Jim LaMarche’s book, I fell in love with the story all over again. I decided that I’d write an Asian adaptation.

“I chose to set the story in China as the tradition of foot binding came to mind. I wanted to feature the tiny three-inch lotus shoes and the lushness of Chinese silk embroidery. It was weird to allow the setting to determine the choice of a Chinese boy being labelled as an elf, but I didn’t have much choice as there are no elves in Chinese history! But there are monsters, or what the Chinese call ‘guai wu’, that is someone who’s different. So everything fell into place and the story kind of wrote itself!”

Adeline hopes that Singaporean and Malaysian children will relate to the story of Guai Wu. She also hopes they will understand that every child thinks he’s different. But we shouldn’t single out anyone by using bullying tactics like name-calling to assert a false sense of superiority.

The book features illustrations by Christine Lim Simpson, whom Adeline knew before she even decided to write the book. Knowing her style, Adeline figured she’d be a good fit.

Christine developed her designs based on research on the right type of clothes, shoes, designs, colours, mood and feel for the book.

Asian-themed books are still very few comparatively, which is why this book by Adeline is a gem.

“Writers are drawn to writing about popular culture, primarily Western culture that offers more attractive/alluring products, think of pop music, screen ‘goddesses’, teenage fashion, fads and trends etc. that readers recognise and lap up. Stories that offer popular hooks will find ready readers/buyers.

“In writing an Asian story, we have to find a universal hook in the story that makes it something simple to understand, regardless of the reader’s race or culture. Writing an Asian story may mean that the book is labelled/dismissed simply as a ‘cultural’ or ‘historical’ title. It sounds like it’d take more effort in doing this, doesn’t it? So isn’t it natural that writers want to write about something more popular, like an easier to please story? So writers are not gearing towards writing Asian-themed stories, because it just sounds like difficult work!” explains Adeline.

She has three children – Benjamin, 13, Tessa, 10, and Jeremy, eight. Her daughter loves the book for its illustrations. Jeremy liked being read to when he was younger but these days he hardly reads picture books.

Her advice to Asian parents trying to encourage more reading and less tech gadgets?

“I think you can’t stop kids from playing with tech gadgets. But fill the home and their time with books and more books! I bring my kids to the library at least once a week. If we are shopping, the book store is a must stop-over. Once they get hooked on reading, it sticks for a long time. I hope my kids would become lifelong readers! Kids have to be persuaded and rewarded. Give them reading incentives so that they’d pick the book first, gadget later.”