

Readwalking

By Andrea Cheng

One day my daughter, Jane, came home from second grade with a big scratch across one lens of her glasses. She had walked into a telephone pole. "Readwalking?" I asked. She nodded.

Jane became immersed very early into the world of books. Laura and Mary from the Laura Ingalls Wilder books became members of our family. So did Henry and Jesse and Violet and Benny from the *Boxcar Children* and Sam Gribly as he made his home in the wilderness in *My Side of the Mountain*.

Then I began to worry that Jane's fixation with print was becoming a problem. She read the cereal box at breakfast and lost track of the conversation. At her eighth birthday party, someone gave her *Little Women* and she was well into chapter three before I made her put the book down and participate in the games I had carefully arranged. She took *The Prince and the Pauper* to school and finished it in two days. Her third grade teacher said she was reading in class and on the playground. "Should I tell her to put her book away?" the teacher asked. I was unsure how to answer.

Jane did not seem unhappy. She chatted with the crossing guard in the morning before school. She liked most of her teachers. After school, while our neighbor fixed his lawnmower, she told him about the characters in the books she was reading. On the weekends she played school with her sister and followed her brother around the neighborhood on her bike. She was good at climbing trees and riding a scooter. She took Chinese class and enjoyed decoding sentences even when she only knew half of the characters. At the main library, she found books about how to make paper cut outs and fancy tassels. She spent endless hours following the directions to make her own creations.

I knew that often Jane was reading to escape uncomfortable or unpleasant social situations. I knew that a group of girls at school excluded her, that a boy called her Chinese flat face, that she was teased for not knowing anything about television shows or popular singers, that she felt alone. But I had faith that books would, in the long run, help her figure out who she was and how to connect with others. I told the teacher that if Jane was not causing a problem for her or the other students, I thought it best to continue to let her read.

In October of fourth grade, a new girl, Jing, who had recently arrived from China to join her parents in America, came into Jane's class; slowly I watched a friendship begin. Jane invited Jing to our house, and she did not read, at least not most of the time. If she did, she read out loud and Jing listened, trying to follow the story with her limited English. The girls jumped rope and practiced hand clapping games in English and in Chinese. They played underneath the honeysuckle bushes as if they were in Sam Gribly's forest. They made berry stew like the *Boxcar children*. I heard laughter in the back yard. Through the world of books and her friendships with adults, Jane actually had the skills to make a new friend.

Librarians and teachers often tell me about the Janes that come into their libraries and classrooms, eager to open the pages of a book and find a world that is a little easier to navigate than the one at

home or at school. The librarians may suggest *The Little House in the Big Woods* or *The Hundred Dresses* or *My Side of the Mountain*. And maybe *The Year of the Book*.

Like Jane, Anna Wang, the main character of *The Year of the Book*, is lonely in fourth grade, and when she needs company, she turns to the pages of her favorite books. But Anna also shares characteristics with my younger daughter, Ann, who made drawstring bags and collected acorns and loved *Little Blue and Little Yellow*. In many ways, Anna Wang is also like me. I remember being embarrassed about my mother's accent when she came with me to school. I wished she were more like the other moms with their pantsuits and perfect English.

But Anna Wang is not only a collage of Jane and Ann and me. She is her own quirky self, a strong girl with often contradictory thoughts and feelings who is figuring out how to navigate the world. For example, early in *The Year of the Book*, Anna is not interested in learning Chinese characters; instead of paying attention to the teacher in Chinese class, she reads. But later, when she hears her mother speaking Chinese to her friends, she wishes she could follow the conversation.

These scenes are not taken from my daughters' lives or my own. The reader sees Anna through her own eyes as she begins to define herself and understand who she is. At times this process of discovery is messy and inconsistent. But we feel Anna's excitement as she begins to empathize with others and make sense of the world. With the help of her beloved books, her family, and her friends of all ages, Anna begins to bring together the pieces of her identity into something wholly her own.