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Janet Wong

About the Author

“Poetry is, in a way like shouting. Since you can’t yell at the top of your lungs for a very long time, you have to decide what you really need to say, and say it quickly.” Janet Wong was not always a great fan of poetry. In fact, she found it difficult to read aloud and could not identify with what she read. Hundreds of poems later, Janet Wong has given her audiences diverse, culturally rich experiences that ring with very personal experiences.

Wong was born in Los Angeles, California, to a Chinese immigrant father and a Korean immigrant mother. Graduating from UCLA with a degree in history and then earning a law degree from Yale, and after practicing corporate and labor law, she says she wanted to do “something good with my life.” Wong started writing and had great hopes of writing the next *Charlotte’s Web*. She also thought of trying her hand at publishing picture books. To hone those skills, she attended a Saturday UCLA extension seminar on how to write and sell children’s book. There she meet Myra Cohn Livingston, one of America’s award-winning poets, who inspired and encouraged Wong for the next several years with her innovative teaching practices.

Awards for Wong’s work include the International Reading Association’s Celebrate Literacy Award for the promotion of literacy and Notable Children’s Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies for the collection, *A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems*. Wong’s work appears in many textbooks, anthologies, and journals for the teaching profession.

Suggested Activities

A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems

1. Read *A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems* to the class. Discuss with students that perhaps the grandmother had packed things that would remind her of Korea. Tell students that they are going on an imaginary trip. Direct students to draw pictures of items or foods that they would pack that would remind them of the United States. Allow students to share their drawings with the class.
2. Read “Poetry” to the class. Draw a large tree trunk with branches on butcher paper. Give each student a copy of a leaf pattern. Direct students to write on the leaf something that can be found in poetry, e.g., verb, noun, rhyming word, etc. Ask students to cut out their leaves and paste them on the branches.
3. Read “Sisters” to the class. Direct students to write a poem following the pattern of “Sisters.”



Good Luck Gold and Other

1. Draw two columns on the board. In column 1, write “Good Luck” and in column 2, write “Bad Luck.” As a class, discuss things that people consider good or bad luck, e.g., four-leaf clovers are “good luck” and breaking a mirror is “bad luck.” Write the students’ suggestions in the respective columns. Direct each student to select one thing from each column, and use the library, the Internet, or other resources to research the folklore behind each item.
2. Read “Ox and Snake.” Use the library, the Internet, or other resources to locate information on the Chinese year and pictures of the Chinese zodiac signs. Discuss this information with students and show them the Chinese zodiac signs. Ask each student to locate the year of his or her birth and the animal sign for that year. Direct students to use the animals and create their own zodiac signs.
3. Read “My Bird Day.” Ask students to list the ways they celebrate their birthdays and compare their celebrations to Wong’s. Students may research birthday celebrations in other cultures.

The Trip Back Home

1. Use a Venn diagram to compare what the girl did and saw in Korea to what students do and see in the United States.
2. Direct students to pretend that they are going to travel to Korea. Ask students to use the library, the Internet, or other resources to find out:
 - a. Do you need any special documents to travel to Korea?
 - b. What airlines goes to Korea?
 - c. How long is the flight from your hometown to Korea? And how long is the return flight? Are they the same? Why not?
 - d. Create a map based on your flight path. Show key points of interest.
3. Direct students to the Korean words in the book for family members. Discuss with the students the words they use for each family member. Write the words on the board. What are the similarities and what are the differences?
4. Compare the description and picture of the outdoor market with the grocery stores students go to.
5. Discuss with students how the size and placement of things in a picture create depth. Introduce the students to the terms: foreground—close to the viewer, background—furthest from the viewer, and middle ground—the space between. Examine Jia’s illustrations. Ask students to identify what is in the foreground, the middle ground, and the background.
6. Jia’s illustrations in the book were done with watercolors. Show students illustrations from other books that were done with other art mediums. Allow students the opportunity to paint a still life (basket of fruit, stack of books) with various art mediums. As a class, discuss the differences and similarities of the mediums.

This Next New Year

1. As you read the story, direct students to identify the Chinese New Year traditions.
2. Direct students to research New Year traditions in other cultures.



Suggested Activities for Books by Janet Wong

1. Use a related set of Wong's poems to compare family relationships and feelings.
2. Wong says she is "half Chinese" and "half Korean." She was born in America and says, "I am American." Direct students to interview their parents to find out their parents' countries of origin.
3. Discuss with students the elements of poetry, e.g., meter, rhythm, imagery, sounds, and form. Ask students to identify these elements in Wong's poetry.
4. Compare Choi's illustrations in *This Next New Year* with Jia's illustrations in *The Trip Back Home*.
5. Direct students to identify the things specific to the Korean, Chinese, and American cultures.
6. Ask students to select one of Wong's poems to illustrate.

Suggested Poetry Activities

1. Conversation poetry or poems for two voices. This form is a great way to allow children to collaborate on a piece of poetry and then to present their work to the class. Model several pieces such as "Speak Up" and "Noise" from *Good Luck Gold and Other Poems* and "When I Grow Up" from *A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems*.
2. Read a poem a day. The more children hear and read, the more they become familiar with the patterns and rhythms that poetry has to offer.
3. Spill-Down Poetry. Direct students to look around the classroom and to select three or four things that they see. Ask them to write down one sentence for each observation. Then direct students to pull or spill down the sentence to form a poem. For example, "Spider webs cover the forgotten books in the corner of the library."

Spider webs cover
the forgotten books
in the corner
of the
library.

4. Biopoetry. Children like to write about what they know. Starting with personal experiences can promote confidence as well as help individuals define characteristics they possess. Use this same form with other curricular areas such as social studies or science. Direct students to write a biopoem using the following standard format (decide, in advance, how many things will be listed on lines 4-9):

Line 1 Student's first name

Line 2 two to four adjectives that describe the student

Line 3 Relative of ____ ("brother," "sister," etc.)

Line 4 Lover of _____

Line 5 Who feels _____

Line 6 Who needs _____

Line 7 Who fears _____

Line 8 Who gives _____

Line 9 Who would like to see _____

Line 10 Resident of _____

Line 11 Last name



5. List Poetry. I find this type very useful for science and social studies.

Hairy Spider

Arachnid
 In a jar
 Black with green
 Eight hairy legs
 Enormous eyes
 Dangerous to the eye
 Harmless to the world

6. There are many types of poetry. One type is shape poetry, which helps students focus on syllables, e.g., a lantern poem. Ask students to write a lantern poem.

Line		Syllables	Example
1		1	Kite
2	—	2	threading
3	— —	3	through the sky
4	— — —	4	wind stops quickly
5	— — — —	1	plunge
	—		