

Parachute Kids

AUTHOR

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid to Upper Primary



SYNOPSIS

Feng-Li can't wait to discover America with her family! But after an action-packed vacation, her parents deliver shocking news: They are returning to Taiwan and leaving Feng-Li and her older siblings in California on their own.

Suddenly, the three kids must fend for themselves in a strange new world—and get along. Starting a new school, learning a new language, and trying to make new friends while managing a household is hard enough, but Bro and Sis's constant bickering makes everything worse. Thankfully, there are some hilarious moments to balance the stress and loneliness. But as tensions escalate—and all three kids get tangled in a web of bad choices—can Feng-Li keep her family together?

ABOUT THE CREATOR

Betty C. Tang is the *New York Times* bestselling illustrator of the Jacky Ha-Ha series of graphic novels by James Patterson and Chris Grabenstein. She has worked for various Hollywood animation studios including Disney TV and Dreamworks Animation, and co-directed an animated feature called *Where's the Dragon?* Betty is also a fourth degree black belt in aikido, a Japanese martial art. Born in Taiwan, Betty immigrated to California as a Parachute Kid when she was ten. She lives in Los Angeles.

Learn more about her work at bettyctang.com.

STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, as a class, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
 - What do you think the title of this book refers to?
 - Where and when do you think this book might be set?
 - Who do you think this book is about?
 - Which of the children shown on the front cover do you think might be the main character, and why do you think this?
- After reading the back cover, as a class discuss what type of events you predict might happen within the novel. Once you have finished reading the book, go back and review your predictions to see how accurate they were.
- At the very start of the story the family is nearly denied entry because the name on the visa has a hyphen, while the name in the passport doesn't. As a class, discuss this scene. Some things to include in your discussion could be:

- Why, in your opinion, do you think the senior immigration official said that the younger officer was being ‘overzealous’?
 - What does overzealous mean?
- Why might names in a passport need to match names on a visa exactly?
- What are some reasons why the family might not have noticed the discrepancy?
- What are some challenges that might arise when visiting an English speaking country for people from a country with a different alphabet or writing style?
- How would the family normally write their names?
- Why could the family’s names be written differently from the way they normally are in a passport or on a visa?
- Would this also be a problem for people whose names are normally written using the latin alphabet when they visit countries with a different alphabet or method of writing? In what way and why?
- Feng-Li and her brother and sister were all told to choose new ‘American’ names. What reason was Feng-Li given for having to do this? How did she choose a new name? If you had to choose a new name for yourself, what would you choose and why? Write a short paragraph explaining your reasons, make a nameplate for yourself, and as a class try calling each other by your ‘new names’ for an hour or two of classtime. After the exercise is over, write a brief recount of the experience, being sure to include an account of what it felt like to use and be known by a different name, and how it made you feel to call your classmates by names that you knew were not really theirs.
- Feng-Li has to deal with starting a new school where everything is in a language she doesn’t speak or understand. How does she deal with feeling alone, different and isolated? How do the other students in her class react to her lack of understanding? As a class, discuss what it was like for Feng-Li, and what the other students could have said or done differently to make her feel welcome and included. In small groups, use the ideas you talked about in your discussion, to help you write a brief guide to welcoming new students to your classroom. Your guide should deal with how to make people feel welcome whatever their language, culture and country of origin. As a class share your guides with each other, and combine the best bits of all of them to create a class guide to welcoming others to the school community. Ask if your final class guide can be included in the next edition of the school newsletter for everyone to read and think about.
- Some of the scenes in the book contain Chinese characters (Hanzi) as well as their English equivalent. How many different Hanzi can you find in the pages of the book? See how many different characters you can locate and identify by their English translation. In small groups carefully look through the book to find as many as you can, and use them to create a mini English-Chinese dictionary for this book. Research the Hanzi you find, and see if you can also learn how they are pronounced in Mandarin.
- What language do Feng-Li and her family most likely speak? Research Taiwan and find out what language or languages they are most likely to be speaking to each other—and to the Chinese Americans they meet like Rebecca, and the other Parachute Kids like Pete and his friends.
- How much of a difference would it have made to the three Lin children, if there had been mobile phones available, and they could have texted, called, or even video-chatted with their parents whenever they wanted to? What other things can you think of that are very different today than in 1981? What things are more or less the same?
- Jia-Xi (Jessie) tells her new friend Jenny that her school in Taiwan had a very strict short-hair only policy. Can you think of any rules around appearance that your school has which are as strict as this? Why do you think a school might think that a rule like this is a good idea?
- When the family first visit a Chinese restaurant in America, they struggle to recognise any of the dishes that they are served. How authentically Chinese do you think the food served in a Chinese restaurant local to you is likely to be? Why do you think this? If there is a multicultural festival near you, or an international food court, visit it and try to find a dish that you have never eaten before. When you return to class, write a recount of the experience, and if you managed to try a completely new-to-you dish, include in your account a description of what it felt like to not know what you were going to get or how it was prepared, and what it felt like to taste it for the first time. Compare your experience with the experiences of the Lin family at the Lucky China restaurant and at the steakhouse. Was there anything that took you by surprise?
- Feng-Li’s fortune cookie tells her that ‘Tomorrow will be better’ and for a long time she takes comfort from this.

Write a fortune or two of your own that might be helpful or inspiring to others, and use all the class fortunes to create a wall of inspiration in your class.

- Why is the book called *Parachute Kids*? What do you think this means, and why might it apply to Feng-Li and her siblings?
- As a class, discuss what it must have felt like for the three children left on their own in a strange country where none of them spoke the language well. Do you think it was the right thing for their parents to do? Why/why not? Read the Authors Note at the end of the book, and talk about what sort of reasons a parent would have to have to leave their children alone in a country so far away and so foreign to all they have ever known before.
- All three of the Lin children find themselves making some bad choices and getting into different kinds of trouble. In your opinion, which of the three showed the biggest error of judgement?
- Jia-Xi is taken in by a scammer and ends up giving them the money the children need to live on. Can you think of any indications in the scammer's behaviour and requests that would have given away the fact that this was a scam to a more experienced person? What could Jia-Xi have said or done differently that could have prevented her being scammed? What types of scams are there nowadays that people need to be aware of? Which groups are the most vulnerable to being taken in, and what can they do to protect themselves from scams?
- Write a review of this book. Include in your review both a synopsis, and your personal recommendation as well as a star rating from one to five.
- What do you think might happen next to Feng-Li, Ke-Gāng, and Jia-Xi? Choose one of the three children, and write a possible next chapter of their life in America.

AUTHOR OF NOTES
RAE CARLYLE