

Imagining an APIA World

APIA Children's Book Authors & Illustrators

Introduction

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APIA Biography Project (2025)

2025 APIA Wall of Fame

The Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) Biography Project proudly presents our 12th annual APIA Wall of Fame in 2025. This year's theme celebrates the APIA authors and illustrators who have created picture books on the API experience in America. API Americans live in a country that is not in Asia or the Pacific Islands. They are minorities living in a mainland America that is predominantly Eurocentric. For this year's APIA Wall of Fame, we have 5 APIA Caldecott Medalists and 14 APIA Caldecott Honor Book winners. Not to exclude other equally prominent APIA picture book authors/illustrators, the Wall recognizes 24 more APIA authors/illustrators who have had at least five books published by 2023, the cutoff date of our research. We apologize in advance if we have omitted anyone on our Wall. We also have another listing of APIA picture book awards established by an APIA organization. The Asia Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) has been presenting their own APIA picture book awards since 2001. It took over two years for Asian American Studies students at San Francisco State University to research, draw, and create this Activity Book. The 2024-25 APIA Planning Committee volunteered to put everything together for our 2025 APIA Heritage Month Celebration: the April 27, 2025 live kickoff event, the Wall of Fame, the APIA website, and the Activity Book. Special thanks are extended to our donors, funders, and cosponsors.

A Brief History of APIA Picture Books in Children's Literature

The first known children's picture book in the United States was published in 1658. Up until the 19th century, American children's books about Asia and the Pacific Islands were mostly nonfiction and functioned mainly to inform American children about those "strange" lands on and across the Pacific Ocean. They were by white authors and illustrators. The concept of having Americans of any API ethnicity was foreign to America at the time.

By the beginning of the 20th century, children's literature surfaced with Asian immigrant characters. *The Jingle of a Jap* (1908) by Clara Bell Thurston is a toy story about a Japanese boy doll falling in love with a blonde, blue-eye American girl doll. Then there are books like *Sing a Song O'Six Tails* (anonymous, n.d.), a Mother Goose variant with Chinese immigrants in America drawn in exaggerated and animalistic features.

Popular picture books with an Asian setting included various renderings of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), the Aladdin story from *One Thousand and One Nights* (translated 1704), and more recently the story of Mulan (c. 4th-6th centuries). Early American children grew up with *Little Black Sambo* (1899), *The Story about Ping* (1933), *The Five Chinese Brothers* (1938), and *Tikki Tikki Tembo* (1968). Palmer Cox (d. 1924) created a Brownies series that had a Chinese Brownie, and he wrote short "Chinese" stories for children like "The Curious Case of Ah-Top" (1898). Later, Dr. Seuss included Asian characters in his picture books like *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937). All the above represented APIs as written and illustrated by

white individuals and none dealt with API *American* characters. These works have been criticized for how they have contributed to the inaccuracies and negative stereotypes of APIs.

After the 1968-69 Third World Liberation Student Strike at San Francisco State College (now University) and similar ethnic studies movements at other universities, the government provided grants supporting minority communities to write their own history and stories. This resulted in the beginning of picture books written and illustrated by APIs. *The Iron Moonhunter* (1977) received a grant from the US Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. It is a bilingual picture book written/illustrated by Kathleen Chang and translated into Chinese by Chiu Chung Liao. This is a ghost story about the Transcontinental Railroad Chinese workers. *A Heart as Strong as Mt. Fuji* (1981) received a grant four years later from the US Department of Education. Written by Linda Wing and illustrated by Hideo Yoshida, this simple bilingual picture book narrates the story of a picture bride arriving from Japan. Works like these attempted to break the negative API stereotypes of the past.

Some of the mainstream publishers who began publishing APIA picture books during this beginning period included Houghton Mifflin, Little, Brown, and Company, Scholastic, and Viking/Penguin. APIA picture book fiction began to rise in numbers in the 1980s and continued to flourish to this date with different themes.

Natural and major APIA picture book themes are immigration and adjustment. Usually, the story focuses on learning about the API character arriving in America, whereupon the immigrant introduces API culture to the non-APIA characters. A bully often accompanies this theme to pose the conflict: ignorance and racism towards the minority API immigrant. In the adjustment theme, the APIA protagonist has cultural conflicts with elders and learns that being an American does not mean the betrayal of one's ancestral heritage.

The most popular API theme in American children's literature is Chinese/Lunar New Year as celebrated in Asia. Today's stories also show how other API holidays originated and are celebrated in Asia and the Pacific Islands. The APIA picture book holiday theme attempts to show APIs being accepted as Americans. This occurs when they are embraced after the non-APIA characters learn and accept the minority characters' ancestral API holiday, thus making both the API immigrant and holiday a part of America. For the relatively few APIA-written holiday picture books, the stories would mostly explain how API holidays are celebrated in an APIA family, but not how it is celebrated differently as minorities in America. This has changed slowly in the 1990s, as the stories begin to tell how these holidays are distinct in America. Mainstream white and other minority characters would join in the celebration, but this would also initiate a cultural lesson to introduce the API holiday to the non-APIA characters. Progress comes when APIA characters are written not as one-dimensional cultural ambassadors, but as children interacting in an APIA holiday setting. The holiday theme that comes closest to depicting APIs as American is when APIs celebrate "American" holidays like Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween, and July 4th, alongside other Americans and sometimes with an APIA twist.

Historical fiction acknowledges APIA existence in America not only in contemporary times, but also in the past. This helps to break the stereotype that APIs are newcomers. There exists picture book fiction set in the late 1880s and the turn of the century with Chinese and Japanese American characters. Historical milestones also provide the backdrop for APIA historical fiction. Some of these stories are fictional and some are based on family histories. For Chinese America, there are settings like the first Transcontinental Railroad (1863-69) and the Angel Island

Immigration Station (1910-40). A significant historical milestone in American history is the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans (1942-46), which has prompted the largest number of APIA historical picture book fiction published since the 1990s.

Picture books about APIs adopted by non-API parents have been published as early as 1966 with *The Widdles* family adopting five ethnic minority children that includes twin Hawaiian girls. Adopting Korean and Vietnamese children were the usual subjects in early API adoption stories, but Chinese girls have outnumbered all API adoptee characters beginning in the 1990s with at least one book published a year. Except for about six APIA authors/illustrators, a majority of the authors/illustrators are non-APIAs. The latter presents their stories from the perspective of real or fictional white adoptive parents. On the other hand, adoption stories by APIAs have APIA adoptive parents and siblings, and often deal with the child's feelings.

Almost all picture book fiction about Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are set in Hawai'i or the Pacific Islands, and their fiction is based within their native traditions, culture, and history. The setting for many Hawaiian American stories is in Hawai'i, where different ethnic Asian or Asian American characters interact with the local Hawaiian characters. There are hardly any children's stories about Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders going to mainland America and living as minorities in the mainland. This explains why there is a lack of National Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) American representation that satisfies the criteria for their inclusion in our 2025 APIA Wall of Fame.

By the 21st century, APIA picture book authors/illustrators are no longer pigeonholed to write stories set in Asia and the Pacific Islands, or about API traditions, culture, and history. In the early days, there were only Chinese and Japanese American stories, today we have stories about Cambodian, Indian, Korean, Pakistani, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and other Asian Americans. APIA picture book fiction cherishes API traditions but focuses also on what it means to be an API *American minority*. Today's themes have expanded to be more universal: food, cooking, inter- and intra-ethnic friendships, fear of the unknown, mental health, and internal family issues like sibling rivalry, intergenerational clashes, and elders with Alzheimer's. Some APIA writers have even ventured to write animal stories and stories with solely non-APIA characters.

Nineteen APIA authors/illustrators have been recognized with the prestigious Caldecott Medal or Honor Book award. Plato Chan was fourteen when he received the first APIA Caldecott Honor Book in 1944 and Ed Young won the first APIA Caldecott Medal in 1990. But Allen Say's *Grandfather's Journey* (1994) was the first APIA-themed picture book to garner the Medal. By 2023, 43 distinguished APIA authors and illustrators can be identified for our Wall of Fame. Finally, in 2025, and for the first time, APALA awarded their Asian Pacific American Award for Literature (APAAL) in the Picture Book Category to a Hawaiian-themed picture book, *Aloha Everything* (2024). Much progress has been made in the past fifty years since the first picture books by APIAs surfaced in the 1970s.

Picture Books for All Children

APIAs have a huge challenge in the world of children's literature. The history of APIA picture books has had a late start in the 1970s and even more specifically for Hawaiian and Pacific Islander American picture books. The "recent" 18th-19th century arrival of Asians to America and decades of basic survival have prevented many first and second generation APIAs from pursuing a path in the world of humanities and the arts.

In 2024, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)'s annual statistics show 18% of total children's books were by at least one Asian and a very small 0.3% of the total were by at least one Pacific Islander, versus 70% by at least one white person. In the following year, Mac Barnett became the 9th National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. His goal to elevate reverence for picture books tells us of their relatively low status in the world of literature and art.

Picture books are not trivial literature or art. Additionally, they are not only about history or pedagogy. They are unique, serious literature that creatively blends words and illustrations. Our 2025 APIA Wall of Fame exhibits forty-three heroes and heroines who dared to enter the world of children's literature. They have followed their hearts to create picture books about a minority world that is ethnic specific but universally human. More important, they have brought a world of possibilities and imagination for *all* children.

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