

• Meet the Author •

Grades
PK–6

Janet S. Wong

Nick Glass of TeachingBooks.net interviewed Janet Wong in Princeton, New Jersey, on July 23, 2012.



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You are the author of poetry for children and young readers, published in picture books, books of poetry, and other formats, including e-books. Did you love poetry as a child?

JSW: Oh, I hated poetry starting in about fourth grade, but I think—in retrospect—what I hated was poetry homework and the way poetry was taught. Unfortunately, I think many of my teachers hated teaching poetry, and that dislike of poetry came through.

When I quit my job as a lawyer to become a writer, I would never have guessed I was going to write poetry.

Please talk about your career path. How did you come to be an acclaimed writer of dozens of poetry books for children?

JSW: The decision about what career path to follow was made when I was a senior in college. My father sat me down for one of our serious talks and said, “You’re graduating from

UCLA. What are you going to do?” And I said, “Oh, I don’t know.” If I had had courage, I would have told him, “I think I want to be a painter.” In my family if I had said I want to be a painter, I would have been handed a roller and a gallon of semi-gloss, and I would have been told, “Okay, start with the upstairs bathroom.” But I didn’t have the courage to say that. So instead I said, “I don’t know.” Then he said, “Well, maybe you should go to law school.” And I said, “I think that there are a lot of lawyers out there who are unemployed. Maybe I should only go if I get into a good law school.” I got into Yale, so I had to go.

When I was at Yale, I really resisted the idea of being a lawyer, but graduating with a lot of debt, I got drawn into the same path as most of my friends and went to work for a law firm. A few years later, I landed a pretty interesting job as director of labor relations at Universal Studios in Hollywood. I was there to negotiate union contracts, deciding how much money people would make, and how many vacation days they could take. When they did something bad, like the Teamster who put a snake in his boss’s office, I would have to fire them. I was firing about ten people a week,

on average, and it was starting not to bother me.

One night I said to my husband, “I think I’m becoming a mean person.” And he said, “You are.” And I thought, “I’m making a ton of money. I love spending money, but what’s the use of all this money if I’m not proud of who I am, and if I’m not proud of what I do every day?”

I thought, and thought, and thought. I couldn’t think of anything more important than working with kids, but I had been a substitute teacher when I was working my way through law school. Being a substitute teacher, and being a teacher is the very hardest job I’ve ever had. I knew I wouldn’t survive as a teacher.

So what did you decide?

JSW: I didn’t yet have a child of my own (now my son is nineteen), but I had a cousin who was two years old, and it was her birthday. I was looking in a small bookstore for a gift for her, and the next thing I knew I had an armload of picture books for two-year-olds that I wanted to buy for myself. I thought, “Somebody wrote these books; why couldn’t I be one of those people?” I didn’t have any idea how to write a book or how to get one published, but I thought, “Let

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me go ahead and try.” And eighteen months and many, many rejection letters later, I was a published author.

How did you end up writing poetry for children?

JSW: Well, poetry was not the first thing that I wrote after I quit my law job. The first thing that I wrote was a middle grade novel about the murder of an insect in the backyard. It was about a trial with all the backyard animals taking part. After I finished, I decided never to send that book out. I never sent it to a publisher, but that was the very first thing I wrote. After that, I started doing picture books, because falling in love with picture books was the reason I decided to quit my law job in the first place.

I was writing one picture book a week and sending them out, and at about the six-month mark, they started coming back with form letters saying, “Dear author, we regret to inform you your book is not right for our list.” I thought, “Wait a minute, I went to UCLA, I graduated summa cum laude. I went to Yale Law School—one of the best law schools in the country—and I can’t write a book for two-year-olds?”

At that point, I realized that maybe I needed to learn how to write for children. Maybe that was something different than writing legal memos, so I signed up for a class at UCLA Extension—a one-day class on everything you need to know to write and sell your children’s books. It was there that I heard Myra Cohn Livingston speak, and I thought, “Wow, I can really

learn something from her. ” I had no idea who she was. She said she was the author of over eighty books of poetry, and I started tuning out. I thought, “Oh, no, poetry.” I started doodling.

Then she read a poem of hers called “There Was a Place” from a book by the same name. When she read that poem, I started blinking back tears. I thought, “Wow, if that little poem can make me feel so much, there is something I can learn from that woman.” It wasn’t then that I decided to study with Myra, but after the six months of rejection letters, I decided to study with her.

I figured that by studying poetic technique like rhyme and repetition and rhythm, I could then write the picture books that would sell. I had no intention at that point of writing poetry, but I knew that I could become a better writer by studying with Myra.

Where did you spend your childhood? What were your parents like?

JSW: I was born in Los Angeles. My father was an immigrant from China. He came to this country as a young teenager. My father met my mother when he was serving in Korea in the U.S. Army. She immigrated to this country with him after they married.

Los Angeles in the 1960s wasn’t all that multicultural. I regret that I didn’t learn how to speak Chinese, and I didn’t learn how to speak Korean. Now, I always encourage kids to learn to speak Chinese or Korean, or whatever language is part of their heritage. One of the things that I remember

about being a kid growing up in Los Angeles is being teased from time to time about being Asian. Even though it didn’t happen very often, it was really painful. That memory informed some of my early writing in *Good Luck Gold*—poems about identity, race, and being made fun of.

Did you have siblings growing up?

JSW: I did have a brother, but he died when he was teenager, so it’s something that is still hard for me to talk about. One day, I think I’ll write about it, but I haven’t really written about it yet.

In some places in my books, especially the poetry collections, I’ll mention my brother this or my brother that, but then, it’s not really autobiographical. I think one mistake people often make is thinking a writer’s writing is totally autobiographical. For instance, in one poem, called “Sisters” in *A Suitcase of Seaweed*, I talk about the differences between me and my sister, but I’ve never had a sister. What I was really talking about was me and my mother, but I didn’t want my mother to know.

What do you remember about your childhood?

JSW: I lived in the middle of the city of Los Angeles until I was seven years old. At seven, we moved to San Anselmo in Marin County, north of San Francisco. We lived there for only three years, but those years were so idyllic. I’d spend afternoons lizard catching with my friends, digging up soap plants (bulbs that we could use for soap), or just wandering

trails in the hills. I had the freedom that so many of us who are over forty had as children, where we were able to spend all day outside and do completely unsupervised things.

Those experiences formed the basis of my books about Minn and Jake: *Minn and Jake* is about them catching lizards after school and the adventures that come after that.

How do you turn memories into stories?

JSW: It's funny. When you think about different memories, traumatic memories seem to come to the fore. Things like being made fun of as a child or having thirteen stitches in my chin from my skateboarding accident when I was seven years old. Those are things that I remember—not necessarily the happy times, but there were lots and lots of happy times.

One thing I like children to think about is how our everyday memories can be really special, too. For instance, in *The Rainbow Hand*, I have a poem where I talk about not having a Mother's Day present the year I was in fifth grade. I hadn't thought about it the night before, and the morning of Mother's Day I realized that I didn't have a present. I went outside dejected, shuffling around. My toe hit a rock, and I thought, "Hey, if I clean this up, it could be a Mother's Day present. Maybe a paperweight." That rock ended up becoming my mother's garlic rock that she uses, to this day, to smash garlic. That story formed the basis for my poem "Mother's Day" in *The Rainbow Hand*.

I like to tell kids to just write about everyday experiences, like not having enough money for a good gift and finding something and turning it into a gift. It might be one of the best poems and one of the best memories you'll have, even though it's not something fantastic and impressive.

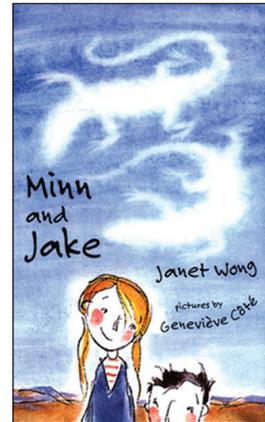
Were you a reader as a child?

JSW: I was not. In my *Meet the Author* book, *Before It Wiggles Away*, I wrote rather carelessly, not imagining how this would impact children, that I actually didn't like books. So when I visit schools, many ask me about that. They say, "You didn't like books?" in disbelief. And I have to admit, "Well, you know, I had a very narrow view of books and reading." Early on I must have checked some book out of the library that I didn't like, and maybe I had two or three weeks of this experience of checking a book out of the library that I didn't like, and I decided reading was not for me. I preferred listening to my grandfather tell stories and watching TV. I didn't really want to read because reading was so quiet and so solitary.

It's a terrible lesson to give to kids, but I defend that statement for a couple of reasons. One, it was genuine, and there are kids out there who are not readers. I tell students that I should have gone to the librarian and told her that I didn't like the book I was reading and asked her to recommend another. I made the mistake of checking out a

handful of books that I didn't like, and thinking, "Well, that's it. Books are not for me."

When I talk to kids, I want them to realize that they might have checked out a dud at some point, but that doesn't mean that there aren't five dozen books out there that they are going to love.



The other reason why I like to talk about how I didn't really like reading as a kid is that it connects with those kids who are reluctant readers. It may make them open to having reading become a favorite pastime later on.

What else do you like to tell students about reading?

JSW: I like to tell kids that we define reading too narrowly. I think a lot of us think that if we don't like to read novels, that means we're not readers, so I like to ask kids, "How many of you get a video game, and the first thing you do is read the instructions or go online to do a search to find something that you can read—a cheat sheet or something that you can read to make yourself be able to play the game better?" A bunch of

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hands go up, and I say, “You know what? You are readers. You don’t realize it, but you’re readers.” Or I’ll ask them, “If I were to put a cereal box in front of you, how many of you would read that cereal box as you’re eating your cereal?” And, oh, the hands go up, and I say, “See, you guys really are readers, and you don’t realize it.” Or I will say, “If you were in a public bathroom and there was graffiti on the wall, how many of you would read the graffiti?” Every hand in the audience will go up, and I say to the kids, “That proves it to me; you guys are readers.”

I think we need to expand our view of what reading is to help kids realize that they can be readers—that they are readers—and maybe they just haven’t found the right reading material yet.

You said you weren’t very immersed in your own multicultural background growing up, yet many of your stories refer to your Korean and Chinese heritages.

JSW: My early, unthemed collections *Good Luck Gold* and *A Suitcase of Seaweed* contain a lot of poems that have stories behind them. I like to share those stories with kids because I think it shows them how poems can be just little snapshots of our own lives. When I’m sharing the poems, I connect them with a story. I think that the storytelling helps create a framework for the poem. Sometimes those stories are just a line long.

For instance, in *Good Luck Gold*, there’s a poem called

“Grandmother’s Cure,” and it’s about how when I had chickenpox, my grandmother cut down huge banana leaves that were four or five feet long to lay down on my bed. That was a Chinese home remedy. I think when you write about your own true experiences, and when you write about your family, you’re bound to stumble into some cultural truths.

Your work reminds readers about the similarities of everybody, yet there are beautiful, unique perspectives, too.

JSW: Along those lines, I have a poem in *A Suitcase of Seaweed* called “Grandmother’s Almond Cookies” about how my grandmother cooked using a handful of this and a handful of that, never following a recipe in a book or a written recipe of any sort, but just cooking by intuition or from memory. I wrote that poem and thought, “This really captures my grandmother and the way she cooked, the Chinese way of cooking.”

The first time I read that poem to a group of kids, a child came up to me afterward and said, “That is my Norwegian grandmother. My Norwegian grandmother cooks just that way.” Since then, I’ve had people say, “Oh, that’s my Italian grandmother,” or “That’s my grandmother from Georgia,” so I think that the best multicultural poems really are multicultural. They’re universal and will strike readers as reflecting their own cultures, whether those cultures are Korean or Norwegian or Italian or whatever.

Did you set out to write about your multicultural heritage?

JSW: When I first started writing, I really resisted writing multicultural stories because I didn’t want to cash in on my heritage. I felt that my family and my heritage were not for sale, so I didn’t want to write multicultural stories. It was only after about a year of writing that I realized my best stories happen to come from my grandfather and my mother, and because my parents and grandparents happen to be multicultural, those stories are multicultural, too. So I got over the label of being a “multicultural author.” One of the problems of being a multicultural author, though, is that you don’t want to be pigeonholed. You don’t want people to think that you can only write about Asian culture. A lot of what I write is just about growing up in the United States.

Your picture book *Apple Pie 4th of July* is an interesting example of the convergence of all different kinds of cultural perspectives.

JSW: I wrote *Apple Pie 4th of July* because in the summer of 1996, I was living on Bainbridge Island in Washington State, and my parents were living in rural Oregon. They had a small minimart that sold Chinese food to go. I called my father on the Fourth of July and he answered, “Tricity Market,” and I said, “Hey, Tricity Market, it’s pretty slow today, huh?” And he said, “Oh, no, it’s busy.” I thought, “How can it be busy?”

So I said, “What? Are people buying ice, matches?” I was thinking of things that people needed for a barbeque, and he said, “Oh, no, Chinese food.” I was so taken aback, I said to him, “Chinese food? Hello? This is the Fourth of July, this is an all-American holiday and you are cooking Chinese food?” And he said, “Yeah, it’s busy, and I’ve got to go.” And he hung up. The very next day I wrote the first draft of *Apple Pie 4th of July* as an apology to my father for being so narrow-minded about what constitutes being American on the Fourth of July. I’m really happy that I wrote that book, and I’m really proud of the people in his community in rural Oregon. I think he was the only Chinese person in his whole town, and yet the town showed up to eat Chinese food on the Fourth of July.

How do teachers like to use *Apple Pie 4th of July* in the classroom?

JSW: It really is useful for discussions about what it means to be an American; it expands kids’ views of what being an American means. I told some people that my favorite poem that has to do with the Fourth of July is written by Alberto Rios, and it’s called “The Day of the Refugios.” It is about this family and how they celebrate this day by eating shrimp cocktail and celebrating Saint Refugio, whom they’re all named after. So I think what being an American is, more than anything, about being open to differences.

Your story of going from a lawyer to a poet is a great one: follow your dream. You’re exemplifying something that I think we all want, and we have the space in this country for people to do what they want to do.

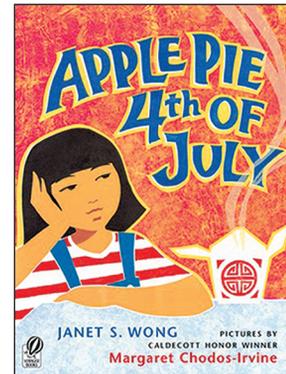
JSW: I used to think that my story was about “following your dream” or “finding your passion.” Now I think it’s more about “taking a chance”—taking a chance on yourself. Sometimes we don’t know what our dream is, or we have a few things that we like, but we don’t like them passionately enough to call them a dream.

But taking a chance on yourself can mean anything from deciding that you’re going to cut your hair in a strange hairstyle to reading something that you never would have picked off the shelf. I would love for my readers—or people who are familiar with my story about how I left law to become a children’s author—to focus on taking a chance on themselves more than anything.

Another example of how I want kids to take a chance on themselves is to create their own books. This is such an exciting time to be an author. You can become a published author either the traditional way by a regular publisher or through do-it-yourself paperback printing at zero cost to you, or through e-books.

One thing that I like to tell kids is that you can write a book this month, decide at the end of the month that you want to take a chance on yourself and make this book

available to the world. Go ahead and spend one week formatting it and getting it ready, upload it to one of the retailers like Amazon.com, and twenty-four hours later your work is out there in the world. You’ve just taken a chance on yourself, so just sit back and see what happens.



You are currently publishing books in digital format, and you talk about how anybody can take a chance and use technology to promote themselves in a way they couldn’t have before. How did you come to embrace technology as part of your publishing and message to readers?

JSW: I’ve never been a person that you would describe as a techie person. To this day, I can barely operate my DVD player, but I’m fascinated by the possibilities of technology and am always interested in the latest things that technology lets us do. When I was in law school I became involved with a group called the Yale Law and Technology Group. So even though I’m not really all that computer savvy, I find gadgetry fascinating.

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The way technology has made it so easy for new writers to get published is amazing to me. This is a very empowering time.

You figured out that you can get poems in people's hands or even build anthologies in ways that couldn't have been done before without technology. Please talk about some of the early things you did with poetry and e-books.

JSW: At the NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) conference in 2010, I started commiserating with teachers who wanted to buy thousands of dollars' worth of new books but had a budget for only hundreds of dollars' worth. I started brainstorming with my poet colleagues different ways that we could make poetry affordable to teachers and librarians, and we decided that the best way to make poetry affordable would be using e-book technology. Poetry, as it has been traditionally published, costs \$15 to \$20 a book. Poetry rarely goes into paperback. Usually you can only buy it in hardcover, and poetry is the genre that goes out of print more quickly than any other genre.

But where a paperback book might need to cost \$8 to break even, the very same book as an e-book can be sold for half of that, or even a quarter of that. Sylvia Vardell, who teaches children's literature at Texas Woman's University, and I decided that we wanted to make poetry an impulse buy and create poetry anthologies that cost no more than a cup of

coffee. We started with *Poetry Tag Time*, then we moved on to an e-book anthology for teens called *P*Tag*, and a holiday collection called *Gift Tag*.

What is your most recent venture in the world of e-books?

JSW: Our most recent venture, *Poetry Friday Anthology*, is a simultaneous release in e-book and in paperback of 218 poems plus curriculum tie-ins linked to the Common Core and the Texas standards (TEKS). With the name, we decided that we would link into the poetry Friday phenomenon, which in the blogosphere means that poetry bloggers go crazy every Friday with amazing posts. In *Poetry Friday Anthology*, there is a poem for each week of the school year and a curriculum tie-in for each poem. Sylvia and I published it under our company name, Pomelo Books. We are publishing it in e-book format and also using do-it-yourself paperback printing through CreateSpace, which creates an Amazon.com listing for your book at no cost to you.

Where did the 218 poems come from?

JSW: We contacted our poetry friends. I am so proud to say that we have big names like Jack Prelutsky, J. Patrick Lewis, Nikki Grimes, X. J. Kennedy. We also have poets who haven't published a lot for the last decade but were doing incredible work before then, and now we're reconnecting them with new readers—poets such as Patricia Hubbell, Deborah Chandra, and Monica Gunning, and Constance Levy.

We have poets who are traditionally thought of not as poets but as accomplished writers in other genres such as Linda Sue Park, Gail Carson Levine, and Kathy Appelt. I'm really excited about the wide variety of voices that we have, seventy-four poets in this book of 218 poems.

Is there a central theme in your Poetry Friday Anthology?

JSW: No. We invited poets to send us their best unpublished work—something brand-new or something they'd written that had not yet been published. The 218 poems are all previously unpublished on thirty-six different topics, from school to pets, food, families, love and friendship, poems about bullying—which I think is a very important subject—poems about art, community, house and home, all different kinds of topics.

You think in terms of how to help someone see and teach. Are there writing exercises there that you believe in?

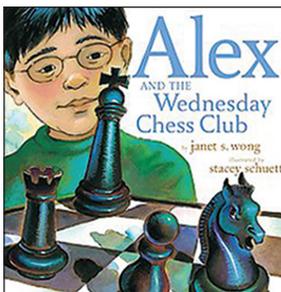
JSW: Sometimes I'll give myself a writing prompt, but more often than not, I think my writing exercises occur when I'm doing a school visit. At a school, I'll start with an assembly or two, and then I'll do writing workshops where I write while the students are writing on a subject of their choosing so they know that my writing is spontaneous and authentic. I usually will write six poems during a school visit. I never save those poems. I just write them and then erase them or leave them behind at the school.

I consider those poems kind of like my periodic workouts; I have to create these poems that are good enough to share with the public and share with the kids that I'm working with, and write them on the spot. Those are pretty much the only writing exercises that I do.

Which of your books are most used in schools?

JSW: One book that I really think lends itself well to being used at a school and having a positive effect on kids is *Alex and the Wednesday Chess Club*. My son Andrew played a lot of chess between third and sixth grades, and we spent a ton of time at Saturday chess tournaments. I am convinced that the studies are correct. Studies show that if kids play chess at school, test scores in both reading and math go up.

Some people think the reason is that chess develops certain parts of the brain more quickly than other activities. I think the key is that when you're playing chess, to be successful, you need to learn to sit and concentrate for a long period of time. That, to me, is the single most important thing in terms of testing success. You can know everything, but if you can't sit and fill in those bubbles, your test scores are not going to be great.



So in terms of incidental benefit to a school, I think that *Alex and the Wednesday Chess Club* is by far the winner of all my books.

There is often a very clear connection between your life and your story, your memories or experiences and the topics and stories that matter to you about which you write—like you just revealed with *Alex and the Wednesday Chess Club*.

JSW: My book *You Have to Write* is about searching for something important enough to write about and then writing it. I think my problem when I first got started was I didn't think my own life and my own family stories were important enough for a book. But what I've come to realize over the years is that those small, everyday experiences and family stories are the most special things I could possibly write about.

One example of a small experience in *You Have to Write* is taking the trash out and doing it right. When I was a kid, that was my job. You might think, "How could you possibly write about taking out the trash?" But taking out the trash is not a simple thing. There are lots of elements to it, such as you can't pack the trash down too tightly or it won't come out of the can, and you can't leave the lid open so that the birds get to it.

If you had asked me twenty years ago could you possibly write a poem or part

of a picture book about taking out the trash, I would have said absolutely not, but what I've come to see is that those little experiences really are the things that make up who I am.

Your poems seem to be quite short, and therefore accessible to readers, but yet the words are so carefully chosen to beautifully convey both a story and an image and often even a message.

JSW: I usually write between ten and fifty drafts of most of my poems, but with some drafts, I might just change the punctuation or I might only change a couple of words. With many of the drafts, I try to shorten the poem to bring it down to what's most necessary. My mentor, Myra Cohn Livingston, said your poems should really only be about one thing. Very often I'll write a poem that really is about three or four things, and during the editing and revising process, I'll say to myself, "Okay, I don't have to say it all in one poem. I can break this poem up into five different poems and use three of them and not use two of them."

I said to someone once that poetry is like shouting. You have to decide what you really want to say and what you could shout out across the playground—that's what your poem is. If you wouldn't shout it out across the playground, if it's not absolutely necessary to your message, then leave it out.

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Please describe your process of writing collections and gathering anthologies.

JSW: Lately, I've been putting together anthologies of poems by many poets while also writing collections of poems that contain poems only by me. My early collections were unthemed because that's what the standard was in the 1980s and early 90s. Publishers published mainly unthemed collections of poems by a poet. You could write about anything and it could go together in one book. Starting in the middle of the 1990s, publishers really wanted to see only themed collections.

What are your themed collections about?

JSW: My first themed collection was poems about mothers and children, *The Rainbow Hand*. My second themed collection was poems about driving, called *Behind the Wheel*. My third themed collection was poems about dreams, called *Night Garden*.

There's a big movement now among poets to have the courage to say to publishers that we don't necessarily want to write poems on a limited theme. Self-publishing makes it easier to do that. We can take our poems about scattered topics and put them together.

What do you like about unthemed collections?

JSW: I think one really special thing about an unthemed collection is it shows you the wide variety of experiences that a poet might want to talk about or might have.

When I've been the anthologist and have selected poems by different poets, usually I've had a certain format or a certain theme that I need to follow. For *Poetry Friday Anthology*, Sylvia Vardell and I decided we wanted to cover a wide range of themes—everything from science to pets to art—so we solicited poems on every conceivable thing. I think that breadth and variety of themes is what makes *Poetry Friday Anthology* so special.

You talk with students about the power of poetry and encourage them to see through poetry both by writing and by reading. Can you talk a little about that element?

JSW: I like to call myself a poetry evangelist, because I think that I've made it my mission to convert people to poetry. I used to be a poetry hater, and Myra Cohn Livingston, my mentor, transformed me into not just a poetry lover, but into a practicing, every-day poet. That's what I'd like to be able to accomplish with the kids I meet.

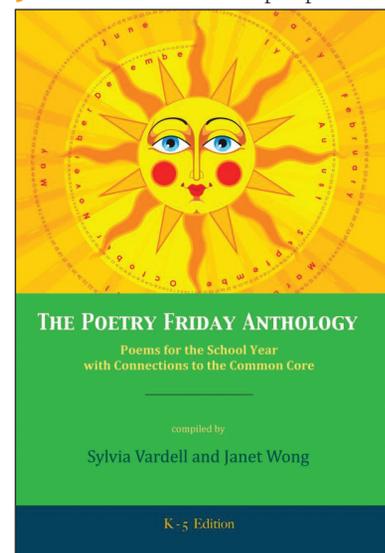
Kids like it when I visit their schools to teach them poetry because I make it easy. I make it easy to enjoy a poem with props and stories behind the poem, and I make it easy to write a poem. I think when they learn to enjoy poetry from the inside out as a poet, then they become more connected to poetry as poetry readers, too.

Why is poetry valuable? In real life, poetry helps us deal with tragedy. It helps us deal with feelings that we might not be able to express otherwise—

small but still devastating experiences—like the death of a pet or being teased. Poetry comforts us. It cheers us up. It's like a cup of coffee. It makes you more alert and aware of the world. So one of my missions is to have teachers and librarians stick a five-minute poetry break into the day just to perk themselves up.

How are you envisioning the relationship between *The Poetry Friday Anthology* and Common Core?

JSW: I think a lot of people



when they hear the words Common Core immediately groan and think of it as a burden. But to me, the Common Core really presents an opportunity for poetry, because, now that there are standards tied to reading and understanding poetry, there are millions of teachers who haven't felt a pressing need to share poetry who all of a sudden are interested in learning about it and in teaching poetry to their kids. This is a tremendous opportunity for poetry and for poets.

One of the things that Sylvia and I are trying to do with our anthology is to guide teachers to share poetry in fun ways that satisfy the Common Core elements. For example, if you need to teach repetition, in our book we spell out different ways to teach repetition with specific poems so that kids can really learn these Common Core elements without realizing that they're learning them.

What else would you like to share with readers?

JSW: I want to talk about how do-it-yourself paperback printing and do-it-yourself e-book creation has opened up the possibility for school fund-raisers where kids create the product and sell it in a way that enriches their learning experience. For instance, my e-book *Once Upon a Tiger* is a paperback book that kids and teachers can buy. All of my royalties are being donated to the World Wildlife Fund to benefit endangered animals.

I would love to see schools using this model where kids find a cause that they really believe in—whether it's endangered animals or cancer research or their community parks—where they find a cause, they write about that cause, and then publish their books themselves. They send out the Amazon links and start making money for this thing that they believe in.

What do you do when you get stuck?

JSW: Getting stuck is a regular occurrence, and I think it's really important not to be afraid of getting stuck, to

understand that getting stuck means you're doing something. We should congratulate ourselves when we're getting stuck, because often it means that we're doing something where there's no clear answer, and we're actually being pioneers.

What is a typical day like for Janet S. Wong?

JSW: A typical day starts with email. Email is my morning coffee. I love connecting with friends and hearing from new people. I love it when teachers and librarians write me about my books and the ways that they use them in their classroom. And if you have sent me an email and I haven't responded within two days, it probably means that I'm either out of the country or your email was lost in cyberspace.

What do you like to tell students?

JSW: I like to say to students, "Why not you?" Take a chance. Think about something that you can do and go for it. If it doesn't turn out right the first time, so what? If you try to publish a book and you get a rejection letter, then welcome to the club. You're just like me. You're like Dr. Seuss. You're even like J. K. Rowling. People can't believe that J. K. Rowling actually got rejection letters. So, take a chance on yourself. That's what life's all about.

What do you like to tell teachers and librarians?

JSW: I like to tell them, "Make your day fun." And, as with students, take a chance—don't be afraid to teach

something that's important to you, to make every day in your classroom, every day in your library meaningful to you as an individual. You know, those of us who work with kids, we didn't decide to work with kids because we thought we could help people get better SAT scores or because we thought we could help them get into better colleges. We became educators because we wanted to make this a better world. We wanted to help create better people. When your curriculum confines you, disconnect from the curriculum and teach what you know will work to make your kids better people.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

JSW: Yes. Don't be afraid to experiment with technology and embrace the whole literary experience, which goes way beyond the front and back covers of your book. There are so many resources that are available today, and the librarian is the one who really can open a whole world of experience to kids beyond the book itself.

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Meet the Author

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