Talking with Cynthia Kadohata

Gain insight into the award-winning author's writing process and discover new tips for sharing her acclaimed books across the curriculum. By Amina Chaudhri

Cynthia Kadohata is a prolific and highly acclaimed writer of youth fiction. Her books have been recognized with such awards as the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, the Pen–USA Award, and the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, just to name a few.

Like the characters in her books, Kadohata's readers can expect to find themselves catapulted across the country or across the world in pursuit of work, love, or dreams. In Kira-Kira, Katie and her family drive from Iowa to Georgia to find work in chicken hatcheries. In The Thing about Luck, young Summer and her grandparents travel across Kansas and then to Texas to harvest wheat. In Weedflower, Sumiko finds herself in the internment camp in Poston. In two novels, Kadohata takes readers to South Vietnam: Cracker! The Best Dog in Vietnam, with Cracker and Rick, and A Million Shades of Grey, with Y’Tin. And in Outside Beauty, the adventures never cease on the long drive from Chicago to California with Shelby and her sisters. In Kadohata's most recent novel, Half a World Away, young Jaden travels to Kazakhstan and into the realm of international adoption with his family.

Kadohata's stories expertly balance the unique and the universal. Her protagonists are quirky, observant, deeply reflective, and innocently childlike. They consider the decisions of the adults in their lives with believable trust and skepticism and make sense of the changes in their world accordingly. In Half a World Away, Jaden thinks about what it will mean for his future that his parents want to adopt another baby. Unsure of what it means to love and be loved, he tiptoes around the process of bonding with the baby who is soon to be his new brother. Meanwhile, he surprises himself by connecting with another child, who seems to tap into a place of empathy he did not know he had.

In the following interview, Kadohata talks about where she gets her ideas, how she imagines her characters, and how much she values conversations with the real people whose stories have informed her celebrated novels.

BKL: Do you keep a list of ideas that might one day turn into books?
KADOHATA: Yes, I have a short list. I get my ideas from so many places. I was at an award ceremony in Kansas for my book Cracker!, and someone pointed to a family of custom harvesters. I had never heard of that kind of work before, so I asked a couple of questions about it. I went home from Kansas to Los Angeles on the train, and I was waiting in the station at about two o'clock in the morning, and I suddenly thought it would be a good idea to write about custom harvesters. So I sent my editor an e-mail from my cell, and by the time I got home, she thought it was a good idea. So I did it! That was how I got the idea for The Thing about Luck.

BKL: Did books or stories play a big role in your childhood?
KADOHATA: Yes, they really did. My mom used to take us to the library every week. There was this one story in a book I read in second grade. It was "Five Chinese Brothers," which I have not read since then, but I think it's racist! I just loved that story, and it was in
As an extension activity, students can write red herrings, students can collect a set of final narrative devices such as cliff-hangers and chapters are like cliff-hangers. After a lesson on perspective and a discussion about photographs of dogs and their handlers in Vietnam, students can pick a photo that speaks to them and write an account of what they imagine the soldiers and dogs were thinking. Their accounts can be fortified with research from the Vietnam Dog Handler Association website (www.vdna.us).

Common Core Connections
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.5. Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.B. Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations.

Common Core Connections
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1.a. Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1.b. Follow rules for collegial discussions, set specific goals and deadlines, and define individual roles as needed.

Common Core Connections
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2. Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.1.C. Link opinion and reasons using words, phrases, and clauses (e.g., consequently, specifically).

Common Core Connections
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.7. Compare and contrast the experience of reading a story, drama, or poem to listening to or viewing an audio, video, or live version of the text, including contrasting what they "see" and "hear" when reading the text to what they perceive when they listen or watch.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.7. Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

In the Classroom: In Haft a World Away, Kadohata provides clear visuals of the Kazakhstan setting, as in this passage: "Outside the car the landscape was barren—brown dirt, faded plants, and gray-green bushes and trees. Occasionally Jaden saw a shepherd and sheep. One time they passed a shepherd with several double-humped camels ambling close to the road." Students can select similar passages that provide a sense of the novel's setting and illustrate them based on Kadohata's descriptions. Along with the image, they can use a sentence or phrase from the text that captures the theme, essence, tone, or feeling of the illustration and passage and also include a written reflection about their choices.

Common Core Connections
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2. Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.D. Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.

Common Core Connections
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3.A. Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3.D. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences and events.
my second-grade textbook. At the end of the year, I had to return the book, and I was sobbing and sobbing because I really wanted to keep it. My mother actually typed it up for me!

BKL: There is a very strong sense of place in your books. All your stories are grounded in very specific geography (e.g., wheat fields, steppes, Vietnam, U.S. internment camps). Where does this reverence for geography come from?

KADOHATA: When we were young and my dad was looking for work, we did a fair amount of driving around, traveling. And being on the road made me fascinated by the landscape. Landscape seems mystical to me, and so I think of setting as having a kind of power in a story. It sets the tone for the entire novel.

BKL: Until Half a World Away, most of your protagonists have been girls. What made you decide to change perspective?

KADOHATA: I have one boy in A Million Shades of Grey, and he really had to be a boy for that story. For Half a World Away, I started with a girl. My editors thought I was using too much of my own experiences in adopting from Kazakhstan. At some point, a teacher had contacted me about coming to her school, which was full of at-risk kids, to talk about Cracker! I went, and as we were talking, she mentioned that she had adopted a Romanian boy, who was really troubled. She told me her whole story, and it wasn’t until months later that I thought I should change my adoption book to being about her experiences, and that was when I changed the protagonist to a boy. I think it changed the nature of the book.

BLK: My fourth-grade students loved Kira-Kira, but some of their parents objected, saying that it was too sad. Half a World Away also deals with some difficult topics, but you seem to trust your readers to receive them well.

KADOHATA: I was happy to read sad books when I was a kid. I don’t see any reason at all why kids shouldn’t read sad books, even if it makes them sad to go through those emotional experiences. It’s part of what reading—and life—is about. I don’t understand the objection to that. I do think about it as I write, though, and if it weren’t for grown-ups, I wouldn’t have to think about it at all. I do think about books having hopeful, if not happy, endings. That’s how I am in real life, and what I want for my books.

BKL: Your protagonists tend to make unexpected connections with adults outside their inner circles. Katie with Hank Garvin, Summer with Mick, Jaden with Sam.

KADOHATA: I’m not sure where that comes from. I actually never noticed it, so it’s really interesting. It’s almost like there’s this magical person who comes in and gives the characters guidance or something. I love secondary characters. I love developing them and having them
be interesting people. I really enjoyed creating Sam in *Half a World Away*.

**BKL: With all your books, readers come away feeling as if they have learned something new. How do you approach your research?**

**KADOHATA:** I love the research, especially interviewing people. I try to find people who are involved in doing whatever the characters in the book are doing. With *Cracker!* I loved interviewing the former Vietnam dog handlers. They were very emotional talking about things from 35 years earlier. They would cry about the dogs they lost, and it was so amazing for me to learn from them. People open up their worlds to me. That's probably my favorite part of the research. There are always a few people who are so helpful; I badger them a lot, and they are so nice and gracious about it! I also read a lot, and the Internet is fantastic!

**BKL: What's next?**

**KADOHATA:** I was working on a follow-up to *Half a World Away* and what happens when the family gets back home, but it’s on hold for now. The other book I’m also working on is about the time period after the internment camps, during WWII, when several thousand Japanese Americans were coerced into giving up their citizenship. So, at that point, they were neither citizens of Japan or the U.S., and some were sent to Japan to fend for themselves. I’m working on both books at the same time, but I’ll concentrate on the Japanese one because many of the people I will need to interview are getting older and aren’t able to remember as well, so it’s important to work on this one quickly.