

## **Finding a Voice in Children’s Literature: Kat Yeh’s Journey to Becoming a Well-Known Asian American Author**

**By Allison Xu**

In 2011, at a writers’ conference, there came a moment that Kat Yeh, a then-aspiring writer, had been dreaming of—multiple publishing houses competing in an auction for the opportunity to work with her on her debut middle-grade novel, *The Truth About Twinkie Pie*. To Kat, this moment marked a turning point in her writing career and brought her closer to her dream of publishing stories with diverse characters of color.

Her love for writing and telling stories started at a young age. “As soon as I learned how to write, I wanted to write stories,” she recalls. When she was around eight years old, Kat wrote poems in a little green notebook gifted by her mother. She remembers her favorite elementary teacher loved her poem about fog and read it aloud, which gave her tremendous power as a young writer. Kat kept writing over the years and even wrote a children’s novel for her senior year project in high school.

Kat didn’t work as a novelist after college but took a job in advertising and sports-marketing as a copywriter for many years. While she enjoyed her job, she never forgot about the childhood dream flickering inside her like a firefly. When Kat had kids, she often read bedtime stories to them. Her love for children and writing inspired her to publish her own stories.

She worked during the day and wrote at night. She also found her way into the writing community—taking children’s picture books and middle-grade novels writing classes, joining writing societies, going to writer conferences, and meeting editors and agents.

Her book, *The Truth About Twinkie Pie*, is a heartwarming middle-grade novel telling a story of family, friendship, and new starts. It is about a 12-year-old girl named Gigi and her story of family secrets and the new life after she and her older sister Didi move to New York. The most valuable asset in Gigi’s life is her mother’s cookbook, which is filled with fun, exciting recipes. In her book, Kat includes those recipes at the end of every other chapter, all of which were created and tested by herself, from the famous “Twinkie Pie” to “Easier-Then-Pie Pudding” to “Turn Over a New Leaf Turnovers.”

The book became an immediate hit when it was published in 2015, winning a number of awards and recognitions, including NPR’s Best Books of 2015, Chicago Public Library Best Fiction for Older Readers 2015, and the Crystal Kite Award.

For Kat, her Asian heritage plays a crucial role in her writing career. When she was young, she noticed the lack of representation of Asian characters in books. “I really didn’t have books that had anyone who looked like me when I was growing up. And I knew that I wanted that,” she says.

Kat makes sure to include Asian characters in her writing to let her Asian readers see people like themselves reflected in books and to help non-Asian readers have a profound understanding of

Asian communities. When she wrote *The Truth About Twinkie Pie*, she applied her interpretation of diverse characterization in the story. Kat says, “it was important for me to have at least two Asian characters who were different.” Having more than one Asian character in the book allowed her to accurately portray how unique and non-alike Asians are in real life, instead of falling into stereotypes.

“If you have a group of friends, there's not always just one Asian person in the group. There could be a lot of Asians, and they're very different from each other,” Kat says.

Kat embeds elements of her own Asian identity in her writing, encouraging all readers to explore the fascinating roots and aspects of Asian cultures. In her picture book *The Magic Brush: A Story of Love, Family, and Chinese Characters*, she tells a magical story about Chinese calligraphy and invites the readers to learn more about Chinese traditions.

She feels endeared to her Asian characters, sometimes even seeing herself reflected in the characters. In her most recent middle-grade book, *The Way to Bea*, the main character, Beatrix “Bea” Lee, is a seventh-grade Taiwanese-American girl who loves writing poetry, like Kat herself. “The little drawn picture of an Asian girl, Bea, on the book cover, was very special for me,” Kat says with a smile.

Along with the well-depicted characters and the captivating storylines, her books cover valuable themes of family, friendship, and self-discovery, touching the hearts of readers of all ages and backgrounds. Although her books focus on a character’s experience, her messages mean something for everyone and empower people to embrace their individuality and become their best selves.

Kat has published five books so far, all holding high-level reviews and notable honors. Through her books, Kat has built heartfelt connections with her readers. She once received a letter from a mother in Germany, who wrote that *The Truth About Twinkie Pie* had given her daughter hope during struggling times. “For me, what was so meaningful about that was knowing that being myself and writing as myself, and just being truthful in the way I write helped somebody,” Kat says.

Some of Kat’s favorite responses are from readers of her first picture book, *You’re Lovable to Me*, a sweet bedtime rhyming book. “I got so many letters and responses from dads, who told me the book made them cry,” Kat says. “And their comments made me so happy.”

When recalling her biggest challenge in the journey toward becoming an influential writer, Kat talks about the fear of using her own voice. “I was afraid that people might not like the things that I thought were good or the things that I thought were funny or the things that I felt were moving and important,” she says.

Kat realizes that those thoughts could take away something she does better than anyone else—being herself. Even though she isn’t completely immune from that fear, she acknowledges, “There will be people who love [my work], people who don’t like it, and I can’t control any of that. The only thing I can control is to write in a way that feels truly like me.”

She hopes to pass this advice down to future generations of Asian Americans and budding writers—“You get to decide who you are and what you do and what you create and who you become. And no one else gets to tell you any of that.”

Currently, Kat is working on several projects that she is excited about, including a middle-grade novel with two Asian protagonists, a young adult novel with an Asian lead, and a graphic novel also featuring an Asian character. Her next picture book, illustrated by Isabelle Arsenault, *Just One Little Light* will come out in the winter of 2023.

Kat loves being an author and transferring her ideas into stories that reach readers. “There’s a saying in publishing, which is, as soon as you finish a book and publish it, it’s not yours anymore. It belongs to everybody who reads it,” she says.

Kat has influenced countless young readers worldwide with her powerful words and stories. Ever since her childhood, Kat has been trying to find her own unique voice in writing. Now, she is using her experience to help others find their own.