The First Person Fiction Series for Young Adults
A Conversation With the Authors
By Terry Hong

With the exception of the Native Americans—and some may still argue that they walked over the Bering Straits from Asia—every so-called American is actually an immigrant. Even as the term “American” may still connotate a light-skinned Caucasian who is blond and blue-eyed, in reality Americans come in every color, from every ethnicity and every culture.

In the publishing industry, Scholastic has been a major leader in depicting the lives of every type of young American with three highly popular series—Dear America, My America, and My Name Is America—all of which capture the American experience from colonial to modern times, including numerous historical immigrant experiences as well.

The latest Scholastic series, First Person Fiction, focuses on the more recent immigrant experience. “Today’s immigrants have different expectations from the people who came a hundred or more years ago,” says Amy Griffin, senior editor of Orchard Books, the Scholastic imprint responsible for the series. “Before, it was about assimilation. Today, it’s about maintaining a balance between the culture of the world left behind, and marrying that home culture with the new culture that is America.”

First Person Fiction debuted in October 2002 with two titles—Behind the Mountains by Edwidge Danticat and Flight to Freedom by Ana Veciana-Suarez—then added two titles, Finding My Hat by John Son and The Stone Goddess by Minfong Ho, in October 2003. The first two are scheduled for paperback release in February 2004. “We wanted to find writers who themselves had immigrated to America,” explains Griffin. “Because they would understand the struggles and get the voice right, readers could trust these writers’ knowledge of the immigrant experience.”

The first writer Griffin contacted was Danticat, the award-winning author of Breath, Eyes, Memory and The Farming of Bones. “I am a big fan of the Dear America series,” confesses Danticat. “I was working on an adult novel at the time Amy Griffin called. But then it occurred to me that this was a rare chance to write something about Haitian immigrants amidst the violence of contemporary political turbulence where the family back together in the new country. Eventually the family is reunited, but the experience is bittersweet, as all four family members must adjust to overwhelming changes as new immigrants.

Still, with purpose, Danticat names the family Espérance, which means “hope”: “I think all immigrants come here with a great deal of hope,” she says. “Sometimes there is a feeling—that there was certainly that feeling in my family—that once you get to the United States, everything will be better. You’ll eat better, live better. That’s what you sacrifice everything for. I have always thought that it was a great act of faith to leave everything behind and start anew in a place where you don’t speak the language and sometimes know no one. If that’s not hopeful, I don’t know what is.”

Danticat also has certain hopes for Mountains: “My hope for the book, for the whole series in general, is that it will make children more understanding with immigrant children in their schools, give them a sense of what they went through before they came to this country, and what they still go through when they get here.”

The focus of Ana Veciana-Suarez’ Flight to Freedom is exactly about “what they ... go through when they get here.” Because Yara Garcia and her family in Havana, Cuba, are ideologically opposed to the Communist regime under Fidel Castro, they must leave their homeland, even at the cost of being separated from the family’s oldest son, Pepito, who has been drafted into the Cuban army. The bulk of Flight is about their new life in Miami.

“The Cuban experience is different from that of other groups,” explains Veciana-Suarez, “because many Cubans came as exiles who believed that they were always going back to Cuba.” Indeed, even after settling in Miami amidst extended relatives, Yara’s father in Flight continues to insist that the family will be returning to Cuba imminently. “The process of adaptation [to the new country] was that much harder for our parents,” says Veciana-Suarez. “Families stuck to the old ways more than they might have in the home country.”

While Veciana-Suarez was younger than her character Yara when she originally arrived in the United States, writing Flight nevertheless conjured up “memories of returning and being a stranger in a strange land.” Four decades later, Veciana-Suarez quotes a Cuban American thinker who refers to living on the hyphen: “You’re not one thing and you’re not the other,” she says. Still, she confesses that living in multicultural Miami, where the predominant culture is Hispanic, she “doesn’t think about [being an immigrant] much.” One generation later, she refers to her children and says, “they have no real concept of what it was like to be an immigrant. They live a comfortable upper-middle-class existence with no understanding of the struggle of the immigrant.”

Behind the Mountains
EDWIDGE DANTICAT
Orchard Books/Scholastic,

Flight to Freedom
ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ
Orchard Books/Scholastic,

Finding My Hat
JOHN SON
Orchard Books/Scholastic,

The Stone Goddess
MINFONG HO
Orchard Books/Scholastic,

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John Son, author of Finding My Hat, says he initially avoided Griffin’s inquiries about writing about his own immigrant experience from Korea. “I didn’t know if I had a lot to say about growing up as an Asian American. But I realize now that I did, and just didn’t know how to say it.” When he figured that out, he had the story of Jin-Han Park and his family, who arrive in the United States from Korea via Germany, and struggle to find a place to call home—first in Chicago, then Memphis, and finally settling in Houston.

The poignant story of Hat, which is dedicated to the memory of Son’s mother, draws upon an especially touching relationship between Jin-Han and his mother, as they suffer through the financial, emotional, and eventually physical hardships of an uprooted life in unfamiliar landscapes. As the book is largely autobiographical, it does double duty as Son’s contemporary family record as well. Son says his father “seemed to appreciate the way it brought up all these old memories,” while Son’s sister “found it interesting to read about the part of our family history before she was born.”

Author Minfong Ho, who is Burmese-born, Thai-raised, and writes about Chinese immigrants, draws upon a collective family history of multiple immigrations brought on by political turmoil. In The Stone Goddess, Ho creates a novel about a young Cambodian girl named Nakri who is just beginning her training as a classical dancer when the Khmer Rouge take over her country. She survives the regime even as she loses her father and sister during Pol Pot’s reign. Working as a relief worker on the Thai-Cambodian border in 1980, Ho witnessed firsthand the destruction wrought upon Cambodian families by the Khmer Rouge—nearly a quarter of the national population was literally decimated.

In time, Nakri and her family are allowed to immigrate to the United States, where they face new challenges, piecing their lives back together as a family in a strange new land. “I would like to think that Nakri adapted adroitly enough to American life that she could successfully forge links between the United States and Cambodia, as has indeed happened with many Khmer Americans,” says Ho of her young character. Ho talks about immigrant Cambodians returning to their homeland as U.S. citizens to work in diverse areas, such as running Dunkin’ Donuts franchises or working as UN representatives: “Bridging our two separate countries and cultures isn’t just an option; it’s often an emotional necessity, because not to do so tears us apart.”

As for her own immigrant experience, Ho says, “We weren’t called ‘permanent aliens’ for nothing—it’s a permanent condition, this feeling of being alienated ... I’m not complaining, though. Having to keep your equilibrium on a tightrope means you learn to walk carefully and gracefully. Hmmm ... or you fall off!” she laughs.

Thankfully, the First Person Fiction series shows no signs of falling off. With its growing success, Griffin plans to continue publishing approximately two books per year. The next two are already in the works: Judith Ortiz Cofer will write about an immigrant from Puerto Rico in Call Me Maria (current working title), and Meri Nana-Ama Danquah is working on Crossing the Meridian (also a working title), about the Ghanaian immigrant experience. “We would also love to do a book about an immigrant from Eastern Europe, and one from Afghanistan,” Griffin says.

Indeed, this is America in the 21st century. “We wanted to create a body of literature that would help reflect what America looks like now. Obviously, the immigrants of today are facing a different set of challenges than the ones who came on the Mayflower or in the early 1900s,” says Griffin.

Today’s America is no longer about the melting pot. A patchwork quilt of countless overlapping but distinct pieces might be a more apt description. With the new global age of instant messages and ubiquitous cell phones, ties to the homeland are stronger than ever. “That’s what’s exciting about America these days,” echoes Danticat. “We don’t necessarily have to melt and disappear into some kind of ideological stew. We can be who we are, contribute what we can to American culture, and still retain our ties to our native countries.”

REVIEWER: Terry Hong writes frequently on books, theater, and film.