

“I’m Not a Writer, I’m a Rewriter”

The Novels of Linda Sue Park

Spark discussions about world history, cultural identity, and characterization in these award-winning novels. **By Monika Schröder**

Last year, Linda Sue Park visited our school in New Delhi for 10 days. The prolific Newbery Medal-winning author of novels, picture books, and poetry for children received envious looks from our young aspiring writers when she told her audience that she had a haiku published in a magazine at the age of nine. Her early publishing success continued, and when she was a fifth-grader, one of her stories was printed in her local newspaper in a section called “King Arthur’s Court.” Our students chuckled as they listened to Park end the anecdote by saying that for a while, she was addressed as Lady Linda Sue.

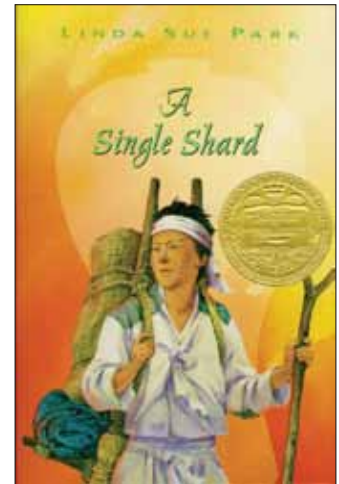
In her engaging classroom presentations, Park talked about the importance of stories in our lives. “I have always been a reader. I love how books let you pretend things,” she told an audience of fourth-graders. “Being a writer allows me to pretend for a living by making up stories.” She informed students that each of her books goes through many revisions before a final draft is published. “I’m not a writer, I’m a rewriter,” Park said. Our teachers appreciated hearing a published author stress the importance of this stage of the writing process, but our students groaned when they heard that Park had rewritten *When My Name Was Keoko* 37 times.

Korean History

Korean history and settings dominate most of Park’s novels. Park’s first book, *Seesaw Girl*, is set in seventeenth-century Korea. Twelve-year-old Jade doesn’t want to stay confined to the Inner Court of her wealthy parents’ house. Readers learn about the customs of Korean aristocracy at the time and follow Jade’s attempts to challenge conventions. The novel lends itself to a character study of the protagonist’s development. Charting text passages that depict Jade’s efforts to overcome obstacles gives students the opportunity to study Park’s artful way of showing how Jade changes throughout the story.



A Single Shard, the 2002 Newbery Medal winner, tells the story of Tree-ear, an orphan boy in twelfth-



century Korea who becomes apprentice to the elder pottery master, Min, after the boy breaks one of the potter’s pieces. When Min asks him to bring two vases to the emperor, Tree-ear embarks on a dangerous journey through unknown territory and must rely on his perseverance, courage, and resourcefulness to reach his goal. The meticulously researched story is full of details about the art of celadon pottery making and was a particular favorite among our Korean middle-school students.

In the time-travel fantasy *Archer’s*

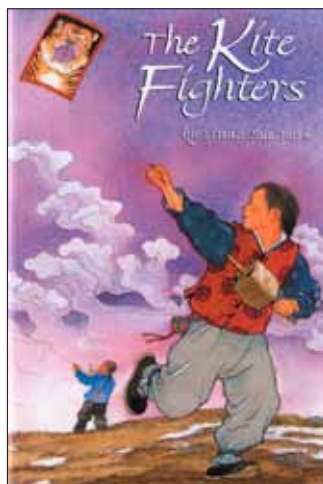
Quest, Park brings the ancient world of Korea and modern America together when Chu-mong, a legendary Korean



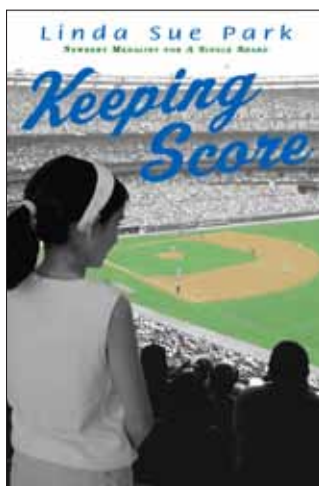
archer born in 55 BCE, appears in the bedroom of a sixth-grade math whiz in Dorchester, New York. The intruder has fallen off his tiger and needs the help of the boy to find his way back to his people. The novel's fast pace and the eccentric relationship between the two protagonists make this a good read for boys and reluctant readers.

Sports

Park loves sports. While in Delhi she expressed interest in watching a cricket match. Unfortunately, we couldn't procure tickets for an official match, but she did enjoy the many games played at every park and square in Delhi. In her novel *The Kite Fighters*,



she combines her love for sport with an ancient Korean setting. The story of 11-year-old Young-sup, who competes with his older brother over flying kites, was a particular favorite among students at my school. When Park mentioned to her father that she planned to write a book about soccer, her father told her about his favorite sport when he was a child in Korea, kite fighting. The book became a tribute to him. Like the book's protagonist, Park's father was a second son, and he not only gave her the idea for the story but also created the chapter illustrations for the book. Students might enjoy working on a character chart that compares the brothers' strengths and weaknesses as they first compete and then join their efforts.

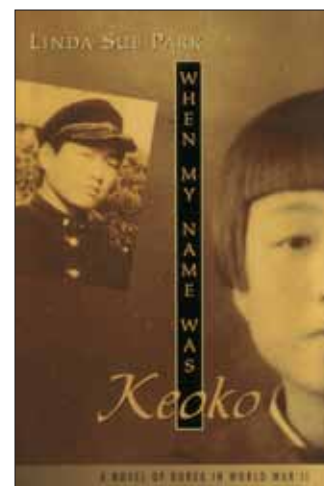


The novel *Keeping Score* takes place in 1950s Brooklyn. Nine-year-old Maggie listens to baseball games on the radio. She roots for the Dodgers and hopes and prays for their victory. Jim, a friend and baseball mentor who teaches Maggie how to score the game, is wounded in Korea and doesn't answer her letters. When Maggie learns about his war injury, she works on a plan to help him heal, showing the same perseverance and indestructible hope she has when rooting for the Dodgers. In her author's note Park points out that "the tragedy in Korea was officially known as 'the Korean conflict'" and only in 1998

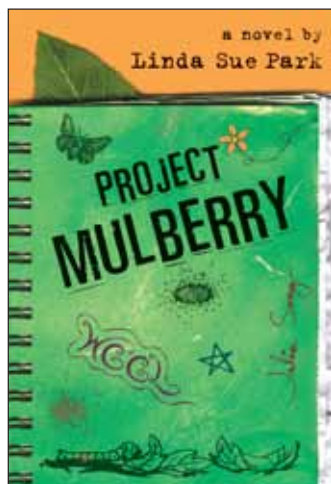
did an act of Congress change the designation to "the Korean War," which may prompt readers to learn more about the causes for the war and the United States' involvement.

Stories in Two Voices

When My Name Was Keoko is based on Park's family's experience during the Japanese occupation of Korea throughout World War II. In alternating first-person narratives, 10-year-old Sun-hee and her older brother, Tae-yul, relate their family's struggle to maintain their Korean identity under the oppression of a foreign regime. Through the eyes of the older brother and younger sister, readers learn about the hardships of everyday life in occupied Korea. Pair this intense novel with *Year of Impossible Goodbyes* (1991), by Sook Nyul Choi, which is set in Korea during the same time period. For a comparison of children's lives under foreign occupation in World War II Europe, see Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* (1989), Mary Casanova's *Klipfish Code* (2007), and Sandi Toksvig's *Hitler's Canary* (2007).



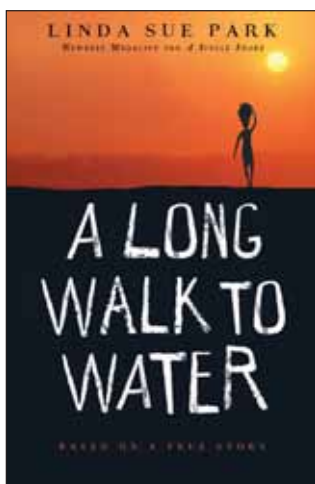
Project Mulberry, Park's only realistic fiction novel set in contemporary America, takes place in Plainfield, Illinois. Julia Song, a Korean American seventh-grader, together with her friend Patrick, must choose a science project. When her mother suggests silkworms, Julia worries that it is "too



Asian.” But once they commit to it, Julia and Patrick become fascinated with the project, and readers learn along with the protagonists how silk is made. The story touches on many important issues for middle-grade readers, such as friendship, cultural and racial identity, and prejudice, providing lots to talk about in book-group discussions. Park intersperses each chapter of the first-person narrative with a two-page dialogue between Julia and the author herself, conversations that provide readers with insights about how and why an author develops a character. This metafictional element gives the book a unique twist and led to many interesting classroom discussions in our school. Students also experimented with inserting dialogue between their own fictional characters and themselves into their own writing.

Park’s latest novel, *A Long Walk to Water*, is based on the true story of Salva Dut, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan. It was first published in weekly installments in newspapers as part of the Breakfast Serials series before it came out as a novel in 2010. The book is told in two voices. Salva, separated from his family by the war, survives a harrowing journey through enemy territory until he finally leads a group of boys to safety in Kenya. Salva’s story is told parallel to that of Nya, a young girl who lives in a Sudanese village today and observes foreign aid workers as they drill a well. Park artfully weaves the two

stories together, and the short novel complements social studies units on Africa and throws light on the plight of refugees. Proceeds from the sales of the Breakfast Serials installments supported a well through the nonprofit Water for Sudan. *A Long Walk to Water* makes the fate of Sudanese refugees accessible to a younger audience and, when used in the social studies classroom, can encourage fundraising projects or a letter campaign to support organizations that work in Sudan or help Sudanese refugees.



Sampling Park

Archer’s Quest. 2006. 176p. Clarion, \$16 (9780618596317); Yearling, paper, \$6.50 (9780440422044). Also available in an audio edition. Gr. 5–8.

Keeping Score. 2008. 208p. Clarion, \$16 (9780618927999); Sandpiper, paper, \$5.99 (9780547248974). Gr. 3–6.

The Kite Fighters. 2000. 144p. Clarion, \$15 (9780395940419); Sandpiper, paper, \$5.99 (9780547328638). Gr. 5–8.


A Long Walk to Water: Based on a True Story. 2010. 128p. Clarion, \$16 (9780547251271). Gr. 6–9.

Project Mulberry. 2005. 240p. Clarion, \$16 (9780618477869); Yearling, paper, \$6.99 (9780440421634). Also available in an audio edition. Gr. 5–8.

Seesaw Girl. Illus. by Jean Tseng and Mou-Sien Tseng. 1999. 96p. Clarion, \$14 (9780395915141); Sandpiper, paper, \$5.99 (9780547248882). Gr. 3–6.

A Single Shard. 2001. 160p. Clarion, \$15 (9780395978276); Sandpiper, paper, \$6.99 (9780547534268). Gr. 5–8.

The 39 Clues, Book 9: Storm Warning. 2010. 192p. Scholastic, \$12.99 (9780545060493). Gr. 3–6.

When My Name Was Keoko. 2002. 208p. Clarion, \$16 (9780618133352); Yearling, paper, \$6.99 (9780440419440). Gr. 5–8. 

Monika Schröder is the elementary school librarian at the American Embassy School in New Delhi, India. Her second novel, *Saraswati’s Way*, was published in 2010.



Tomie dePaola’s acute memories of anecdotes from his childhood form believable narratives that tug at the hearts and bring smiles to the faces of today’s chapter book readers. Each of the 26 Fairmount Avenue titles, now numbering eight (*For the Duration* [2009] being the most recent), bring to life, with brio and panache, day-by-day stories of events on the home front during World War II. In doing so, dePaola has made memoir a viable option in writing books for children.—*Barbara Elleman*

