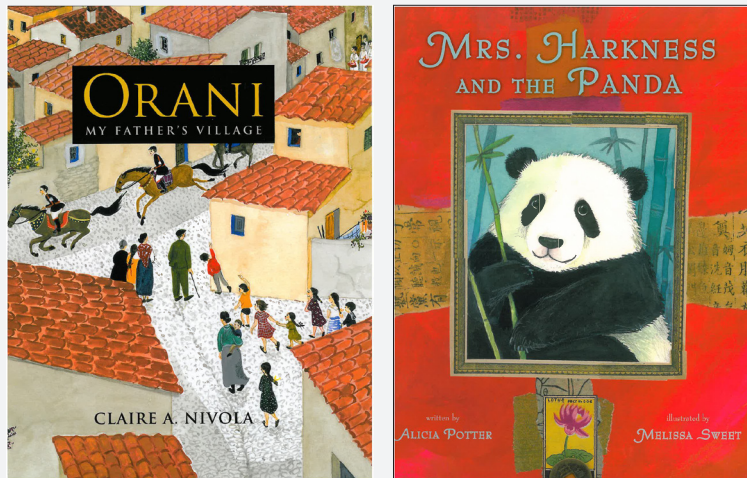


First Opinion: Two Books That Explore and Discover Places and Cultures

Nivola, Claire A. *Orani: My Father's Village*. China: South China Printing Co. Ltd, 2011.

Potter, Alicia. *Mrs. Harkness and the Panda*. New York: Knopf, Borzoi books, 2012.

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These are beautiful books that explore and celebrate different cultural ways that will be foreign to most 21st century readers who are living in a city with an urban lifestyle. Interestingly, they both depict their characters celebrating life and death. Alicia Potter's title appropriately foreshadows the main character's scattering of her husband's ashes, while Nivola's title suggests the importance of village holiday dress traditions. Both are worthy of purchase for school and home libraries and classroom sharing, because they can encourage shared discussions about different traditions and will encourage their readers to re-read and consider how others celebrate passages in life.

Mrs. Harkness and the Panda, written by Alicia Potter and illustrated by Melissa Sweet, successfully explores the historical events leading to the discovery and delivery of the first panda cub to the United States, telling how William Harkness set out on an expedition to find a panda cub and return with it to the USA. Meanwhile, his dutiful wife remained at home in New York where she designed tea gowns, even though she wanted to accompany her husband on the adventure considered too dangerous for women.

Many months later, when Mrs. Harkness is notified that her husband has died, she decides to carry on with his work—much to the chagrin of friends and acquaintances—even though she knows very little about animals. Potter describes Mrs. Harkness's plans for the expedition, her travels to China, and her encounter with a Chinese man who helps her on her exploration, including advising her on proper clothing and equipment. The two sail the Chinese rivers and enter the forests, eventually discovering the first panda to be displayed in America. Potter's landscape descriptions are celebratory; in addition, I can see my relatives in the depiction of the old man with a wild gray hair and no teeth.

Readers are exposed to the changing role of women in society (Mrs. Harkness is considered too delicate to become an explorer) and will appreciate the true spirit of this adventurer as she faces frustrations and must be patient and industrious until she luckily finds the panda. The author's end-notes are noteworthy in their information concerning the changing role of zoos and the importance of preserving a way of life through cultural awareness.

Melissa Sweet's artwork is appropriately naïve and echoes Chinese art styles created in the landscapes and paneled illustrations. The brief timeline at the end shows the reality of early explorations in China and the removal of wild animals that were important and integral to us in the 21st century. There is a wonderful silver-grey photo of Mrs. Harkness and a baby panda in China, which holds a sense of purpose and suggests the importance of belonging in a particular landscape.

On the surface, *Orani: My Father's Village* by Claire A. Nivola is a simple tale of village life, but it is much more. This is a tribute to a village where people lived close to the earth in a simpler and less restrictive way of life. They are not restrained by the 21st century constraints. Nivola's title demonstrates her intimate knowledge of and affinity for the ancestral home of her father, which is lovingly shown in the visual and narrative re-creations of village life. Readers are introduced to the beauty of the setting with its breathtaking blue sea, white pebbled shores, and rugged cliffs. The simplicity of village life, with older means of transportation, cobblestones streets, and communal families, will be unknown to most of our 21st century urban dwellers; the people are depicted milling flour and stitching jackets in homes with donkeys and goats in backyards. Meals are shared within the extended family, and much of the food comes directly from the area. Finally, Nivola aptly shows how the villagers mourn for a deceased relative, depicting appropriate clothing as part of the simplicity of the village. And when questioned about life in America by the village children, the story's young narrator replies, "it's better here" (Nivola).

The childlike, yet sophisticated illustrations amplify the young narrator's tale, and the clever use of smaller art pieces often skillfully highlights a particular part of the text. Nivola has appropriately placed maps on the end pages, showing the story's location within its greater surroundings. Looking at the intricate scenes and its accompanying illustrations, the reader is left feeling that, in Orani, something is always happening!

These two books can open a reader's interest in times past, places never visited, and divergent cultural customs. The skillful combinations of text and illustrations should delight young contemporary readers. Taken together, they expand children's appreciation of lifestyles not encountered in the 21st century.

About the Author

Christopher Cheng is an award winning children's author creating titles for both print and the digital media. He is Co-Chair of the International Advisory Board for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) and is on the advisory board for the Asian Festival of Children's Content (AFCC). Find out more about Christopher at www.chrischeng.com.