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Book Review of Drawn Together by Minh Lê and Dan Santat

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Drawn Together written by Minh Lê and illustrated by Dan Santat, depicts the story of a grandson and grandfather spending time in the afternoon together. Lê and Santat’s shared experiences and cultures influence the picturebook’s construction. The greatest strength in Drawn Together is the inclusion of family in the creation process. Lê’s meaningful words and phrases complement Santat’s colorful and energetic illustrations. The setting is in the grandfather’s house and away from the site of Thai restaurants and Thai Buddhist temples, to which most of the existing research on Thai Americans hones it on (Bao, 2015; Padoongpatt, 2017). Drawn Together is a humanizing experience for readers to witness the developing relationship between the grandfather and grandson. The two have nothing in common, speak different languages, and find a connection through drawing. This book review discusses the cultural and lingual ties that make reading Drawn Together worthy of critique.

Santat includes both the Thai and English languages and cultural practices in building the bond between Thai and Thai American traditions. The font on the cover and title page is creative, as the English letters resemble Thai consonants and a Thai vowel. For example, the English letter “n” closely resembles the consonant “น” (gor gài), “w” resembles a fusion of the consonants “ว” (por phan) and “ิ” (for fun), and “t” closely resembles the Thai vowel known as “ไ” (ai) (Smyth, 2014, pp. 12-13, 16). The title on the cover and title page is readable in English and helps readers realize the beauty of the written Thai language in the English language they may be familiar with. Once opened, peritext elements on page four stand out as dedications are found to respect Lê’s grandfather and Santat’s grandmother (Pantaleo, 2022). The middle of page four contains English translations with page numbers when Thai is spoken. The story also begins on the bottom of page four before the title page as the mother drops off the grandson and he walk towards the grandfather’s house and rings the doorbell. The grandfather with a smile opens the door and they both greet each other with the Thai traditional greeting known as the wai (Bao, 2015, pp. 121, 134-136). The grandson’s back is lowered and his palms for his wai are slightly higher than the grandfather’s wai to show respect. The grandfather welcomes the grandson in for a meal, but the grandson is not excited to be there.

There is a minor grammatical error in the grandfather’s first Thai phrase when he speaks with his grandson at the dinner table. The awkward silence shared by the two leads the grandfather...
to state, “สบายดีเหรอ?” (Lê & Santat, 2018, p. 9). This phrase intended to be pronounced, “Sa bai dee ler?” and translated as, “How are you doing?”. Simultaneously, the grandson in English states, “So...what’s new, Grandpa?”, but the illustrations and conversation indicate the language barrier (p. 9). The correct spelling of “Sa bai dee ler?” is “สบายดีเหรอ?” without the Thai vowel “ə” (er), but both spellings hold the same meaning (Rattanakhemakorn, 2022, p. 11; Smyth, 2014, p. 16). The move to the sofa to watch a movie that shows a superhero speaking in Thai and charging lightning between his palms and shooting a lightning bolt towards a dragon. The grandfather notices his grandson’s disinterest and states, “อยากจะดูอย่างอื่นไม่?” (Lê & Santat, 2018, p. 11). This phrase is pronounced, “Yuk ja doo yung urn mai?” and translated as, “Would you like to watch something else?”. The grandson responds in English with, “Can we watch something else?”, but the language barrier leaves the same movie playing (p. 11). However, it is common in the Thai language if the grandfather’s phrase is spelled, “อยากจะดูอย่างอื่นไหม?” (Rattanakhemakorn, 2022, pp. 11, 47; Smyth, 2014, pp. 12-13, 15-16, 18). The “ə” (consonant or âng with vowel ueh) from Lê and Santat’s spelling of the phrase would need to include the mái âyk tone and be spelled as “ə̂”. The vowel “i” (ai) and the high tone from “i” would need to be deleted while the consonant “u” (mor máh) would be rewritten as “û”. Finally, the consonant “y” (yor yúk) would be written at the end of the phrase. The grandson would not understand.

Santat’s Thai culture illuminates as the grandson stops watching the movie and walks over to a table, pulls markers from his backpack, and draws a wizard avatar of himself. This amuses the grandfather, and he quickly grabs and shares his ink, paint brush, and sketchbook that starts their connection. The grandfather draws a yahk which is a protector of the Thai Buddhist temple sala or hall from spirits with bad intentions (Padoongpatt, 2017, p. 126). Their avatars explore an imaginary world with colorful mountains and vegetation that is interrupted when a towering, fiery, and violent dragon whips their avatars into the air. The grandfather stunningly outlined and painted the inside of the dragon’s mouth, eyes, and fins in black. Meanwhile, the grandson fills the dragon with a red tongue and lips, yellow horns, yellow reptilian belly, and green and yellow scales. In addition, Santat’s dragon with the horns resembles the northern Thai mythological serpent creature known as the Naga (Moonkham, 2021). Back in the imaginary world, the avatars land on opposite sides of a river which is a metaphor for their disconnect. The dragon swimming emerges to strike again and the two use their drawing skills to morph the dragon into a bridge indicating their intention to build familial and emotional connections. The avatars cross the bridge to reunite and in real life the grandfather and grandson hug while their drawings are taped on the room’s wall before the mother picks up the son. The mythological figures make the picturebook enjoyable for readers familiar with Thai culture.

_Drawn Together_ is an excellent picturebook covering the generational gap, language barrier, and shared experiences of Asian Americans. Readers of all ages may learn there are more ways to connect with people after reading this with family and friends. Instead of solely relying on language, _Drawn Together_ shows readers drawing is an important communicative method that can be powerful for forming bonds.

References


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