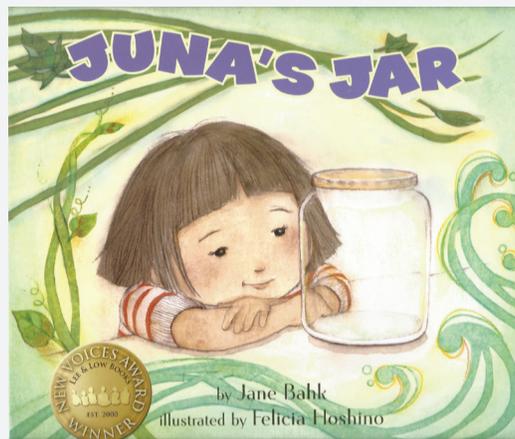


Second Reaction: Readers Are Invited to Consider Friendship, Loss, and Growth through the Metaphor of an Empty Glass Jar

Bahk, Jane. *Juna's Jar*. Illustrated by Felicia Hoshino, Lee & Low Books, 2015.

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In *Juna's Jar*, a young girl struggles when her best friend Hector suddenly moves away. With help from her older brother Minho, and the imaginative play inspired by an empty kimchi jar, Juna comes to terms with Hector's departure and imagines making new friends. Mixing the emotional realism of missing a friend with magical, imaginary elements, *Juna's Jar* deals with themes of friendship, growth, and change.

The reader is introduced to the eponymous jar on the first page, where they learn that kimchi is a staple in Juna's house and that Juna often uses empty kimchi jars as playthings with her best friend Hector. When Hector suddenly moves away, Juna is left alone with her empty jar—an apt symbol of her sudden loneliness. In an effort to lift her spirits, Juna's older brother Minho engages her in a series of activities. They buy a goldfish for the jar, plant a bean plant in it, and make a grasshopper habitat with twigs and leaves. Each evening, the jar magically becomes a gateway to a fantasy environment, which Juna enters in search of Hector. She swims with the goldfish, traverses a rainforest, and rides on the back of a larger-than-life grasshopper across the city to find Hector and say farewell. Each morning, the contents of Juna's jar are found to have grown too big overnight and must be rehoused, freeing up the vessel for subsequent adventures.

The story's repetitive formula reassuringly constructs the reader's expectations. Each day, Juna and Minho fill the jar; each night, Juna sets off on another exploration; and each morning,

the jar can no longer contain its contents and is emptied. In this way, the jar operates as a complex thematic element and metaphor throughout the story. Its original use serves as a marker of Juna's culture. It finds practical application during Juna's and Minho's daytime play as it houses a range of their life-science projects, and at night, it transforms into a portal to the rich dreamscapes and imaginative environments that Juna visits. The jar's sudden emptiness mirrors the void Juna feels after Hector's abrupt departure, but also signals potential, as it functions as such an open-ended plaything. Indeed, the book's last page sees Juna once again at the park with her jar, this time meeting a new prospective playmate. Further, the jar's inability to permanently contain its contents, which grow and change, similarly parallel the shift in Juna's friendship with Hector as their circumstances change.

Although young readers may identify with the sadness and loneliness associated with a friend moving away, the book's development of Juna and Hector's relationship is minimal. The reader knows so little of Juna, to say nothing of Hector, for the emotion to be palpable within the story itself. Moreover, Juna's subsequent companionship with Minho seems exceptionally fulfilling—a model relationship between brother and sister. The book does not merely suggest that one friend may be replaced by another, but the story itself provides inadequate evidence of Juna's initial friendship with Hector for the reader to appreciate his sudden departure as a profound loss for Juna, particularly as Minho appears game to accompany her on daily adventures. We are reassured that Hector's departure is of a positive nature, as his Abuelita tells Juna that he has gone with his parents "to live with them in a big house far away" (unpaged), his occupancy in a single-family home thus read as a kind of upward mobility from the apartment building where he and Juna live. On Juna's final nighttime journey depicted in the book, she is spirited across the city to Hector's new, big house, and she perches outside his window. There, she sees that Hector has kept a kimchi jar, connecting them, but unlike Juna, who has spent her nights roving distant lands to try to find Hector and say goodbye, Hector appears unworried, sleeping soundly "like he was having happy dreams" (unpaged).

While at times the narrative tends to pointedly tell the reader how Juna feels rather than building up those feelings through extended plot and character development, Felicia Hoshino's award-winning watercolor illustrations nevertheless lend an emotional depth to the story, taking full advantage of the medium's variable opacity and creating a visually rich story world where colors run together. Colorful sweeping tendril-like shapes add a magical dynamism to the dream sequence images and serve to connect the book's real environments with Juna's dreamscapes. In one such spread, a sea of blue-green swirls pool across Juna's bedroom as she dives into the jar with her goldfish. In another, the suddenly overgrown bean plant cascades from the mouth of the jar, and vibrant green tendrils coil onto the surfaces of Juna's room as she descends into the forest springing out of the jar.

Perhaps the book's most compelling element is the jar itself as an enduring ad hoc plaything. The book's illustrations show that Juna's material world is densely populated with

toys—from an alligator-shaped watering can and a range of art supplies to stuffed animals and picture books—in addition to a range of vibrant textiles in her room. Yet she, as many children do, appropriates the empty jar, which links her to her heritage, Hector, and the imagined worlds she inhabits. The jar itself may thus offer a connection to a range of activities in conjunction with reading the book. Students might identify the many different shapes and sizes of jars in their own homes, or they might bring their own jars into the classroom for a variety of activities from planting seeds to creating terraria. Finally, the book imagines a culturally diverse social world, seen in Juna’s and Hector’s backgrounds. The children’s cultural identities are central to the story, but rather than being an overwhelmingly didactic celebration of diversity, instead, the book naturalizes diversity, making it a compelling read for students.

About the Author

Meredith A. Bak is Assistant Professor of Childhood Studies at Rutgers University–Camden. Her research concerns children’s media, visual, and material cultures from the nineteenth century to the present day.