

Dragonwings Study Guide

Dragonwings by Laurence Yep

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Dragonwings Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1, The Land of the Demons.....	5
Chapter 2, The Company, and Chapter 3, The Dragon Man.....	7
Chapter 4, Tests.....	9
Chapter 5, Windrider's Claws, and Chapter 6, The Demoness.....	11
Chapter 7, Educations.....	13
Chapter 8, Earth, Wind, and Water, and Chapter 9, The Dragon Wakes.....	14
Chapter 10, Aroused.....	16
Chapter 11, Exile, and Chapter 12, Dragonwings.....	17
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	22
Themes.....	24
Style.....	26
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	30



Plot Summary

Dragonwings is a historical novel by author Laurence Yep who won the Newberry Award. In this novel, Moon Shadow comes to America to be with his father, Windrider, from their home in the Middle Kingdom. As Moon Shadow and his father struggle to survive in a hostile country, they somehow find time to focus on their dreams. Windrider has read about the flying machine the Wright brothers built and believes he can build a better one and fly. Moon Shadow struggles alongside his father as they both build their dream and work to survive both natural and man-made disasters. Dragonwings is a novel of the Asian community of the early 1900s and the spirit that kept them from giving up their dreams.

Moon Shadow has never met his father. Windrider left to make his fortune in America before Moon Shadow's birth. Therefore, Moon Shadow is excited when a distant relative comes and tells him that Moon Shadow is to travel with him to America to live with his father. The trip by ship is very exciting, but not near as exciting as setting foot in the Land of the Golden Mountain and meeting the father he has only heard stories about.

For the first several years of his life in America, Moon Shadow lives with his father in the laundry that is owned by his father's uncle and several friends and relatives. Moon Shadow goes along with his father to make deliveries and pick up dirty laundry. When Moon Shadow is older, he is given the task of collecting past monies due to the company. During one of these outings, Moon Shadow is beaten and robbed by his cousin who has an opium addiction. Windrider goes after the cousin, threatening to kill him, but is stopped by the gang to which his cousin belongs. This causes Windrider and Moon Shadow to move away from the company or face retribution from the gang.

Windrider and Moon Shadow move into a stable behind the once grand home of a white woman. This white woman is very kind and wants to know all she can about Windrider and Moon Shadow's culture. This woman also has a niece who befriends Moon Shadow. In time this foursome becomes a close knit group of friends, often picnicking together and flying kites. During this time, Windrider becomes obsessed with the idea of building a flying machine so that he might one day fly like a dragon. To help his father, Moon Shadow writes to the Wright brothers, a set of brothers who built their own flying machine a few years before. The Wright brothers send schematics and charts to Windrider to help him with his own machine.

One morning a great earthquake hits. Moon Shadow stands in the yard and watches as all the buildings around him fall apart. When it is over, Moon Shadow and his father begin hearing voices calling from the rubble. With the help of their landlady, Moon Shadow and Windrider begin digging survivors out. They learn throughout the day that the military has come in and the government has declared martial law. However, the military is looting more than the looters they have been asked to stop.

Moon Shadow and his father move to the Golden Gate park where many other survivors of the city have gathered. After a few days, however, the government comes and forces



the Asians to move. They move the Asians many times from place to place, causing them to fear that they will not be allowed to settle again in their part of the city. The leaders rise up together and face down the government, forcing them to allow the Asians to return to their homes. The Company's building is rebuilt and the laundry business begins again. Windrider announces that he plans to move away so that he can concentrate on building his flying machine.

For three years, Windrider and Moon Shadow live in a barn, working odd jobs, and building their flying machine. Just as the machine is ready to fly, the cousin returns and steals all their money. Windrider learns that they are about to be evicted by the landlord with no means to move the flying machine. The Company appears on that final day and helps move the flying machine to the top of the hill where Windrider is able to fly it over the valley. Unfortunately, one of the wings breaks and Windrider crashes. Windrider survives and learns from the ordeal that family is more important. Windrider returns to the Company to work for the day he can bring his wife to America.



Chapter 1, The Land of the Demons

Chapter 1, The Land of the Demons Summary

Dragonwings is a historical novel about the lives of Asians who immigrated to America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This novel is also inspired by an Asian immigrant who is rumored to have built and flown a flying machine that was an improvement on the design that originated with the Wright Brothers.

Moon Shadow is eight years old by the method of the Tang People, seven by American standards. He has lived most of those eight years without his father, Windrider, because his father went to America, the Land of the Golden Mountain, while Moon Shadow's mother was pregnant with him in order to make his fortune. All Moon Shadow knows of his father are the stories his mother and grandmother have told him and of the kites his father built and left behind. They receive letters from Windrider regularly, but the letters have to be read to them by the local teacher because neither Moon Shadow's mother nor his grandmother can read. Often Moon Shadow's mother will discuss with him what the letters say and what she should dictate to the teacher to write back for them.

Moon Shadow is fascinated by stories of the Land of the Golden Mountain, but is also frightened by the stories his grandmother tells about the men who have come home disfigured or those who never came home at all. Moon Shadow's own grandfather was killed by a group of demons, white people. Therefore, when a cousin called Hand Clap comes with a letter from Windrider and tells them that Moon Shadow is to travel with him back to America, Moon Shadow is both excited and scared. The journey to America is a long one, but the process through customs is even longer. Hand Clap counsels Moon Shadow on what he must say so that the custom officials will believe he is Windrider's child. They wait several days until it is their turn and then the interview takes long hours to complete. Finally Windrider is allowed to leave the warehouse where he has been held and meet his father.

Chapter 1, The Land of the Demons Analysis

This chapter introduces the main character and part of the conflict that will drive the plot. Moon Shadow is a small boy whose father has lived in America since before he was born. Moon Shadow knows nothing of his father, but he admires the man his mother has illustrated for him through her stories. Moon Shadow's situation is not uncommon in the time period. China was a country that was unable to care for its own people at the time, so people went to America to make money to send home in order to pay the debts they left at home. This leaves many families separated and unable to rectify the situation because of a lack of money or because of the difficult rules of the immigration department in America.



Moon Shadow is called to go to America, a place he believes is an unfriendly and even dangerous place for Asians. In fact, Moon Shadow and his people call Americans demons because of the way they have treated the immigrants in the past. However, Moon Shadow is happy to go because he wants to be where his father is. The reader wonders, however, if Moon Shadow and his father will face the same struggles some of their ancestors have faced in America.



Chapter 2, The Company, and Chapter 3, The Dragon Man

Chapter 2, The Company, and Chapter 3, The Dragon Man Summary

In Chapter 2, Moon Shadow is taken to Chinatown, the section of San Francisco where the Tang people make their home. Here there is a building that belongs to the Company of the Peach Orchard Vow, the Company to which his father and Uncle Bright Star belong. The Company runs a laundry out of the first floor of the building and provides housing for its owners and workers upstairs. When they arrive, Moon Shadow meets the rest of the Company, which includes White Deer, Lefty, and Hand Clap. Over dinner, the group tells Moon Shadow about how his father was given a fake partnership in the Company in order to bring Moon Shadow to America, but Uncle Bright Star refuses to allow him to use the same method to bring Moon Shadow's mother over.

The members of the company give Moon Shadow several gifts, including clothing and shoes to wear. Windrider gives Moon Shadow a kite that he built himself. Then Windrider takes Moon Shadow up to the room they will share. Moon Shadow notices a great number of mechanical parts in his father's room.

In Chapter 3, Moon Shadow has noted that the Company calls his father Windrider, a name his father did not use before coming to America. When Moon Shadow asks about it, his father tells him of a dream he had when he first came to America. In the dream, Windrider met the king of the dragons who told him he was once one of the greatest healing dragons, Windrider. The king asked Windrider to heal him and then told him how he was beheaded and sent to live as a human in punishment for attempting to blow out the fires of the world. The king takes Windrider on a flight through the dragon world and tells him he will face and be expected to pass several tests as a human in order to win the right to be a dragon again. Therefore, Windrider has vowed to live his life like a dragon even though many of his friends discount the dream as a fantasy.

Chapter 2, The Company, and Chapter 3, The Dragon Man Analysis

Moon Shadow meets the men his father works and lives with. These men have built a successful laundry business that allows them the respect and the property they need in order to care for themselves and to possibly bring their family members to America. Windrider is a worker for this company, but only three men are owners in the Company and Windrider is not one of them. However, there is a great sense of camaraderie among the men and it appears that Moon Shadow will have a happy, healthy home.



Moon Shadow learns of his father's dream that he was once a dragon and must prove himself as a human in order to earn the right to become a dragon again. The Tang people hold dragons in great esteem and this dream goes toward the traditions and the beliefs of the Tang people. This dream also defines the way in which Windrider intends to live his life and his own dream of once again flying like he did in the dream. It is this latter dream that will inspire and motivate these characters in a large portion of the novel.



Chapter 4, Tests

Chapter 4, Tests Summary

For the next year, Moon Shadow helps his father pick up and deliver the laundry they clean. Windrider speaks English the best among the men of the Company and therefore he is asked to deal with the demons the most often. At the same time, all the men of the Company work with Moon Shadow on not only learning English, but also to learn to read and write his own language. There is a school for the Tang children, but the school is inferior so Moon Shadow spends most of his time learning independently at home. During this first year as well, Moon Shadow learns that his grandfather was not just arbitrarily killed by a group of demons, but that he was killed because he fought back when a group of demons threatened to cut off his queue, his pony tail. Although the queue began as a method of oppression, it has since become a symbol of honor to these men and most will fight to hold on to their queue such as Moon Shadow's grandfather did.

While picking up and delivering laundry, Moon Shadow and his father must interact with the demons. There is always great fear, especially among the young demons. Once, Windrider stopped and fixed a demon's horseless carriage. This man seemed shocked by Windrider's ability, but he offers him a job afterward. Also during this time, Windrider sees the first article about the Wright Brothers' flying machine in an old magazine. This excites and inspires Windrider. However, Uncle Bright Star dismisses Windrider's desire to fly by saying that no man would ever fly. Uncle Bright Star is saddened at this time because his son, Black Dog, has become a dangerous drug addict. In fact, Black Dog disappears shortly after Windrider first sees the article on the flying machine. The men of the Company go in search of Black Dog. Windrider finds him being dragged out of an opium den by a gang member who wants to kill him for stealing from a prostitute. Windrider fakes the whistle of a cop and scares the men away so that he might take Black Dog home safely.

Chapter 4, Tests Analysis

Moon Shadow settles into his life in Chinatown, happily learning English and business alongside his father. At the same time, Moon Shadow is learning about prejudice when he sees the way the white demons treat Asians outside of their safe community. Moon Shadow has also learned, however, that many stories about the demons have been exaggerated and most demons are not nearly as bad as he first assumed.

Trouble comes within the family in this chapter, however. First Windrider expresses an interest in building a flying machine like the one the Wright Brothers built. This is shot down by Uncle Bright Star who thinks the whole idea is ridiculous. Then the reader learns that Black Dog, Uncle Bright Star's son, has an opium addiction and he has gone to extremes to feed this habit, including stealing from a prostitute. This cannot lead to

good things for Black Dog. In this chapter, Windrider saves Black Dog from sure death, an event that the reader will find ironic as the plot continues to develop.



Chapter 5, Windrider's Claws, and Chapter 6, The Demoness

Chapter 5, Windrider's Claws, and Chapter 6, The Demoness Summary

In Chapter 5, The Company agrees to pay Black Dog's debt, and Black Dog promises to clean up. However, Black Dog's promise is broken within ten days. Sometime later, Moon Shadow is given the task of collecting past due monies owed by the demons for laundry services. While walking home with this money one day, Black Dog attacks Moon Shadow and beats him for the money. When Windrider learns the truth, his friends at the Company try to keep him locked in the house. However, Windrider manages to get out and go looking for Black Dog. Moon Shadow follows.

Windrider goes to the building where the gang Black Dog belongs to lives. When Windrider explains the situation to their leader, they bring Black Dog out to fight Windrider. However, two of Black Dog's friends wait in the alley to ambush Windrider. Moon Shadow sees them and tries to stop them, forcing his father to kill these men. The leader of the gang tells Windrider that Black Dog is no longer a member of their gang and he can be killed without retribution. However, the friends of the two dead men will more than likely look for retribution, therefore Windrider should get out of Chinatown. The following morning, Windrider announces his decision to move and live in the city with the demons.

In Chapter 6, Windrider and Moon Shadow are given a ride to their new home on Polk Street by Hand Clap. Windrider has gotten them a room behind a once magnificent home in what was once the stable. After they move their meager belongings into the house, Windrider tells Moon Shadow they must go to the house and thank their new landlady. The landlady is a white demon called Miss Whitlaw. Miss Whitlaw is very nice and she gives Moon Shadow milk and cookies, two things he has never seen before. They are joined by Miss Whitlaw's niece, Robin. Miss Whitlaw gives them a tour of her house, including a visit to see her stained-glass window. The window depicts a great dragon reigning terror on people. Moon Shadow immediately points out to his father that this is incorrect. Windrider explains that demons do not know the truth about dragons. Moon Shadow decides that it should be his job to teach the kindly Miss Whitlaw.

Chapter 5, Windrider's Claws, and Chapter 6, The Demoness Analysis

Like any addict, Black Dog makes promises to get sober and to be a good man, but he fails to keep his promises. Soon enough, Black Dog leaves the Company to pursue his drug habit and this causes him to find himself desperate for money. Uncle Bright Star is



deeply disappointed in his son and hurt by what he sees as his failing in bringing a weak creature like Black Dog to America in the first place. No one could have foreseen, however, Black Dog's next despicable act. Black Dog attacks Moon Shadow for the money he carries. This brings out the father in Windrider, causing him to avenge his son's injuries with Black Dog's death, marking the irony of Windrider saving Black Dog's life in the previous chapter. Now Black Dog has forced Windrider out of the protection of the Tang community and into the world of the demons, foreshadowing a difficult time ahead.

Moon Shadow meets his first demoness and finds her to be nice. Moon Shadow is shocked by the differences in the cultures of his people and that of the demons, but he feels that Miss Whitlaw is so kind that he should be the one to educate her, especially about dragons. This suggests a good relationship between the demoness and Moon Shadow, perhaps to bring some light into this difficult life.



Chapter 7, Educations

Chapter 7, Educations Summary

Moon Shadow goes back to visit Miss Whitlaw a few days later, intent on teaching her about dragons. Moon Shadow's mother used to say one should treat everyone with care because you never know which person might have been an emperor or empress in a previous life. Moon Shadow has come to think Miss Whitlaw might have been an empress in a former life. Moon Shadow explains that dragons are usually nice creatures and Miss Whitlaw listens closely to all he says. However, about the same time Moon Shadow comes face to face with some neighbor children who taunt him and threaten him physical harm. Moon Shadow begins avoiding the areas where he might see these children, causing Robin to question his maturity. Robin begins cooking with Moon Shadow in the backyard and they slowly become friends, sharing some of their reading material and flying kites together. One afternoon they include both Windrider and Miss Whitlaw in their attempts to fly small models of the Wright flying machine.

One day Moon Shadow decides to write a letter to the Wright Brothers to see if they can help his father build his own flying machine. Moon Shadow asks Miss Whitlaw to help. In a few weeks, he receives a response. Moon Shadow is excited because the letter includes charts for the flying machine. However, Windrider is angry because he feels like Moon Shadow is asking for charity. He eventually calms down and uses the charts sent, encouraging Moon Shadow to write another letter to the Wright Brothers to thank them, beginning a long term writing relationship.

Chapter 7, Educations Analysis

Moon Shadow gets to know Miss Whitlaw and Robin better in this chapter, leading to a strong relationship between all four of them. The reader sees this relationship as a bridge between two cultures and hope that the Tang men will discover that not all Americans are pure evil. Unfortunately, there are some children in the area who express hatred toward Moon Shadow just because he is different, causing a shadow to move over the hope the reader has recently discovered.

Windrider's desire to build a flying machine has built. Windrider is creating small prototypes, trying to figure out the science that helped the Wright Brothers' fly. Moon Shadow loves his father and tries to help him by contacting the Wrights, something that an American child might have done without thought. However, the Tang culture causes this to appear like begging and it causes Windrider trouble because he has not adjusted to the more relaxed American culture. However, Moon Shadow learns from Miss Whitlaw why his father reacted this way and comes to understand even as his father relents and uses the material.



Chapter 8, Earth, Wind, and Water, and Chapter 9, The Dragon Wakes

Chapter 8, Earth, Wind, and Water, and Chapter 9, The Dragon Wakes Summary

In Chapter 8, Windrider, Moon Shadow, Robin, and Miss Whitlaw all go out on a picnic together where they fly kites. It is an enjoyable day by the water that brings the foursome closer together. Several months pass and Moon Shadow continues to be frightened of the unkind local children. Then one day Robin happens to tell Moon Shadow that the leader of those kids does not like to bleed from his nose. Moon Shadow decides to confront the boy, hoping he can get a punch in to his nose before the boy hurts him. It works and the bully decides that Moon Shadow is not such a bad person after all. Then one night a month or so later, the foursome is out watching the stars and Windrider becomes depressed by the distance between himself and his wife. Miss Whitlaw carefully distracts him.

In Chapter 9, the Chinese New Year comes and they celebrate some of their traditions with Miss Whitlaw and Robin. A short time later the Feast of Pure Brightness arrives. Uncle Bright Star and some of the Company men come to take Moon Shadow and his father to the celebrations. This marks a moment of forgiveness between Uncle Bright Star and Windrider after their bitter parting nearly a year before. Less than two weeks later, Moon Shadow wakes early and begins his chores. As he is getting water for breakfast, an earthquake begins to shake the earth. The tenement buildings on either side of Miss Whitlaw's property fall to ground. Moon Shadow and his father rush into Miss Whitlaw's house and find her and Robin unharmed. Together, the four of them go into the street and begin forcing neighbors to help them dig survivors out of the rubble.

As the foursome works, people gather their prized possessions and begin leaving the city. One man breaks into Miss Whitlaw's house and tries to steal all her money, but Windrider manages to stop him. That evening they learn that martial law has been declared in the city and that there is a fire burning on the other side of town that is heading their way. A military patrol comes by and warns them to leave soon. The leader even tells them where there is a wagon they can use. Windrider gets the wagon and helps Miss Whitlaw load her belongings onto it, including the stained-glass window. When Windrider and Moon Shadow come back to get the rest of Miss Whitlaw's things, they find Lefty waiting for them. Lefty asks them to come to the Company building and talk Uncle Bright Star into leaving it. Lefty shares some food with them, helps Miss Whitlaw load the rest of her things and watch her drive off on her own.



Chapter 8, Earth, Wind, and Water, and Chapter 9, The Dragon Wakes Analysis

Life appears to be getting easier for Windrider and his son, Moon Shadow. They have made good friends with a demoness and her niece. They are working hard, saving money, and working on a flying machine. Windrider even makes amends with his uncle after their falling out over Windrider's decision to enter the demon world on his own. It seems life can only get better. However, readers familiar with San Francisco history who have been keeping track of the dates know that disaster looms for this young family. The disastrous San Francisco earthquake that struck the city in 1906 arrives one early morning while Moon Shadow is getting water for breakfast. The reader gets to see through the eyes of the characters and the imagination of the writer how it must have been that fateful day in San Francisco. At the same time, the characters are able to prove their strength of character and their determination as they first help uncover survivors and then turn to the survival of the woman who took them in and became their good friend. Now the reader can only wonder what will happen to father and son now that they will most likely be homeless by the end of the day.



Chapter 10, Aroused

Chapter 10, Aroused Summary

Windrider, Moon Shadow, and Lefty go to the Company building where Uncle Bright Star does not want to leave out of fear of losing the land he and so many others have fought so hard to own. When all the Company men threaten to remain behind at the building with Uncle Bright Star, he relents and leaves. The entire city takes refuge at the Golden Gate Park. The army hands out bread and tents for those who need them. The Tang people have gathered in one area of the park, separate from the white demons. Windrider and Moon Shadow invite Miss Whitlaw to dinner. Uncle Bright Star, who is weary of white demons, finds Miss Whitlaw delightful. A few days later, Uncle Bright Star even goes to visit Miss Whitlaw in order to get out of the rain.

Not long after the fires have been put out and the people begin to return to the remnants of their homes, the Tang people are rounded up by the military. The Tang people are moved from military base to military base as though no one knows what to do with them. The Tang leaders become afraid that they will not be allowed to resettle on their lands, so they approach the Americans and insist that they be allowed to return to their lands or they will leave the area. Eventually, their request is granted.

The Company returns to Chinatown and begins to rebuild. Miss Whitlaw, who lost everything in the fire, has taken a job as a housekeeper in Oakland. Moon Shadow and Windrider go to the ferry to see them off. A short time later, Windrider announces to Uncle Bright Star that he intends to devote his time to building his flying machine in a place where he has room to fly it. Once again Uncle Bright Star is hurt and saddened by Windrider's decision.

Chapter 10, Aroused Analysis

The people of San Francisco have suffered a terrible tragedy in the chapter prior to this one and in this one the people come together for a brief time and heal together. However, when the healing is done, the Tang people once more become a sort of pariah that no one wants around. This causes them to be taken from the refugee area, away from the white demons, and kept isolated. However, the Tang people are not ones who do not fight back and they manage to get their freedom to return home. This shows the reader how strong these people are and how far they are willing to go for themselves and those they care about.

It appears at first that the Company has come back together. However, Windrider quickly ends this sense of family by announcing once more he plans to live in the demon world where he can work on his flying machine. This reveals to the reader how important this machine truly is to Windrider and that it will occupy the remainder of his time as the plot comes to its conclusion.



Chapter 11, Exile, and Chapter 12, Dragonwings

Chapter 11, Exile, and Chapter 12, Dragonwings Summary

In Chapter 11, Windrider and Moon Shadow move to a barn on an old estate in the hills of Oakland. For the next three years, Windrider works odd jobs while building his flying machine and Moon Shadow works as a delivery boy for a local store. The expense of building the flying machine is sometimes overwhelming, causing Windrider to dip into his savings to pay the basic expenses and send money home to his wife. Eventually, however, he is able to build a full-size flying machine. Just as they are ready to hire a team of horses to take the machine up on top of the hill, Black Dog shows up. Black Dog chases Moon Shadow into the woods and threatens to kill him if Windrider does not hand over all their money. Windrider does, leaving them without a cent, including the rent money that is due the next day. Moon Shadow calls Miss Whitlaw to tell her not to come visit them that weekend.

In Chapter 12, the entire Company shows up the day before Windrider and Moon Shadow are to be evicted from their barn. They have paid the rent and brought a wagon to take the flying machine up the hill. Windrider is deeply touched by their concern. They drag the flying machine, named Dragonwings, up the hill. Miss Whitlaw and Robin join them just before Windrider climbs onto the machine and begins preparations for the first flight. Everyone is shocked and happy when Windrider gets his machine off the ground. Windrider flies all around the valley. As Windrider begins his decent toward the hilltop, one wing touches the hill and breaks apart. Windrider crashes. However, Windrider survives his crash with only a broken leg and some broken ribs.

After the flight, Windrider decides he does not want to build another flying machine because his family is more important to him. Therefore, when Uncle Bright Star announces that he has decided to give Windrider a full thousand dollar share in the company so that he can bring his wife to America, Windrider is very excited. It takes almost a year, but Windrider saves up the money and his family is reunited once again.

Chapter 11, Exile, and Chapter 12, Dragonwings Analysis

Windrider has become obsessed with the idea of building a flying machine, placing everything on hold to make his dream come true. However, this dream nearly costs his son his life, leaves them destitute, and nearly ends Windrider's life. In the end, Windrider realizes what is important to him and that is his family. This seems to be doubly proven to Windrider when all his friends come to his rescue, thanks to Miss

Whitlaw. Windrider gives up his dream of flying and devotes his life to reuniting his family, with the help of his family at the Company. It seems all has come to a happy ending in this historical novel, giving readers a realistic look at the life of a determined Tang immigrant.



Characters

Moon Shadow

Moon Shadow is an eight-year-old boy by Tang tradition when the novel opens. Moon Shadow lives in China, an area referred to in the book as the Middle Kingdom. Moon Shadow has never known his father because his father immigrated to America while his mother was pregnant with him in order to make money needed to pay off debts. This has caused the family to be without the strongest worker in the family and the emotional support of a kind and caring husband and father.

Moon Shadow is pleased when his father sends for him. Moon Shadow adjusts well to America, finding it to be a country very different from the scary tales told back in the Middle Kingdom. Moon Shadow makes friends with a young white girl and her aunt, a friendship that will prove to be a turning point in this child's life. Moon Shadow is strong, intelligent, and so considerate of his father that he lives in near exile for three years so that his father might live out his own dream. In the end however, Moon Shadow has a part in teaching his father that family is much more important than dreams.

Windrider

Windrider is Moon Shadow's father. Windrider is a good man who once walked the wrong path. Early in his time in America Windrider belong to one of the gangs that blossomed in the Tang community during this time period. However, Windrider had a dream that convinced him he is a dragon being punished by living in a human's body. Windrider decides to devote his life to living like a dragon.

Windrider becomes distracted from his quest to be a dragon when his cousin, Black Dog, beats his son for the money he carried. Windrider vows to kill Black Dog, but kills several gang members instead. This forces Windrider to live in the white demon world, a world most Tang immigrants fear. Windrider, however, makes good friends with his white landlady as well as the famous inventors, the Wright Brothers.

In the end, Windrider has only two dreams, to fly and to see his wife again. Windrider chooses to give up one for the other, devoting himself to building a flying machine. Everyone who loves Windrider supports his choice, but some caution that he is making a mistake. Windrider does build his machine and he does fly, but he also comes to realize that his family means more.

Hand Clap

Hand Clap is a distant relative of Windrider who is a part of the Company that Uncle Bright Star runs in San Francisco. Hand Clap came back to the Middle Kingdom for a time, but found it so different than his memories that he decides to go back to America.

Hand Clap is asked to bring Moon Shadow with him, so it is Hand Clap who accompanies Moon Shadow across the ocean to America.

Uncle Bright Star

Uncle Bright Star is an older man, somewhere in his eighties, who has been in America since the time when Tang men were used to build the railroads. Uncle Bright Star is the senior partner in the Company and he makes most of the decisions in regards to the partnerships and the safety of his people. Uncle Bright Star brought his own son, Black Dog, to America many years before only to watch him turn into a drug addict. Uncle Bright Star is deeply saddened by his son's life and behavior and he worries that he made a mistake bringing Black Dog over.

Uncle Bright Star becomes angry with Windrider each time he wants to leave the safety of the Company and go out into the demon world. The first time this happens, Uncle Bright Star and Windrider do not speak for nearly a year and the second time it last three years. However, Uncle Bright Star always comes around and helps Windrider out in every way he can.

Miss Whitlaw

Miss Whitlaw is Windrider and Moon Shadow's landlady. Miss Whitlaw is the daughter of a man of some means, living in the same house her father built many, many years ago when Polk Street was still a wealthy neighborhood. Miss Whitlaw is no longer wealthy so she must take in boarders to help make ends meet.

Miss Whitlaw is a strong, caring woman who adopts Moon Shadow and Windrider into her family as though they were always meant to be there. Windrider finds himself grateful for Miss Whitlaw time and time again. In the end, it is Miss Whitlaw who orchestrates the events that save Windrider and Moon Shadow from homelessness.

Robin

Robin is Miss Whitlaw's niece. Robin's parents died and Miss Whitlaw has become her legal guardian. Robin is a precocious child, but she quickly wins over Moon Shadow and they become good friends. Robin shows Moon Shadow what it is like to be a child in America, teaching him skills he will need to survive in her world. More important, however, this friendship provides both children affection and support both need.

Black Dog

Black Dog is Uncle Bright Star's son. Black Dog has seen terrible injustices in America against Tang people and he has become bitter as a result. Black Dog has also become an opium addict. As a result, Black Dog will steal, lie, and cheat to get his next fix, even



if it means cheating family. Black Dog steals from Moon Shadow and is the catalyst that forces Windrider to leave the Company the first time. Black Dog is also the reason Windrider cannot pay his rent at the end of the book, leaving him destitute and forced to abandon his dream after three years of hard work. In the end, Black Dog is found murdered in Oakland before he was even able to spend Windrider's money.

Lefty

Lefty is a member of the Company. Lefty once had a terrible gambling problem. Once the problem got so bad that Lefty gambled away a ticket home to the Middle Kingdom. For this reason, Lefty chopped off his right hand to keep him from gambling and to remind him why.

White Deer

White Deer is a member of the Company. White Deer is the cook and he makes the most amazing meals, most of which center around many different meat dishes. White Deer is kind of like the mother of the Company, caring for everyone, and mediating disputes.

Mother

When Moon Shadow comes to America, he leaves behind his mother. Moon Shadow's mother wants to be with her family, but there is not enough money to bring her to America or for Windrider and Moon Shadow to return to the Middle Kingdom. For this reason, the family is forced to remain apart. However, Windrider once promised his wife he would bring her to America to be with him, therefore he does all he can to do so. Unfortunately, Uncle Bright Star makes this difficult by refusing Windrider the paperwork he needs to bring his wife to America until the very end of the novel when Uncle Bright Star finally sees how important family really is.



Objects/Places

Stained-Glass Window

Miss Whitlaw has a stained-glass window in her home that her father had specially made that depicts a fiery dragon. Moon Shadow believes this shows a wrong idea of dragons and seeks to change Miss Whitlaw's beliefs about dragons.

Books

Moon Shadow and his father read many books about aeronautics while Robin introduces Moon Shadow to fiction, including dime store detective novels.

Letters

During their separation, Windrider sent many letters home to his wife and received many from her. However, there was often a delay of several months between these letters.

Queue

A queue is a Tang man's pony tail. The pony tail was originally ordered by Manchu for Tang men to wear in order to oppress them, but it later became a symbol of male pride.

Dragonwings

Dragonwings is the name of the flying machine Windrider and Moon Shadow build.

Opium

Opium is a drug derived from the poppy flower that is both a strong pain reliever and a terribly addictive drug. In the time period the novel is set, there were many opium dens where people would go to smoke the drug for a quick high. A character in this novel is addicted to opium.

The Company of the Peach Orchard Vow

The Company of the Peach Orchard Vow is the laundry business that Windrider works for in America. This Company is a group of men who are not necessarily related by blood, but who have forged a deep friendship, creating a unique family of their own.



People of Tang

People from China refer to themselves as the people of Tang, taking the name from a beloved dynasty of the same name.

Middle Kingdom

Middle Kingdom is what the Tang people call China.

Chinatown

Chinatown is the white demon's name for the Tang community where many Tang immigrants lived in San Francisco during this time period. A version of Chinatown still remains today.

Oakland

Oakland is a city across the bay from San Francisco. This is where Miss Whitlaw and Robin come to live after the earthquake and where Windrider and Moon Shadow build their flying machine.

San Francisco

The novel is set primarily in San Francisco in the years before and after the great earthquake of 1906.



Themes

Family Separation and Devotion

This novel begins with Moon Shadow living in the Middle Kingdom with his mother without knowledge of the man who is his biological father. Moon Shadow knows stories his mother has told about his father, but he has never met him because the financial nature of their country has forced many of the men to move to America to make the money they need to support their families in the Middle Kingdom. It is a difficult situation made harder for Moon Shadow's mother when her husband arranges for the child to join him in America. Moon Shadow's mother is left the only person strong enough to work the farm, leaving her to struggle without the support of a man or a son around.

In America, Windrider desperately wants to bring his wife from the Middle Kingdom to America, but his uncle is afraid that bringing family to America will leave them changed and bitter like it has done to his own son. Uncle Bright Star blocks all attempts Windrider makes to bring his wife to America, leaving him with only one dream open to him. Windrider gives up the idea of ever seeing his wife again and devotes himself to building a flying machine. However, when the flying machine crashes, Windrider realizes that family is much more important. At the same time, Uncle Bright Star has come to the realization that not all Tang people become bitter by America and he allows Windrider what he needs to bring his wife to him.

Immigrants in a Strange Country

America is a country that is famous for opening its borders to all types of people. This includes the original British citizens who came here to escape religious persecution, the blacks forced to come as slaves, and the Asians who came in a desperate need for money. The Tang people came to America to build railroads and work mines hoping they will make enough money to support their families back home. These cheaper workers took the jobs no one else wanted and some jobs that others might have demanded too much money to do. Many Tang went home injured or missing limbs, giving America a bad reputation.

When this novel opens, the Tang people have settled down in different areas, making lives for themselves in their own tightly knit communities. The hostility that they feel from the Americans, people they call demons, comes not only from a past filled with the tension of the jobs they did for so little money, but also from the fact that the Tang are different, speak differently, and have different customs. Often the white demons feel fear from their strange customs. This novel attempts to show the reader what it was like for these people, coming to a strange land only to face prejudice and misunderstanding.



Natural Disasters versus Human Nature

This novel takes place before, during, and after the great earthquake of 1906. The main characters are caught in the middle of the quake, though they are one of the few lucky ones whose home remained standing. The main characters, Moon Shadow and his father, Windrider, spend the hours after the earthquake trying to save the survivors. While these immigrants who have every right to disregard the needs of the white people who often teased and bullied them are saving their neighbors, others are running away, taking what they can and worrying about their own lives.

Later, after the earthquake, the Tang people are forced to move from place to place at the whim of the American government until they finally have enough. None of the other ethnic groups in San Francisco are facing such circumstances. It seems that even in the face of disaster, the prejudices of some people run so deep that they cannot help but punish a people who are just as devastated as everyone else. In the end, the Tang get what they want, but it takes a fight to show the American government that they are a people worth the respect that all human beings deserve.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view. The narrator of this novel is Moon Shadow, a young Tang boy who immigrates to America and learns what it means not only to be a member of the Tang community, but to embrace the diversity of all those around him. Moon Shadow tells his story from the time he is eight until he is fifteen, but the reader gets the impression from certain statements Moon Shadow makes within the narration that he is telling the story from some point later in life, perhaps in adulthood.

The point of view of this novel is not unusual in modern bestselling fiction. The use of first person point of view is often limiting to the author, restricting the writer to events that only one character can see, touch, and feel. However, the author of this novel uses this point of view carefully, showing the story completely through Moon Shadow's eyes, including moments of unreliability as the small boy works out things that the reader might already understand and by having Moon Shadow remain like a shadow to the adults around him so that he can accurately report all events that are pertinent to the plot.

Setting

The novel begins in China, or the Middle Kingdom, where Moon Shadow is just a small boy when his father sends for him from America. The setting then shifts to San Francisco where Moon Shadow lives with his father in the area known in modern times as Chinatown. The family moves again, living on Polk Street, a street that was once prosperous but in 1905 has become a refuge to large tenements filled with poor families. Finally, the setting changes to Oakland where Moon Shadow and his father live for three years while attempting to build a flying machine like the one the Wright Brothers flew a few years before.

The setting in this novel shifts from chapter to chapter. The novel begins in the Middle Kingdom, a country where the economy is so bad that fathers often are forced to abandon their families in order to make a living in a foreign country. This setting is important because it establishes Moon Shadow as a recent immigrant, allowing the reader to feel his impressions of America are genuine. The setting then moves to San Francisco in the early decade of the twentieth century. The narrator describes the Chinatown of his time period, comparing it to the Chinatown of modern times in a way that stresses the Tang influence on the area. At the same time, the reader is introduced to San Francisco as it was in this same time period. All these settings are highly historical, but they are also familiar to the reader, giving the reader a sense of history that is both foreign and familiar.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is filled with words and descriptions that the reader might find confusing or deeply fascinating. The Tang people speak a language that is not familiar to the reader, therefore the author does not introduce too many of these words or phrases to the reader. However, the Tang people have traditions and idioms in their language that are passed on to the reader, presenting a view of America from a Tang immigrants point of view that is both offensive and understanding, a view that will make the reader think simply through their use of words and phrases.

The language of this novel is designed to both be easy for the reader to understand, but to express the differences in the thoughts and language of the Tang people to the Americans. The writer has established this in many ways, by pointing out differences between both cultures and by using words such as demons to describe the American people. The writer goes to extremes to help the reader see the world through Moon Shadow's eyes and by doing this he has created an authentic character that the reader will either hate from the beginning or will learn to love.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters, each with its own title and a date that allows the reader to know how much time will pass in the chapter. The novel is told in both dialogue and exposition with a great deal of the narration in a type of internal dialogue that includes musings from the narrator from the point of view of someone who has already lived through the events being described. The Tang people speak in a language different from English, therefore the author writes their words in normal script, but italicizes the English words and conversations presented in the novel, giving the impression that the entire novel is meant to be in the Tang language except for these foreign phrases.

The novel has one main plot and several subplots. The main plot is the story of a little boy who comes to America and learns to get by day by day by both keeping close to his own culture, but also embracing the culture of his new home. One subplot follows the relationship between Moon Shadow's father and the men of the company. Another subplot follows the actions of Black Dog, a Tang man with an opium addiction. Also included is a friendship that develops between Moon Shadow, his father, and their white landlady and her niece. All plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"Ever since I can remember, I had wanted to know about the Land of the Golden Mountain, but my mother had never wanted to talk about it" (Chapter 1, The Land of the Demons, pg. 1.)

"I can see the town of the Tang people even now in the late afternoon sun—not as it is now, full of souvenir shops and neon signs, but as it was then" (Chapter 2, The Company, pg. 18.)

"Of course, not all dragons are evil, as I later discovered the demons think they are, for they can be good to you as well as bad" (Chapter 3, The Dragon Man, pg. 34.)

"During that year, I learned that the Company was more than a group of men wanting money. We were brothers: strangers in a strange land who had banded together for mutual help and protection" Chapter 4, Tests, pg. 49.)

"Then Father shook hands like a demon with all the others, rather than bowing and saying goodbye." Chapter 5, Windrider's Claws, pg. 94

"I even toyed with the idea that perhaps we had been close to each other in some former life—a mother and child, even. If that was so, I at least owed it to her to set her straight on dragons." Chapter 6, The Demoness, pg. 112

"Perhaps the truth of the dragon lies somewhere in between the American and the Chinese versions. He is neither all-bad nor all-good, neither all-destructive nor all-kind. He is a creature particularly in tune with Nature, and so, like Nature, he can be very kind of very, very terrible. If you love him, you will accept what he is. Otherwise he will destroy you."

Chapter 7, Educations, pg. 133

"I looked at Miss Whitlaw. She winked at me. She had distracted Father." Chapter 8, Earth, Wind, and Water, pg. 147

"Our stable and Miss Whitlaw's house and the tenements to either side heaved and bobbed up and down, riding the ground like ships on a heavy sea." Chapter 9, The Dragon Wakes, pg. 154

"Once they had been rich and wealthy, and now all they owned were the clothes on their backs and their lives, and they were in danger of losing those too." Chapter 10, Aroused, pg. 175



"And beyond the bay was the City—the only city as far as I was concerned. In the next three years, I watched as much of it was restored." Chapter 11, Exile, pg. 209

"I knew there were plenty of problems still ahead of me....I knew that I could meet them with the same courage with which Father had pursued his dream of flight and then given it up, or the same courage with which Mother had faced the long separation from us." Chapter 12, Dragonwings, pg. 245



Topics for Discussion

Who is Moon Shadow? How old is he at the beginning of the novel? How does Moon Shadow explain the discrepancy between his Tang age and his American age? Why is Moon Shadow called to America? Why is he there? What is Moon Shadow's life like in America? How is it different from his life in the Middle Kingdom? How does Moon Shadow deal with these differences?

Who is Windrider? Why does Windrider believe he is a dragon? What do Tang people believe about dragons? How does this differ from the American beliefs in dragons? What does Windrider mean when he says he wants to live his life like a dragon? Why does Windrider want to fly? What does that have to do with his dragon dream? Will Windrider succeed?

Who is Uncle Bright Star? Why does Uncle Bright Star not want Windrider to bring his wife to America? What does Uncle Bright Star do to keep this from happening? What happened in Uncle Bright Star's past to make him feel this way about bringing families over? What is Uncle Bright Star's relationship like with his son? For what reason?

Who is Black Dog? What is his addiction? Why is Black Dog so dark and angry? What does he tell Moon Shadow about life in America? Why does Black Dog constantly steal from other people? Why does Windrider save Black Dog's life early in the novel? Why does Windrider turn around and try to kill Black Dog?

Who is Miss Whitlaw? How does she come into Moon Shadow's life? What does Moon Shadow believe Miss Whitlaw was in another life? Why does he believe this? How do these very different people become friends? Where does this friendship take both sets of individuals? Who is Robin? How is she related to Miss Whitlaw? To Moon Shadow? Describe her friendship with Moon Shadow and Windrider.

Discuss the earthquake. When did it happen? Why? Is it historically accurate that an earthquake took place on that particular day? Discuss the fire. What caused the fire? Why could it not be stopped? Discuss the irony of Miss Whitlaw losing her house not to the earthquake but to the fire.

Discuss racial tensions. Why does Moon Shadow call white Americans demons? Why does Moon Shadow believe his grandfather was killed immediately after getting off the boat from Middle Kingdom? Why do some children throw rocks and otherwise hurt the Tang people? What causes racial tension and how does Moon Shadow learn to overcome it?