

The Year of the Dog Study Guide

The Year of the Dog by Grace Lin

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Plot Summary

Note: This study guide specifically refers to the May 2007 Little, Brown and Company First Paperback Edition of *Year of the Dog* by Grace Lin.

The *Year of the Dog* is a children's novel by Grace Lin which follows the journey of young Pacy as she attempts to figure out who she is over the course of the Chinese Year of the Dog. When the novel begins, Pacy and her family –Taiwanese/Chinese-Americans living in New Hartford, New York –celebrate the Chinese New Year, which will serve to be the Year of the Dog. Such a year is meant to be full of good luck, family, wealth, and friendships. It is also considered to be a good year for finding oneself because dogs are faithful, honest, and sincere. Pacy is thrilled to celebrate the Chinese New Year with her older sister Lissy, her younger sister Ki-Ki, and Mom and Dad. Pacy wonders about finding herself and discovering her special talents.

At school the very next day, Pacy meets a new student at school named Melody Ling, who is also Taiwanese/Chinese-American. Melody tells Pacy that their mothers met recently at the food store, and Melody is happy now to meet Pacy. The girls quickly become friends for several reasons. First, they share a cultural background. They also share many common interests such as playing the violin, loving to draw, and having a crush on the same boy. As the year gets underway, Pacy is thrilled not only with her new friendship, but a new family member in Baby Albert, who is born to her aunt and uncle. So far, the Year of the Dog has been full of new family and new friendships. Pacy could not be happier. except she still wants to know who she is in the wide world..

At school, Pacy learns all students will be entering a science fair and a national book contest. Pacy and Melody team up for the science fair, but they do not win. Pacy is unhappy about this, which causes her to focus harder on writing and illustrating a book. Pacy is struggling with it, however, because she does not know what to write about. It is suggested she write about herself, but this does not help Pacy because she thinks of herself as boring. While digging in the garden with Mom, Pacy realizes that the ugly vegetables grown in the garden end up tasting very good, and this becomes the subject of her book. The summer comes on, during which time Pacy goes with her family to a Taiwanese/Chinese-American cultural convention. There, Pacy is made fun of by other Taiwanese/Chinese-American kids for being so Americanized. Pacy is deeply hurt by this racism, but Mom comforts Pacy by explaining it took a while for her to call America home. However, now America is her home. Pacy can be American without losing the family culture, Mom explains, which comforts Pacy.

In the new school year, Pacy learns there is to be a costume contest for Halloween, but she loses this contest as well. It makes her very sad and causes her to question whether the Year of the Dog was so good after all. However, a short time later, Pacy learns she has come in fourth place out of twenty-thousand entries for the book award. She is thrilled to win \$400 in the contest. She and her family celebrate. Pacy comes to realize that the Year of the Dog was fantastic after all, not just for friends, family, and

wealth, but because Pacy now knows who she is and what she wants to do with her life. She wants to be a writer.



Chapters 1 – 6

Summary

Chapter 1: A Sweet New Year – Pacy and her family, originally from Taiwan but now living in New Hartford, New York, are called all night by relatives still living in Taiwan to wish them a Happy Chinese New Year. Pacy's older sister Lissy and their Mom are in the kitchen cooking delicious food while Pacy teaches her younger sister, Ki-ki, how to draw a dog to celebrate The Year of the Dog. Dad is talking on the phone. Pacy, Lissy, and Mom explain the Year of the Dog is a good year for family and friendships (and finding best friends) because dogs are faithful. It is also a good year to find oneself because dogs are honest and sincere. Mom then has Pacy and Ki-ki prepare the New Year candy tray, including sticky Chinese melon taffy candy and M and M's since there is not enough Chinese taffy to fill the tray. Mom says this is good because the tray reflects the family. They are now Chinese-Americans.

Chapter 2: How to Get Rich – Mom calls everyone together for Chinese New Year dinner, which includes fried fish, meat dumplings, shrimp, pork, vegetables, and more. Each food is symbolic of wealth. Grandpa, who is rich, then calls. Mom explains Grandpa got rich by doing his first job for free after graduating from medical school, becoming a doctor, and opening a clinic. Mom explains one night, Grandpa helped a street vendor who appeared to have been beaten and robbed, but could not pay –and word of Grandpa's kindness got around, meaning he was quickly flooded with customers who could pay.

Chapter 3: Welcoming the New Year – Tradition holds that the later kids stay up on Chinese New Year, the longer the lives of their parents will be –but Mom refuses to follow tradition because Pacy and her sisters have school the next day. In bed, Pacy and Lissy worry about this, and decide to stay awake as long as they can. Pacy asks Lissy what she wants to be when she grows up. Lissy says she wants to be a doctor like Dad and Grandpa. Pacy does not know what she wants to be. Lissy tells Pacy she must do something she has the talent for. Pacy does not know how to tell if she is talented. Lissy says it could be done by winning an award, but Pacy has never won an award. Lissy tells Pacy there is plenty of time. Not long after, both girls go to sleep.

Chapter 4: Talent – When Mom wakes Pacy up for school in the morning, Pacy is very tired. She asks her mom about talent, and if school will help her find what she is talented at. Mom explains it will. Mom then recalls how she fell asleep in school once. Mom explains that when she was younger, every Monday there was a school assembly, but on one Monday Mom fell asleep standing up because the speaker was so boring and had such a low voice that it sounded like a lullaby.

Chapter 5: A Surprise – Pacy talks about her ethnic background. She explains that, depending on a person's views, she could be considered Chinese (for people who believe Taiwan should be a part of China) and Taiwanese (by those who believe Taiwan



should be its own country). Mom tells Pacy to simply tell people she is an American. Pacy uses the name “Grace” as an American name at school, which is what all her friends call her. Pacy teaches her friend Becky Williams about Chinese New Year. Becky wants to know if there is a Year of the Unicorn, but Pacy says there is not. She says there might be a Day of the Unicorn during Leap Year, though. At lunch, the lunch lady confuses Pacy with a new girl, who apart from Pacy and Lissy, is the only other Chinese kid in school. Pacy cannot wait to meet the new girl.

Chapter 6: A New Year, a New Friend – Pacy and Becky sit down to eat with the girl, who introduces herself as Melody Ling. Melody explains her mother knows Pacy’s mother. They have so much in common –from playing violin to having older and younger siblings –that Becky says they are like twins. Becky brings up the Day of the Unicorn, which Melody has never heard of but plays along with. Pacy knows she and Melody will be good friends.

Analysis

The Year of the Dog is a good year for wealth, friendship, family, and finding oneself. This is made very clear to Pacy from the very start of the novel. The importance and possibilities of The Year of the Dog will become a standing theme that will last throughout the entire novel, until The Year of the Dog actually ends. Pacy is excited about the Year of the Dog for all of these things, but especially because she wants to find out what her talent is, and wants to find herself. To ensure the New Year goes well, readers will note that everything done or used is symbolic in some important way. For example, the plentiful amount of food symbolizes wealth while the mixture of traditional Chinese and contemporary American candy symbolizes that Pacy is both American and Chinese. It should also be noted herein that, though Macy’s family is from Taiwan, she can be considered either Chinese or Taiwanese depending on whether one believes China includes Taiwan, or Taiwan is its own country. It is important to note that Pacy will refer to herself in different ways through the course of the book –but this is less a political point than it is a foundation from which Pacy will search for her identity as a person.

Pacy’s primary concern through the rest of the novel will be to find who she is as a person. It may take time, the author argues, but you will discover who you are. Pacy has no idea who she is, what she is talented at, or when she might find these things out, but she is very much looking forward to what the New Year brings. Pacy herself seeks to narrate her own story of finding herself because it is her story, and so Grace Lin allows Pacy to tell her own story in the first-person. The very day after Chinese New Year, Pacy has her first real answer as to whether or not the Year will provide what it is supposed to. She meets and befriends Melody. Already, the New Year is off to a good start because of this –which in turn provides more evidence for the thematic argument that The Year of the Dog is a good year for friendship. Friendship, the author argues here, is very important. Pacy’s friendship with Melody will come to prove very important in the coming chapters, as it has already proven important in Melody considering the Day of the Unicorn for the sake of making Becky happy.



Discussion Question 1

What is The Year of the Dog? What does The Year of the Dog mean for those who celebrate it? Why is Pacy so excited about The Year of the Dog?

Discussion Question 2

What about The Year of the Dog especially excites Pacy? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Pacy so excited to meet Melody at school the next day? What does this have to say about the possibilities of The Year of the Dog?

Vocabulary

Chinese New Year, Year of the Dog, traditionally, Hong Vao, retort, chanted



Chapters 7 – 12

Summary

Chapter 7: Almost Twins – At home, Mom explains that she met Melody’s mom while both were out grocery shopping at the same time. Mom explains Melody and her family are also from Taiwan. Pacy visits the Lings at their house. Pacy and Melody decide to draw the animals depicted in a scene on her bedroom wall. Melody’s brothers, Benji and Felix, join in. After a while, they get hungry so they go in search of something sweet. The closest thing they can find are orange Vitamin C tablets, so they begin to eat those. Melody’s mom comes in, telling them vitamins are not meant for eating like that. Pacy later explains to everyone how she ended up with the name Grace. She explains that, at birth, Mom and Dad gave her and Lissy American names (Lissy is called Beatrice) so it would be easier for Americans to say.

Chapter 8: Dinner at Melody’s – Melody’s mom prepares Chinese food for dinner, but prepares it in a healthy way. For example, there is brown rice instead of white rice and tofu instead of meat. Pacy does not like the food, and cannot understand how the Ling family likes it so much. Pacy wonders if it is not the food but having eaten too many vitamins that has made her hunger go away.

Chapter 9: Red Eggs – Pacy and Melody become best friends. One day, Melody helps Pacy and her family color eggs red for the birth of Pacy’s new baby cousin, Albert, in New Jersey. Red eggs symbolize good luck, and the more eggs Albert gets, the better his life will be. Lissy explains that when Pacy was a baby, she had to go to the hospital because she got sick from ammonia, the ingredient in window cleaner. Lissy tries to spray Pacy with window cleaner, but Melody stops her. Mom comes in and explains that Pacy had pneumonia, not ammonia, as a baby.

Chapter 10: Albert’s Party – Pacy and her family dress up and travel to New Jersey for Albert’s Red Egg Party. It is such a long drive that Pacy, Lissy, and Ki-ki get to miss school. Grandma and Grandpa are flying in from Taiwan for the party, which makes everyone happy. At the party, happy family members are everywhere. Baby Albert is asleep in his crib, with envelopes stuffed with money surrounding him. The family jokes about how important food is to them, saying that even the name “Albert” means “cooking duck.”

Chapter 11: Tiger Chasing Pig – That night, all the kids sleep in the dining room. When Pacy and the others wake up, their family members are all having breakfast around them. Pacy’s neck is a little stiff from sleeping on the floor, so Grandma says she knows how to fix it. Grandma takes out her Chinese paint box and paints the symbols for a tiger and a pig on the back of Pacy’s neck. Grandma tells Pacy the tiger will chase the pig, and that running will help the neck. Pacy runs to show Mom, and says her neck is feeling better.



Chapter 12: Luck – The family gathering ends, and Pacy, Mom, Dad, Lissy, and Ki-ki say goodbye to everyone. Back home, Melody is happy to see Pacy. She tells Pacy that Heather says that Teddy Jackson –a boy both Pacy and Melody have a crush on –likes someone. Even though Melody thinks Sam Mercer is cuter than Teddy, the news excites her. Heather does not know who Teddy likes beyond the fact that the girl plays the violin. Pacy knows that five girls, including her, play the violin. Pacy and Melody become spies, finding out everything they can. On Friday night, Pacy and Melody compare notes about Teddy. Melody happily comes to believe Teddy likes Pacy, and so calls Pacy “Mrs. Jackson” all weekend. When Pacy suggests working on a science project with Teddy, Melody does not like the idea. Pacy reminds herself Melody also likes Teddy. At school the next day, Pacy and Melody learn that Teddy is dating Sophie Williams.

Analysis

The Year of the Dog is a good year for wealth, friendship, family, and finding oneself. This remains clear as Pacy’s friendship with Melody unfolds very quickly. The two become fast friends based on common interests, but also respect one another where they have differences –from both liking the same boy to the different ways of cooking their moms have. At the same time, the birth of baby Albert underscores the Year of the Dog as a time not only for new friendships, but new family. Pacy and the rest of the family are thrilled with the birth of Albert, and they celebrate in the traditional way by dying red eggs and bringing along envelopes stuffed with money to place in the crib with Albert. The eggs and the money symbolize wealth, and it is hoped that Albert will come to live a wealthy life through these symbolic offerings.

As all of this unfolds, Pacy continues to wonder who she is and what her talent might be. It may take time, Grace Lin continues to argue, but everyone can find who they are and what they are meant to do sooner or later. Pacy’s learning about the science fair gives her something that she may be good at. If she can win the science fair, it will mean she is good at science. However, the science fair –and who will be whose partner –provides the first test of the friendship between Pacy and Melody, because both like the same boy, and both want the same boy to be their science fair partner. Friendship is very important, Pacy knows (and the author argues), and she remembers this after she mentions being partners with Teddy. Fortunately, neither girl needs to worry about this in the end because the boy in question ends up liking another girl.

Discussion Question 1

How does The Year of the Dog continue to unfold relating to family? Does this mean The Year of the Dog is turning bad or continuing to be good for Pacy? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Pacy so excited about the science fair? What does she hope this will do for her?



Discussion Question 3

How do Pacy and Melody handle the situation when they both want to be partners with Ted for the science fair project?

Vocabulary

nutritious, American names, grumbled, red eggs, menacingly, vigorously



Chapters 13 – 18

Summary

Chapter 13: The Book Contest – Pacy's two favorite classes at school are art and library. Pacy loves books, especially the Betsy books by Ruth Chew. One day, the librarian, Ms. McCurdy, comes into Mr. Valente's art class. In a combined project for both classes, the kids will get to write and illustrate their own books. Everyone is excited. It will be done for the National Awards Contest for Students. Becky wants to write a book about unicorns. Melody considers writing about a singer. Pacy does not know what she will write about. At home, Pacy's family gives her some ideas, but Pacy does not like any of them. Mom encourages her to practice coming up with ideas by making a book every day. Mom explains when she was younger, the family was very poor and so she learned to play piano by practicing with a local teacher who lived in an American-styled house, and practicing on a paper piano to ensure she practiced enough. Mom explains she ended up being so good, she was invited to play in the school orchestra.

Chapter 14: Trying to Discover – Pacy and Melody work together on their science project, hoping to win the blue ribbon for First Place. They go to Mom for help since she used to be a plant scientist (a botanist) before getting married. She explains their experiment must answer a question they do not know the answer to. Pacy and Melody do an experiment to see what can be used to make pea plants grow best, and discover soda seems to be the best even though no actual peas are growing. Pacy hopes some will grow by the time of the science fair, however.

Chapter 15: The Science Fair – The science fair is on Saturday. Pacy does not find it fair to have to go to school on a Saturday. Despite the drawings of plants Pacy puts on the poster for their project, the actual project itself does not look the same as the drawings. Still, Pacy and Melody think they will win because they were both born in the Year of the Tiger, and so the Year of the Dog is really lucky for them both. However, the judge, a NASA scientist named Mr. McKnealy, says the results of their project do not hold up to their claims, and that their process for testing was very flawed. Melody is very disappointed, and Pacy cannot cheer her up. Charlotte and Becky end up winning the blue ribbon.

Chapter 16: Dreaming of Dorothy – The end of the school year approaches. Ms. Malone announces that Pacy and Melody's grade will put on the musical play *The Wizard of Oz*. Pacy loves the movie and the book, and so wants to try out. Most girls want to try out for the part of Dorothy, while Melody wants to try out for orchestra. Pacy practices the song *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* over and over again, along with all the other girls. Becky hurts Pacy deeply, however, when Becky says Pacy cannot be Dorothy because Dorothy is not Chinese. Pacy is so shaken by this she does not even audition. Emma Richards gets the part of Dorothy, while Pacy is assigned to be a Munchkin. Pacy later asks Melody why Chinese people are not important, and why they are not in more



movies and plays –and why the school never does any Chinese plays. Melody says there are plenty of Chinese actors and important Chinese people. Pacy says she wants a real Chinese book with Chinese-Americans just like them. Melody tells her not to be so picky, and to write her own such book. Pacy says she will.

Chapter 17: A Real Chinese Person Book – Ms. McCurdy thinks Pacy’s idea is wonderful, and urges Pacy to write about her own experiences as a Chinese-American. Pacy does not know what part of her life to write about. Ms. McCurdy reassures Pacy that an idea will come to her if she just relaxes and enjoys.

Chapter 18: The School Play – Rehearsals for the Wizard of Oz get underway. Pacy does not know why she did not try out for orchestra, because she feels out of place as a Chinese Munchkin. Pacy then gets worried when she is assigned the role of a Munchkin mean to gift Dorothy a gift in the play. She thinks everyone will laugh at her for being a Chinese Munchkin. She tells Mom about this, to which Mom tells a story of her own first day of school. Mom recalls being embarrassed by her own grandmother because she waited all day for Mom at school after walking her there. Mom recalls how a short time later, everyone looked outside to see a row of grandmothers, all sitting together, talking, laughing, drinking tea, and waiting for their grandchildren.

Analysis

The Year of the Dog is a good year for wealth, friendship, family, and finding oneself, the author of the novel continues to argue in this section of the book. Pacy has focused most of her attention on finding herself in the present. However, as she learns –and as the author continues to explain –it may take time, but you will discover who you are. When Pacy learns about the book contest, she believes this will allow her another opportunity to find out who she is. However, Pacy is immediately beset with the problem of not knowing what to write about. Pacy’s struggle to find something to write about presents the author’s next important theme in that success is never easy.

Pacy learns that success is never easy when she loses the science fair. Pacy is hurt, but she must also do her best to cheer up Melody despite the situation. Readers should note that Pacy was overconfident. As such, she did not do the experiment as well as she had figured she had by the drawings she made for the poster. Despite this setback, Pacy is all the more determined to do well with the book contest –which in turn makes her frustration at not being able to find anything to write about (writer’s block) that much harder. It seems as if Pacy is running out of chances to be good at something, and so she is that much more determined to write and illustrate a good book.

Part of this struggle continues to come from Pacy’s attempting to find herself. By finding a talent, she believes she can find purpose and find herself. This is also more important given the Wizard of Oz play. Pacy is told by Becky that Dorothy is not Chinese. While the statement in and of itself is not racist, it has racist consequences. Pacy feels that, as someone who is Chinese, she is unable to have any part in the play at all. Rather than merely being descriptive, Becky’s offhand comment has had serious negative racial



consequences for Pacy. Pacy now feels that she is somehow worth less as being Chinese.

Discussion Question 1

What happens to Pacy and Melody at the science fair? Why does Pacy take this so hard? What happens as a result?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Patsy become very focused on writing and illustrating a good book? What does she hope this will help her do?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Becky intended to be mean or racist by telling Pacy that Dorothy was not Chinese? Explain your reasoning.

Vocabulary

solo, practice, botanist, scrawny, substantiate, frowning, scientific method, flawed, glum, audition, writer's block, deliberately



Chapters 19 – 25

Summary

Chapter 19: The Wizard of Oz – It is the night of the school play. Everyone rushes around to prepare just before the show goes on. While Pacy does not know if she looks like a Munchkin, she knows her costume and the wrapped box meant to be the gift to Dorothy are perfect. Pacy is nervous, but she goes on with the show. When Pacy delivers the gift, the audience applauds her. This thrills Pacy. The rest of the play rushes by, and the people of the audience come to their feet to cheer and clap for the cast.

Chapter 20: Digging up a Book Idea – With the play over, Pacy and her friends at school all focus on their book ideas. Pacy still cannot think of anything unique about herself. Pacy decides to help her Mom out in the garden, with Mom suggesting it may help her writer's block. Mom suggests different ideas to Pacy as they dig, but Pacy does not like any of them. It is while digging that Pacy notes that many of the vegetables from the garden look ugly, but taste delicious. Pacy suddenly realizes she can write about the ugly vegetables and herself. She tells Mom she was right about digging to cure writer's block.

Chapter 21: Making a Book – Pacy writes her story, but ends up rewriting it three times with help from Mom, Dad, and Ms. McCurdy, who all like the book. Pacy does her best to make the vegetables look as ugly as possible in the illustrations, and herself as pretty as possible in the illustrations. At school, the students hand in their books to Ms. McCurdy, who shows them to the class and tells everyone they will not know who has won the contest until the following school year. The students, are however, graded by Ms. McCurdy. Pacy is thrilled to receive an A-plus. Pacy and Melody, who now both have a crush on Sam Mercer, say his book is the best. His book is about a knight who kills people.

Chapter 22: No More School! – The rest of the school year goes by fast. Melody looks forward to the summer where she will attend TAC (Taiwanese-American Convention) and then will visit Aunt Alice in New Jersey. Melody urges Pacy to attend. Pacy's Mom says it would be a good idea for the entire family, so everybody goes. Pacy and Melody enjoy the first week of the convention, until Melody leaves to visit her Aunt Alice. Melody explains her Aunt Alice is strange, and that the last time Melody visited Aunt Alice, Melody sat on a ghost. She explains that she sat in one of two empty chairs, but was told to get up because they were for the ghosts of Alice's parents, who were themselves served dinner. Melody explains her parents revealed it was a way of honoring the dead.

Chapter 23: A Twinkie – Mom tells Pacy it will be okay that Melody leaves early, because Pacy will be able to make new friends. Instead, Pacy meets a girl who cannot believe Pacy does not speak Chinese or Taiwanese. Another mean girl says it is because Pacy has become Americanized. The girl says when someone is Americanized, they don't have any culture. Another girl calls Pacy a "Twinkie," meaning



she is yellow (Taiwanese) on the outside, but white (American) on the inside. Pacy almost cries, but she stops herself. In their hotel room, Pacy finally does cry and tells Mom about what happened. Mom is sad, saying she hoped that Pacy would have friends like her from her own culture.

Mom then tells the story of her first friend in America. Mom explains that when she first came to America with Dad, she was very lonely. She was afraid to talk to anyone because her English was so bad back then. However, she made a friend named Mei who introduced her to American friends and helped her learn English. Because of this, Mom explains, America came to feel like home for her. Now she knows it is her home. In the present, Pacy says that having friends who are Chinese does not mean they will understand. Pacy says it is unfair that to Americans, she is Chinese, but to Chinese, she is American. She wants to know which she is supposed to be. Mom reminds her she is Chinese-American. She does not have to be more of one or the other.

Chapter 24: New York City – After the conference, Pacy and her family go to visit New York City. Pacy is always confused by New York, because she does not know whether people are referring to the state or the city. Pacy, Mom, and the family go to Chinatown to do some grocery shopping since there are things in Chinatown they cannot find anywhere else. They buy plenty of Chinese New Year candy, canned lychees, and Chinese Popsicles. After loading up the car, Mom and Dad bring the girls to a Chinese bakery for thousand-layer cake. Mom then tells the story of Uncle Shin and a special cake. Mom explains that, when she and her brother and sisters were kids, they were poor and rarely got anything special. But one day, a rich aunt brought over a delicious cake which Mom's brother, Pacy's Uncle Shin, spit all over so he could get to eat it all. Mom explains he had a horrible stomachache from the cake, and no one felt sorry for him.

Chapter 25: Halloween at School – Summer ends and a new school year begins. Pacy's new teacher is Mrs. Piterassi. Melody and Sam are also in the same class, but Becky is in Mrs. Wynne's class across the hall. Lissy now goes to junior high, while Ki-Ki has started kindergarten. Mrs. Piterassi is kind and fun. As October comes on, she announces there will be a costume contest, and all the teachers would judge to see who had the best costume. Pacy immediately begins to wonder what her costume will be. Pacy decides she will be a cat, using Lissy's old black dance leotard, making cat ears to attach to a headband, and painting whiskers on her face. On Halloween, the classes are arranged for a Halloween party. Unfortunately, Pacy has navy blue stockings to go with her black leotard, but puts them on anyways. Melody dresses up as a basket of laundry, and wins first place. Pacy does not win anything, and does not believe it is her lucky year at all.

Analysis

The Year of the Dog is a good year for wealth, friendship, family, and finding oneself. Pacy begins to find herself through writing about her own life in her book, learning more from her mother while digging in the garden, and coming to understand herself more



through her Mom's stories and wisdom. (Note that this serves as the plot for Pacy's book.) This is especially important when it comes to Pacy finding herself directly not only in terms of her talents, but who she is as a person. Readers should note that the worst racism Pacy experiences in the novel comes not from people who do not look like her, but from people who look like her. It is other Taiwanese/Chinese-American kids who torment Pacy at the convention for being too Americanized. Indeed, they use the horrible racist term "Twinkie" to describe Pacy for her love of both Taiwan and America. Ironically, rather than becoming symbolic of the union of American and Taiwanese/Chinese culture, the convention becomes symbolic of disharmony and racism.

This hurts Pacy deeply because she has always thought of herself as an American with Taiwanese/Chinese culture. Mom reminds Pacy that it does not matter what the other kids say. There is nothing wrong with being an American with a Taiwanese/Chinese background, and that Pacy can indeed be both American and Taiwanese/Chinese. This is incredibly important for readers to understand: although Pacy and her family celebrate their Taiwanese/Chinese heritage, they consider themselves Americans. Indeed, Mom says she considers America to be her home. Reassured by Mom, Pacy now feels better about who she is culturally –but still does not know who she is with respect to herself and her talents. The loss of the costume contest at Halloween causes Pacy to believe the Year of the Dog is not so good after all.

Discussion Question 1

What does Pacy finally decide to write her book about? Why does she choose this particular story?

Discussion Question 2

What kind of racism does Pacy experience at the Taiwanese/Chinese-American convention? Why does this hurt Pacy so much? How does Mom help Pacy?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Pacy come to believe The Year of the Dog may not be so good after all? Do you believe Pacy is right? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

unreliable, ovation, honoring, Americanized, cackled, jabbered



Chapters 26 – 29

Summary

Chapter 26: A Prize – Pacy believes her year will end as unluckily as it has been all along. November arrives. There is an announcement that Pacy is the fourth-place winner of the book competition for her book *The Ugly Vegetables*. Her book was selected fourth out of 20,000 entries. The entire class claps and cheers for Pacy. At home, Pacy's family is thrilled for her. Pacy realizes she has come into wealth and success. Also, she has discovered her talent as a writer and illustrator. Pacy declares she has found herself, and will be a writer when she grows up.

Chapter 27: American Holidays the Chinese Way – Pacy and Lissy know Thanksgiving and Christmas are important holidays in America, so they want to celebrate them as closely as possible as Americans do, though they have a slight Chinese twist. For example, when Mom makes sweet potatoes, she does not put them in a bowl, but turns them into little squares decorated with herbs. In addition to American food, Mom also makes Chinese food. Instead of cutting down a tree for Christmas, they decorate Mom's rubber tree, but they do give gifts to one another just like Americans do. Pacy asks for a pioneer china doll for Christmas. Instead, Mom gets her a Chinese china doll, which Pacy says she can get along with.

Chapter 28: Here Comes Chinese New Year! – Pacy knows that the one holiday her parents truly know how to celebrate right is Chinese New Year. Pacy and the family are made to clean the house thoroughly, and then hang a good luck symbol upside down as a sign of good luck already being present. Mom takes the girls shopping for clothes and gives them haircuts. It makes Mom remember the time when she was younger in school in Taiwan, hair could not be longer than the ears. Mom explains that, at school, a teacher called her out on her hair, then cut it off –but only cut one side.

Chapter 29: Good-bye, Year of the Dog – Pacy's family and Melody's family celebrate Chinese New Year together. Melody's family brings over gifts of oranges, symbolizing good luck and wealth. The Year of the Dog ends, and the Year of the Pig begins. Everyone toasts the Year of the Dog, for it has been a good year. It has been a very good year, Pacy thinks, because she made new friends, won a contest, became wealthy, discovered her talent, and realized what she wanted to do when she grew up.

Analysis

The Year of the Dog is a good year for wealth, friendship, family, and finding oneself. At last, Pacy has the success for which she has waited. She comes in fourth place out of 20,000 entries in the book contest, and wins \$400. Success is never easy, the author contends. It may take a long time, but success is always possible. For Pacy, it took almost an entire year to find something she could be successful at. Because of this,



Pacy has also discovered her talent. This becomes a source of great joy to herself and her family. It also gives credibility to the possibilities of Chinese New Year and The Year of the Dog, in particular.

What readers should note about The Year of the Dog is that it means more to Pacy than money is concerned. It is a year she has not only made a new friend and welcomed a new family member, but it is a year that has great personal meaning for her as well. It is the year that she has discovered her talent, who she is, and what she wants to do with her life. Comfortable with being an American with a Taiwanese/Chinese background and confident both in herself and in her family, Pacy now knows exactly who she is and what she will be –a writer.

Discussion Question 1

Is Pacy excited for The Year of the Dog to end? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Does Pacy believe The Year of the Dog has been a success for her? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What does Pacy come to realize about herself and what she wants to do? Why?

Vocabulary

rummage, imperfections, ridiculous, delicate, hustled



Characters

Pacy

Pacy “Grace” Lin is the narrator of the novel. Pacy is the daughter of Mom and Dad, and the middle sister of Lissy and Ki-Ki. Pacy is very kind and very intelligent. She loves her family deeply.

Pacy does not know what she is good at, or who she wants to be. She hopes the Year of the Dog will help her to find herself. So, she spends much of the novel seeking herself. It is through the course of the year that Pacy becomes best friends with Melody and writes a book for the book contest.

Pacy questions her identity when other Taiwanese/Chinese kids make fun of her for being Americanized. Pacy finds comfort in her Mom who tells her Pacy can indeed be both American and Taiwanese/Chinese.

Pacy is later thrilled when she comes in fourth place for the book contest. Pacy wins \$400 for her book. More importantly, she realizes that she wants to be a writer.

Lissy

Lissy “Beatrice” Lin is the older sister of Pacy and Ki-Ki and the daughter of Mom and Dad. Lissy loves her family. However, since she is on the verge of being a teenager, Lissy tries to act very mature. It is Lissy who first suggests to Pacy that the Year of the Dog might help her to find herself through her talent and winning a contest. Lissy hopes to become a doctor like her father and grandfather.

Ki-Ki

Ki-Ki is the younger sister of Pacy and Lissy, and she is the daughter of Mom and Dad. Ki-Ki is a sweet kindergarten student who is excited to learn about Taiwanese/Chinese customs through her family. As Ki-Ki learns about her culture, readers unfamiliar with Taiwanese/Chinese customs learn about them, too.

Mom

Mom is the wife of Dad and the mother of Pacy, Lissy, and Ki-Ki. Mom is very gentle, very loving, and very wise. Mom moved to America with Dad many years ago after getting married. Mom proves to be a great source of comfort to Pacy as Pacy struggles with being both American and Taiwanese/Chinese. Mom tells Pacy that America is indeed home, but that does not mean Pacy must forget being Taiwanese/Chinese.



Dad

Dad is the husband of Mom and the father of Pacy, Lissy, and Ki-Ki. Dad is also a doctor who works very hard to support his family. He is loving and kind with a gentle sense of humor that his family loves.

Grandma

Grandma is the wife of Grandpa and the grandmother of Pacy, Lissy, and Ki-Ki. Grandma is traditional and wise. She uses ancient Taiwanese techniques of pain relief to heal the pain in Pacy's neck after spending the night at cousin Albert's house.

Grandpa

Grandpa is the husband of Grandma and the grandfather of Pacy, Lissy, and Ki-Ki. Grandpa has become very wealthy as a doctor. As a young doctor, Grandpa had treated a patient who could not pay. Grandpa is proud of his family and provides a good role model, especially for Lissy.

Melody

Melody Ling is the new student at school who becomes Pacy's best friend. Melody is also Taiwanese/Chinese-American. She and Pacy get along well because they have so much in common and are both good people. Melody is among those who encourages and supports Pacy as Pacy attempts to figure out who she is.

Ms. McCurdy

Ms. McCurdy is the librarian and library teacher at school. She is kind, intelligent, and supportive. It is Ms. McCurdy who first suggests that Pacy write about herself in her book.

Mr. Valente

Mr. Valente is the art teacher at school. He is intelligent and talented. He is also supportive of his students. Mr. Valente heads up the illustrating half of the book awards contest project. He encourages Pacy and the other students in their artwork.

Symbols and Symbolism

New Year's candy tray

A New Year's candy tray symbolizes sweetness in the coming New Year. Each year, the candy tray is set out with delicious, sweet candy to signal sweet times to come. In the present year, Pacy and Ki-ki fill half the candy dish with Chinese candy, and the other half with American candy to represent the fact that they are now Americans.

Chinese New Year food

Chinese New Year food symbolizes wealth. Pacy and her family enjoy a Chinese New Year feast that includes many delicious foods ranging from fried fish and meat dumplings to shrimp, pork, vegetables, and more. The large amount of food symbolizes the large amount of wealth hoped for in the New Year.

Hong Bao

Hong Bao symbolize wealth and happy prospects for the New Year. Hong Bao are special red envelopes that contain money in them. Pacy receives five dollars in her envelope, while Lissy receives ten dollars because she is older.

Family stories

Family stories symbolize not only the importance of family, but the wisdom of elders. Through the novel, Pacy's mother, father, and other relatives relate stories about their lives and their pasts. These stories are listened to intently by Pacy as a sign of respect and love for family. These stories teach the young listeners about life.

Red Eggs

Red eggs symbolize good luck. When a baby is born, red-dyed eggs are brought to the baby's family's house for a party attended by family and loved ones. The birth of baby Albert in New Jersey prompts a Red Egg Party that Pacy and her family attend.

The Science Fair

The Science Fair symbolizes an attempt by Pacy to figure out what she is good at and who she is. Pacy and Melody enter the Science Fair with the idea that soda proves to help plants grow the best. Their poor experimentation keeps them from winning. This



makes them both sad, but it especially worries Pacy because it is one less thing she is good at.

The Wizard of Oz

The Wizard of Oz is symbolic of Pacy's self-doubts. The Wizard of Oz is a musical put on by Pacy's school. Pacy wants to try out for the part of Dorothy. Becky asks Pacy why she would want the part because Dorothy was not Chinese. This causes Pacy to doubt herself because she does not believe she is American enough for anything.

The National Awards Contest for Students

The National Awards Contest for Students is a book contest that symbolizes an attempt by Pacy to figure out what she is good at. Pacy enters the contest with the book *The Ugly Vegetables*. She must wait until the following school year to learn the results of the contest. When Pacy wins the contest, she realizes that she is good at writing and illustrating books. She decides that she will be a writer.

The Ugly Vegetables

The Ugly Vegetables symbolizes what Pacy is good at. *The Ugly Vegetables* is the title of the book that Pacy writes and illustrates for the book contest. The book is about how ugly vegetables may taste delicious. It recounts some of Pacy's experiences being a Taiwanese/Chinese American. The book wins fourth place out of 20,000 entries. It wins Pacy \$400. Pacy realizes she is good at writing books because of *The Ugly Vegetables*. Pacy decides she wants to become a writer when she grows up.

Digging

Digging symbolizes sowing and discovery. Pacy, unsure of what to write her book about, digs in the garden with her mom. As they dig, they sow and plant vegetables. Digging also allows for things to be discovered. It is while digging with Mom in the garden that Pacy discovers she should write her book about vegetables and her life. The discovery of the idea for the book is also the sowing and planting of the idea that Pacy will one day become a writer.



Settings

The Lin house

The Lin house is where Pacy, Lissy, Ki-Ki, Mom, and Dad live. Located in New Hartford, New York, the Lin house is a place of love and family. It is where the novel begins and ends with the celebrating of Chinese New Year. It is at the Lin house, in the backyard, that Mom keeps a garden where she and Pacy are digging when Pacy comes up with the idea for her book.

School

The school is located near the Lin house in New Hartford, New York. Pacy enjoys going to school, and is not really bothered by the fact that the only other Chinese student is her sister. This changes when Melody comes to school. Pacy is thrilled to have a friend who is from the same cultural background. It is at school that Pacy enters the science fair, the costume contest, and the book contest. It is at school that Pacy loses the science fair and the costume contest, but wins the book contest.

TAC

TAC, or the Taiwanese-American Convention, is a cultural convention for Taiwanese/Chinese Americans that Melody and her family attend. Mom decides Pacy's family should attend so new friends can be made. Unfortunately for Pacy, some of the Taiwanese/Chinese girls bully her and make fun of her for being Americanized. As a result, TAC becomes a sad event for Pacy, though it helps her to realize through Mom that Pacy can indeed be an American with a Taiwanese-Chinese background.

New York City

New York City is visited by Pacy and her family after the convention. It is in Chinatown in New York City that the family goes shopping for food, candy, and other items they cannot get elsewhere. Pacy enjoys her time in New York City thoroughly, as it is the only trip the family makes once each year.

New Jersey

New Jersey is where baby Albert and his family live. Pacy and her family travel to New Jersey to celebrate Albert's birth. Relatives still living in Taiwan fly all the way to America to participate in the celebration.

It is in New Jersey that Pacy receives a dose of Taiwanese/Chinese-American culture from those she loves, such as Grandma. Grandma paints traditional Taiwanese symbols on Pacy's neck that relieves her neck pain.



Themes and Motifs

The Year of the Dog is a good year for wealth, friendship, family, and finding oneself.

The Year of the Dog is a good year for wealth, friendship, family, and finding oneself. Traditionally, the Chinese Year of the Dog promised such things in the years to come. Thus, it is only natural that the author adopted the same outlook in her book. Pacy is excited for the Year of the Dog because of the things that it promises.

The Year of the Dog begins with good things happening. Pacy welcomes in the Year of the Dog with her family, good food, and \$5—all things foretold by the Year of the Dog. The very next day, Pacy meets Melody at school. Melody becomes Pacy's newest friend. In a short time the girls will be best friends. Their friendship fulfills the promise of the Year of the Dog for friendship.

As Pacy's friendship continues with Melody, a new family emerges for Pacy as well. Baby Albert is born, and the entire family travels to New Jersey to welcome Albert and celebrate his birth with Albert's parents. This fulfills the promise of family made by the Year of the Dog, and Pacy is thrilled about this.

Through the course of the year, Pacy seeks to find herself, as her family assures her that the Year of the Dog is the perfect time to do so. Pacy experiences racism at a convention because she is Americanized. However, through Mom's reassurance, Pacy becomes comfortable with being an American with a Taiwanese/Chinese background.

Pacy also attempts to find herself through science and fashion (in the Halloween costume contest), but she has no success with either. Pacy does have success with the book she writes for the national contest. By winning fourth place and \$400 in the contest, the promises of wealth and finding oneself in the Year of the Dog are fulfilled. Pacy decides to become a writer.

It may take awhile, but you will discover who you are in time.

It may take awhile, but you will discover who you are in time. Mom explains that The Year of the Dog is a good year to find oneself because dogs are honest and sincere. People must be honest and sincere in their attempts to find themselves. Even then, it may take a while.

Pacy first tries to find herself through the science fair. She partners with Melody to see what kind of drink plants like best. They come to the conclusion that plants like soda the best, but their experiments are not well-done and so they do not win the competition. This discourages Pacy, but she is not ready to give up.



Pacy attends the convention with her parents, where other Taiwanese/Chinese kids make fun of her for being so Americanized. But Mom reassures her that she can be both. This makes Pacy very comfortable with accepting herself as an American of Taiwanese/Chinese background. At school, Pacy enters a costume contest, thinking fashion and dressing up may be a talent for her, but she does not win the competition. This makes her very sad and makes her think that the Year of the Dog will end sadly.

However, Pacy wins fourth place and \$400 in the book contest. This provides Pacy with a win and wealth, and it allows her to find something she is good at. Pacy decides she will work as a writer for a living when she grows up, because that is who she is –a writer.

Friendship is very important.

Friendship is very important. Friendship is one of the major promises The Year of the Dog brings. Friendship allows people to find someone to support them, encourage them, spend time with them, and even help them see things differently. In the novel, Pacy's friendship with Melody allows for all these things. Her life is better and fuller as a result.

In accord with The Year of the Dog, Pacy meets Melody at school. They have many things in common –from being nice to others to their Taiwanese/Chinese background to their playing of the violin to their positive outlooks on life. Because of these similarities, the girls hit things off and quickly become friends (later best friends).

Being friends with Melody also helps Pacy to experience a different world than her own. For example, Pacy is exposed to a very healthy way of cooking at Melody's house. It is not something that Pacy is used to, but it is something she tries (even though it makes her sick to her stomach). Pacy also learns to think outside herself when she and Melody have a crush on the same boy.

As the year gets underway, Pacy loses the science fair and the costume contest. Melody is kind and gentle, reassuring Pacy not to worry. Pacy also reassures Melody after Melody is sad about losing the science fair competition, demonstrating how much the girls mean to one another in their friendship. Melody also comes to encourage Pacy in her writing of her book as Pacy comes to have writer's block. Melody is also there to celebrate with Pacy when Pacy wins the competition many months later.

Racism is possible anywhere.

Racism is possible anywhere. The novel deals with race and racism directly. The story demonstrates that even things not intended racially can have racist consequences.

When the novel begins, Pacy is one of only two Chinese girls at her school (the other is her sister, Lissy). Pacy is not very bothered by this at all because she is well-liked and has friends, though she is happy to see another Chinese girl when Melody shows up



one day. Pacy is a little confused by being an American with Taiwanese/Chinese background, for she does not know which of them she truly is.

When the school puts on the play *The Wizard of Oz*, Pacy wants to try out for the part of Dorothy. Becky, another student, asks Pacy why she wants to be Dorothy because Dorothy is not Chinese. Though Becky's comment is casual and not intended to be racist, it has racist consequences. Pacy thinks less of herself because she is Chinese, and she wonders if she is good enough to even be a Munchkin in the play. Later, the applause she gets for her part in the play confirms that being Chinese does not matter at all.

When Pacy attends the Taiwanese American Convention, she experiences direct racism for the first time from other Taiwanese kids. They bully her for being too American. They cruelly call her a "Twinkie," meaning she is yellow (Asian) on the outside but white (American) on the inside. It hurts Pacy so deeply she cries. She realizes through talking with Mom that America is home and that there is nothing wrong with being an American of Taiwanese background.

Success is never easy.

Success is never easy. Sometimes, it takes a little while to be successful at something or at anything. In the novel, Pacy struggles through the course of a year to figure out what she is good at and to succeed at it.

When the novel begins, so too does *The Year of the Dog*. Mom tells Pacy it will be a good year to find herself, but Pacy does not know how to do this. Lissy suggests talent and winning a contest with that talent could be a good way to find out. Still, Pacy does not know where her talent lies, but she moves ahead to try to find out.

She wonders if science might be her talent, but when she and Melody lose the science fair, she realizes that science is not her strength. Pacy goes on to wonder if fashion, by way of the Halloween costume contest, might be her strong point, but Pacy does not win the costume contest either. She begins to lose hope that she will succeed at anything.

However, Pacy forgets that she has previously entered the book contest. Pacy wins fourth place in the contest, beating out 20,000 other entries. Her success restores her confidence and convinces her that she is meant to be a writer. Pacy decides that she will be a writer.

Styles

Point of View

Grace Lin tells her novel *The Year of the Dog* from the first-person, limited-omniscient perspective point of view of Pacy Lin, the main character. The novel is narrated by Pacy because Pacy is the main character and she wishes to talk about her experiences as the year unfolds. The first-person narrative allows readers a very personal glimpse into Pacy's thoughts, feelings, ideas, and emotions, even when she tells no one else. This is especially important during situations like the convention. Additionally, the limited-omniscient perspective of Pacy, which means she does not know everything going on at once or what is coming in the future, adds a sense not only of realism (as readers cannot tell the future, and do not know everything going on at once), but a sense of drama as well, as readers constantly look forward to seeing what happens next.

Language and Meaning

Grace Lin tells her novel *The Year of the Dog* in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the novel is told from the point of view (in first-person) of Pacy. Pacy is an elementary school student, so it is only natural the language she uses be simple and straightforward, reflective of a young student's vocabulary. Second, the novel is geared toward an audience of young and intermediate readers, so the language used in the novel must be able to be easily understood by average young and intermediate readers. Third, the simple and straightforward language allows Grace Lin to clearly and effectively communicate the messages and themes she writes about in her novel, so that these lessons are easily understood by readers.

Structure

Grace Lin divides her novel *The Year of the Dog* into twenty-nine consecutive, linear, numbered chapters ranging from 1 to 29. This simple and straightforward structure allows readers to easily move through the book, moving from one chapter to the next as the story unfolds. The chapters allow the author to move the reader through the course of a year, sometimes skipping months in between chapters in order to advance the novel.

The novel is also structured to include small black-and-white, pen-and-ink illustrations made by Grace Lin. The illustrations are intended to be doodles made by Pacy herself. These illustrations provide a visual reference to the events of the book. They also give readers a visual understanding of some Taiwanese/Chinese traditions, objects, and symbols of which they may not be aware.



Quotes

They say the Year of the Dog is also for thinking. Since dogs are also honest and sincere, it's a good year to find yourself.

-- Mom (Chapter 1)

Importance: When Ki-ki asks about the meaning behind The Year of the Dog, Pacy, Lissy, and Mom explain what The Year of the Dog is all about. Mom goes even further to explain that the Year of the Dog is more than just about friends and family. It is also about finding oneself.

Will school teach me what I'm talented at?

-- Pacy (Chapter 4)

Importance: When Pacy thinks about what she wants to be when she grows up, Lissy tells her that she should do something she is talented at. Pacy does not know what she is talented at. Lissy asks if she has ever won a contest for something, but Pacy never has. She considers that she must win something to be good at a talent, and so will be on the lookout for any contest opportunities.

I knew we were going to be good friends.

-- Pacy (Chapter 6)

Importance: When Pacy goes to school after Chinese New Year, she meets a brand new girl at school named Melody. Melody and her family are also from Taiwan. When Melody goes along with the idea of Day of the Unicorn to make Becky Williams happy, Pacy realizes she and Melody are going to be good friends. It is a great start to Chinese New Year.

Our own books? Could we do that? Could I do that?

-- Pacy (Chapter 13)

Importance: When Pacy learns about the book contest at school, it excites her and worries her. She thinks she may be able to find a talent through writing, illustrating and winning the book contest –but wonders if she will be able to do it. She worries because she has never done it before, and does not know what she will write a book about.

Go write your own, then.

-- Melody (Chapter 16)

Importance: When Pacy complains about there not being more Chinese actors, Chinese movies, Chinese plays, or Chinese books, the answer for Melody is simple. Melody tells Pacy to write her own. Pacy is struck by this idea, and decides to do just that.



I was definitely having writer's block!
-- Pacy (Chapter 117)

Importance: Pacy knows she wants to write about a Chinese-American, but does not know what to write. Ms. McCurdy suggests writing about Pacy's own life, to write about what she knows. Pacy does not know what part of her life to write about, and confirms to Ms. McCurdy that she has writer's block.

Suddenly it hit me. Here was a good idea for my book. I could write about the ugly vegetables and me!
-- Pacy (Chapter 20)

Importance: While digging with Mom in the garden to cure writer's block, Pacy has her idea for her book at last. She thinks about how the vegetables that are grown in the garden look ugly but taste delicious.

I HATED, HATED, HATED those girls.
-- Pacy (Chapter 23)

Importance: When Pacy attends the Taiwanese American Convention, she is bullied by very mean girls. These girls torment Pacy because Pacy does not speak Chinese or Taiwanese, and has become Americanized. The girls mock Pacy and call her a Twinkie, which upsets Pacy deeply. This causes Pacy to question who she is.

It's not fair. To Americans, I'm too Chinese, and to Chinese people, I'm too American. So which one am I supposed to be?
-- Pacy (Chapter 24)

Importance: Here, Pacy speaks with Mom about the strange situation in which she finds herself. She explains the issue she has where Americans consider her to be too Chinese, while Chinese people consider her to be too American. Pacy feels lost and alone, not knowing which she should be.

I'm not lucky," I told Melody. "I'm not lucky at all."
-- Pacy (Chapter 25)

Importance: After a year of not winning, Pacy believes she is unlucky. She has lost the science competition and the Halloween costume competition. The year is coming to an end, and Pacy has won nothing. She believes the year will end as unlucky as it began.

I couldn't believe it! I felt like I had been tickled awake from a nap.
-- Pacy (Chapter 26)

Importance: Pacy learns that she has won fourth place in the national book competition. Her prize is \$400. Pacy is beyond thrilled. She has finally won something, and it appears as if the year is finally looking up, although the year itself is almost over.



I'm going to make books when I grow up.
-- Pacy (Chapter 26)

Importance: Winning the competition earns Pacy a prize and some money. It also makes her realize she does have talent. Her talents are writing and illustrating. After winning the contest, she knows that she wants to be a writer when she grows up. She is determined to write many books and to illustrate them.