



Meet Maggie P. Chang

Author of Geraldine Pu and Her Lunch Box, Too!

About the Book

Meet spunky, funny, and friendly Geraldine Pu as she takes on a bully and makes a new friend in this first book in a new Level 3 Ready-to-Read Graphics series!

Geraldine Pu's favorite part of school is lunch. She loves her lunch box, which she calls Biandang. She can't wait to see what her grandmother, Amah, has packed inside it each day. Then one day, Geraldine gets stinky tofu...and an unexpected surprise. What will she do?

Ready-to-Read Graphics books give readers the perfect introduction to the graphic novel format with easy-to-follow panels, speech bubbles with accessible vocabulary, and sequential storytelling that is spot-on for beginning readers. There's even a how-to guide for reading graphic novels at the beginning of each book.

Q&A with Maggie

Q: *Geraldine Pu and Her Lunch Box, Too!* tells the story of a Taiwanese American girl who is struggling to fit in during lunchtime even though she is proud of the traditional lunches her grandmother packs her. This story touches on cultural identity, school bullying, and social emotional learning skills. What was your inspiration for this story, and how did you come to include these different elements in it?

A: I'm so glad you noticed all those themes! Different elements that intersect is generally how my brain works. I used to be an art teacher and loved interdisciplinary teaching. I think that's how many young people experience the world, too. They don't move through life going from subject to subject in their minds; they experience it all together. Plus, life is multidimensional and complex for all humans, including kids! In order to be authentic to kids' layered experiences in life, I purposefully kept the storytelling simple to give room for the multiple elements. Also, I tried to leave space for all young readers to reflect on their own cultural identity and social and emotional development because, even though the main character is Asian American—the themes are universal.

As for the initial spark behind the story—my own childhood experiences with my grandmother's Taiwanese cooking and school lunches was the major inspiration. Let's just say I'm a second-generation Asian American who grew up in Kansas and would have given anything to read a book like this one!

Q: Speaking of grandmothers, Geraldine's grandmother Amah is a central character in the book. Can you share some thoughts behind the development of Amah's character?

A: Yes! She's so very central. For starters, Amah in the book is based largely off of my own Amah, whom I just adored. In fact, if you check out the dedication—it's dedicated to her. Along with my mom and grandfather, my Amah lived with us and played a large role in my upbringing. She was definitely the one who packed all my lunches! And she was big and tall with a stature that embodied safety and groundedness—things that the main character Geraldine finds at home that allow her to embrace her culture, and ultimately herself. Language barriers and cultural differences did create a tiny bit of distance for me and my Amah. I have glimmers of this in the book because even though Geraldine is third generation (and I'm second generation) and her Amah speaks English (whereas mine didn't), these barriers and differences still exist today for many Asian American kids like Geraldine and their grandparents. However, what's a love language that can transcend all? . . . *Food!* I have many fond memories of wrapping yummy things with my Amah, like dumplings and baos, where we said very little and so much all at once. Simply eating dinner together—my Amah's delicious ten dish dinners—would feel like the best hug. It's subtle, but I tried to imbue these ideas throughout the book.

Q: You are both the author and the illustrator of the new Geraldine Pu early reader graphic novels. Could you describe your creative process for us and share how you go about writing and illustrating this series for those young readers who are just beginning to learn to read graphic novels?

A: There are many, many steps! And it's like a continuous ping-pong between words and images, but I always begin with writing the manuscript. Then I decide pagination by marking what I *think* will take up a spread in terms of pictures. I'm mindful of suspenseful page turns to keep the young reader going, and I try to give a beat to breathe by including a spacious page every few spreads. It's all got to fit precisely 64 pages, so usually I have to cut *a lot* of text at this stage! Next, I do thumbnail sketches with a pencil and a huge eraser, and here I'll ask—are there areas where the pictures and words are redundant? If so, what other words would enhance the scene in a way that pictures can't? Or what else can I cut? (Hmm, there's cutting at every stage, actually!) With the pictures, I might do 3 or 4 thumbnails with different angles or perspectives before I come up with one I like. Next are the detailed sketches, which I do digitally—that way panels can be laid out with grids and rulers to get the exact right spacing. Because graphic novels can be a lot to take in visually, especially if you're new to them *and* reading in general, I try to include some consistent spacing to help with overwhelm, while including some variety to keep it dynamic. The last phase is the technical stuff—I draw the character sheets, line art, coloring, and shading, and a designer inserts all the final text! Whew!

What I haven't mentioned yet is getting constant feedback from my super helpful editors. I'll struggle with a layout or question if my choices are too complicated for kids learning to read, and their input and expertise with early readers is invaluable! I think it's important for students who are working on their own stories to hear about how authors and illustrators receive loads of feedback and how revision is key. For your students who feel like the creative and editing process is long—you're not alone! I just summarized like a bajillion steps! So, keep at it, and your work will go from good to great.

Q: As a former teacher yourself, how has your experience working with children and young adults impacted the creation of this story and your writing?

A: I know that kids don't like being talked down to. And want to be perceived as capable, independent people. I tried to do that for Geraldine and gave her opportunities to solve her own problems and right her own wrongs. Also, my experience with kids influenced how I depicted the character Nico—the kid who initially calls Geraldine's lunch gross and later instigates teasing. When I was a teacher, I truly loved each of my students and tried to see all of them. I could see that the kids who picked on other kids had a reason, even if their actions were hurtful and wrong. So I went a little deeper with Nico's portrayal than just the typical bully. The book introduces him as a kid who's afraid of anything new—he wears only striped shirts and eats the same exact lunch everyday. Because empathy is a major theme in the book, I hope that readers grasp on some level that Nico is acting out of fear, and even “bullies” have their issues to work through.

Q: What would you say to teachers and librarians who are looking for ways to introduce the Geraldine Pu series in their classrooms and libraries?

A: First of all, the book has some really useful front matter! Each of Simon & Schuster's Ready-To-Read Graphics books has a “How to Read This Book” spread, so that kids being introduced to graphic novels can feel equipped. The Geraldine books also have an illustrated glossary and pronunciation guide, which will be especially helpful for certain words that are actually Taiwanese or Mandarin Chinese words. And like mentioned above—there are many entry points for rich and meaningful discussions! Inclusion,

tolerance, and compassion. Emotional literacy. Cultural identity. Self-esteem . . . and more. Educator resources are also available, so check them out.

To learn more about the new Ready-to-Read Graphics books, visit ReadytoReadGraphics.com.

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