

Goldfish and Chrysanthemums

Andrea Cheng

Michelle Chang, Illustrator

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As Grandma Ni Ni slices carrot flowers and her granddaughter, Nancy, swirls and rinses the dinner rice, grandson Greg bursts into the busy kitchen with a blue envelope mailed from China. Grandma recognizes the return address as that of her brother. Two devastating photographs fall to the countertop, and she quickly reads her brother's words.

"'Brother says the city needs space for apartment building, so they tear down our father's old house in Suzhou,' Ni Ni said softly. She held the photos to the light from the window. 'Ba Ba had a fishpond in the middle,' she said, pointing to the courtyard."

Seeing Grandma Ni Ni heartbroken by the news of the destruction of her childhood home and the precious goldfish pond, Nancy seizes the opportunity to restore the joy that once shone in her grandmother's countenance. In the midst of her search for something to brighten Grandma Ni Ni's day, Nancy wins a pair of goldfish at the summer fair. When she returns with the goldfish bowl, Grandma Ni Ni reminisces about the pond in her past and the brilliant, yellow chrysanthemums that lined the garden path. Her vivid memories launch a plan in Nancy's mind that she quickly sets into action.

The author, director and instructor of an English as a Second Language program in Ohio, is the author of *Grandfather Counts*, chosen as one of "50 Multicultural Books Every Child Should Know" by the Cooperative Children's Book Center. Her inspiration for *Goldfish and Chrysanthemums* is attributed to the personal experiences of her mother-in-law, who was reared in China.

Through the decisive actions of a child, Cheng shows how one person can make a powerful difference in the world. The compassion demonstrated by Nancy's concern for her grandmother carries the theme of selfless giving throughout the book and strongly defines the ties that bind generations together.

The illustrator, who has published in many award-winning magazines, debuts in children's fiction with this volume. Her luminescent oil paintings artfully capture the nostalgia of an age gone by, essentially creating a scrapbook effect through a tinted lens. The color scheme is the strength of Chang's work. Each full-page painting radiates in golden honey and amber.

Goldfish and Chrysanthemums is a choice picture book written for ages four through eight. For older readers, educators could easily work this text into a family history unit or a classroom assignment that delves into journals and memoirs.

CHARISSE FLOYD (March / April 2004)

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