



Where the Steps Were

Andrea Cheng

Wordsong (March 2008)

\$16.95 (144pp)

978-1-932425-88-8

Andrea Cheng has written and illustrated a very unusual book, *Where the Steps Were* (WordSong, 978-1-932425-88-8), about an ordinary class of third graders, their always extraordinary questions, and the teacher who guides them. Miss D. takes the class through lessons on American history, with an emphasis on the experiences and contributions of blacks. Five of the children narrate the year in poems.

CARMEN

Rosa Parks

Harriet Tubman,

she came before Lincoln,

but then how did Rosa Parks

fit in?

Miss Parks

just died,

Miss D. says.

—And she was a slave?

—No, she was a seamstress

who wanted to sit

in her seat on the bus.

We find 1955

on my time line.

Dang,

that was about one hundred years

after slavery.

That's the year I was born,

Miss D. says.

—So when you were little,
we couldn't have sat together
on the bus?

The children also talk about personal concerns and family matters.

JONATHAN

E verything Dies

Grams had a husband once

and so did my mom

but their husbands died.

Everything dies

like these cicadas

all over the playground.

Simon's dad

was murdered one day

and so was Lincoln

in that theater

and Martin Luther King

talking about dreams.

There is additional tension as their school is to be demolished at the end of the year.

JONATHAN

Keys

Mr. O'Leary

has all the keys,

every last one

to every last door

in our school,

*even the bathrooms
and the boiler room
where he took me and Anthony
to show us
all that heat.
What's he going to do
with those keys
when they tear our school
down?*

Cheng is the author and illustrator of many books, from picture books to young adult novels. *Where the Steps Were* is based on the experience of her sister, who teaches third grade in Cincinnati. In the book, the class takes a field trip to a farm, a zoo, and finally to a theater to see a play. There, history comes home to roost as the children, sitting in the balcony, are accused without evidence of spitting on the crowd below. Back in their classroom—having missed the play—the children write letters to the theater manager, asking him if their skin color had anything to do with their presumed guilt.

Where the Steps Were is fascinating, heartbreaking, and hilarious. It's an extraordinary collection of voices of ordinary children. Our ordinary (not) children. This book is highly recommended for classrooms and independent readers.

HEATHER SHAW (February 25, 2008)

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