



THE KENNEDY CENTER

# Performing Arts Series

ARTS-BASED PROGRAMMING VIA SATELLITE/WEB

presented in cooperation with PRINCE WILLIAM NETWORK

## Telling Tales: Laurence Yep

Friday, November 1, 2002

Grades 5 - 8

**When viewing *Telling Tales: Laurence Yep* and participating in this guide's suggested activities, various language arts standards sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association will be addressed: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7.**

### Background Information

Writers take readers on journeys to other times and places, bringing to life characters, feelings, and ideas. They explore worlds, events, and emotions. Before writers write, they have their own journeys through time; they see places, meet people, and experience things with their distinctive vision.

Laurence Yep, author of novels, short stories, and plays and re-teller of traditional literature, takes his readers on journeys across cultures and generations, all the while introducing them to memorable characters in real places both in the United States and in China. His writing started with a personal journey, growing up in San Francisco, California. His father, Thomas Gim Yep, came to America from China when he was ten years old. Franche Lee, Laurence's mother, was born in Ohio, raised in West Virginia, and moved to California by the time she was ten. Foreign-

born Thomas and American-born Franche had two sons. The eldest was Thomas, better known as "Spike" for the appearance of his hair. Ten years later, Laurence was born.

Laurence Yep felt the tug between two traditions, American and Chinese, but never felt completely a part of either. While he was in high school, he discovered writing. He sold his first story to a science fiction magazine for a penny a word when he was 18. "When I wrote, I went from being a puzzle to a puzzle solver" by exploring the pieces of fabric that made up America and that made up Laurence Yep. "I was...a child who had been too American to fit into Chinatown and too Chinese to fit in elsewhere." And more, he was the "clumsy son of an athletic family, the grandson of a Chinese grandmother who spoke more of West Virginia than of China."

Yep's historical novels take readers on unforgettable journeys with spunky characters, often exploring difficult themes such as cultural alienation and racial bias. His books are steeped in rich detail about Chinese history and culture and the fascinating ways in which old and new worlds bridge in surprising ways. We are introduced to traditional stories and symbols and the universal theme of one's search for identity. The series of novels that form the "Golden Mountain Chronicles" begins in 1849. Readers join the Young family as they journey from the Kwangtung province of China to America. The "Chronicles" continue through the late 20<sup>th</sup> century in which a biracial teenager must come to grips with what it means to be part of two distinct cultures.

Yep writes in his memoir, *Lost Garden*: "Memories are like seeds. They lie

concealed within the imagination...Memory pays no rent and is assessed no taxes, yet its value is infinite." Yep invites readers to join his ongoing trek, and perhaps better understand their own journeys through these provocative, unforgettable novels.

## About the Program

Laurence Yep will discuss with moderator Maria Salvadore how his family, their history, and the history of China and America converge in his novels. The discussion will focus on Yep's historical novels, including: *When the Circus Came to Town* and select books from the "Golden Mountain Chronicles," with an emphasis on two award-winning titles, *Dragonwings* and *Child of the Owl*. Yep also will touch upon techniques that aspiring writers may find useful to map, research, and select family stories. Additionally, Yep will share parts of *Traitor*, the most recent novel in the "Golden Mountain Chronicles," to be published in 2003.

## Instructional Activities:

### ●Reading

Read several novels by Laurence Yep, as well as a biographical essay or his memoir, *Lost Garden*. What are recurring themes in the novels?



How do they relate to Yep's life and his family? Do these themes relate to your life or family?

### ●Writing

Interview a grandparent or an older person in your community. Choose a specific event described in the interview. Ask them for photographs from the period. Write about it in two different forms: a piece of creative writing (or fiction) and as part of a biographical essay (or nonfiction). Think about an experience you may have had that is comparable. Can it be woven into the fictional piece? Is there a similar theme that emerges from the two forms of writing? What can you learn from the photographs? How do these photos differ from those taken now?

### ●Researching

Yep's historical novels require research to be historically accurate. Visit the library to find out what was going on during the time described by your interviewee. Identify a major event in current events, sports, or the specific community. Consider the impact on the anecdotes revealed in the interview. Think about how the events could be woven into the story.

## Resources

### On the Web:

[kennedy-center.org/pwttv](http://kennedy-center.org/pwttv)  
[chinakite.com](http://chinakite.com)  
[chinapage.com/dragon](http://chinapage.com/dragon)  
[sfmuseum.org](http://sfmuseum.org)

### Print:

Yep, Laurence. *Golden Mountain Chronicles*. New York: Harper Collins. Series includes: *The Serpernt's Children*. 1984, *Mountain Light*. 1985, *Dragon's Gate*. 1993, *The Traitor*. 2003, *Dragonwings*. 1975, *Child of the Owl*. 1977, *Sea Glass*. 1979, *Thief of Hearts*. 1995  
Other Books by Laurence Yep: *The Lost Garden: A Memoir*. New York: Julian Messner, 1991. *When the Circus Came to Town*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2002.