FOCAL Award Event : Paper Son
by Basya Samuels

This year’s Friends Of Children And Literature (FOCAL) Award went to the outstanding non-fiction children’s picture book called “Paper Son: The Inspiring True Story of Tyrus Wong, Immigrant and Artist”, written by Julie Leung, and illustrated by Chris Sasaki. Tyrus Wong, originally known as Wong Geng Yeo, traveled from China to America to start a new life for himself. Tyrus loved the arts and enrolled in an art institute in Los Angeles. From there, he went on to work as an artist for the Walt Disney company. As an animator, Wong used his unique talent and his connection with Song Dynasty colors, to create iconic backgrounds for classic movies like Bambi, forever influencing the art direction for future Disney animations. FOCAL’s celebratory event took place online this year and can be viewed on YouTube at https://youtu.be/xlURxcNuE60. Board member Dewi Ochoa Reyes moderated a fascinating conversation with Julie and Chris during the hour-long presentation.

Julie Leung first came across Wong’s story in The New York Times obituary, and his background as an Asian-American Disney animator piqued her interest. Julie felt a personal connection to Wong’s history because she herself is a daughter of immigrants from a place not far from where Wong grew up. Julie spoke with Wong’s family and not only asked for permission to have the privilege to write about the famous artist, but also had the unique opportunity to delve deeper into his background and history.
Chris Sasaki also had a connection with the Wong family members, thus gaining further insight into Tyrus Wong, an artist he had previously studied in art school. Although initially intimidated by Wong’s artistic greatness, Chris accepted the job of illustrating Julie’s text and created a hybrid of Wong’s work and his own modern style. Chris really wanted to honor the immigrants coming to America and was able to accomplish that through this medium. In fact, many of Chris’ illustrations repeat patterns and ideas that are a homage to Wong and the atmospheric effects Wong had brought into his work.

Julie and Chris met in person for the first time after the book had been published, going on book tours and attending book events that ended near a mural Wong had painted in Chinatown, Los Angeles. Chris really felt the love of others enjoying their collaborative effort during this time and found a deeper connection to his Asian pride. Julie feels that there is something really special about finding lesser-known, compelling stories, and giving them voices, in addition to bringing an Asian representation to children’s picture books. Through both their specialized expressions, an award-winning book was born, and Julie and Chris were happy to have worked together to create something so meaningful. Julie and Chris have some exciting individual projects in progress, so watch for them!

The FOCAL award event ended with joy and delight as puppet artists Jesse Kingsley and Moira Macdonald presented their traditional masterful creation to Julie Leung and Chris Sasaki, of a puppet likeness of Tyrus Wong. Puppet awards will go to both the winning author and illustrator, and will also be displayed in the children’s department at Central Library alongside their award-winning book “Paper Son: The Inspiring True Story of Tyrus Wong, Immigrant, and Artist”. Thanks to Dewi Ochoa Reyes for moderating this lovely conversation, to the artists Jesse Kingsley and Moira Macdonald for their beautiful rendering of Tyrus Wong, and to the FOCAL Board Interim President Marilyn Robertson, and to all the 2022 FOCUS Award committee contributors including chairperson Kirsten Peers, Board Liaison Michele Marot, and committee members Jasmine Jones, Marie Marot, Maya Peterpaul, Basya Samuels, Alice Schick, and Elizabeth Tracton.

In finality, this year’s event is dedicated to the memory of Caroline Gill, long-time beloved FOCAL member.
Still grieving the loss of our former President, Caroline Gill, we are faced with the necessity to elect a new one. The results are in. I am President. Susan Savory is VP. Secretary is Michele Marot. Treasurer is Kay Wilcox. Thanks for all who voted. It was a good turn-out.

Now my purpose is to update you on FOCAL’s doings.

Some things are changing while others resume. First, the budget. Our Treasurer, Kay Wilcox, has moved our fiscal year to reflect that of the library, from July 1st to June 30th. Oops. That means that we all need to renew our membership, including me!

Because so many people donated in memory of Caroline, our coffers are fuller than usual…a good thing. We are looking at ways to further support the Central Library, beyond the occasional needs for supplies for upcoming events: sandwiches and beverages for the hardworking staff, furniture or technology for the department, and other expenses to be determined. Of course, we also provide the cost of the puppets, and perhaps lodging and transportation for our award-book winners for our annual Award Event.

Another highlight of the year is that Kay and I attended the 10th “Serving with a Purpose” conference in Ontario, CA, this Spring. It turns out that public libraries, far and wide, cannot fulfill their missions without the help of volunteers. Did you know that?

Two things I learned were (1) Reach out to constituents in other fields (in which you are active) to recruit new volunteers and then, (2) Give them something to do! Given that recommendation, I have interviewed six volunteers from Occidental College who are willing to help us. I have also reached out to people, on and off the Board, to increase our knowledge of technology. The result will hopefully be more electronic ballots, when needed, and even FOCAL Points on the website, to which you will be directed as members.
We will continue to hold our annual Awards Event with puppets of the main character as the prize. Search on LAPL’s YouTube, if you did not see it, FOCAL and Paper Son (link in first page). You will see the thrilled reactions of the author and illustrator to winning puppets for their work on PAPER SON, a wonderful picture book biography about paper-son artist, Tyrus Wong.

We are thinking about holding our Awards Event in November in person once again. Stay tuned for more details. We would also like to reinstate the awards for student essays. If you have information about how to contact teachers regarding this opportunity, let me know.

Meanwhile, our monthly FOCAL book sales at Central continue under the capable leadership of Lara Clardy. Michele Marot helps, though she is also serving as Secretary and Awards godmother.

Let me know if you are interested in a Board position, working on the awards committee, or want to volunteer in other ways. We need you!

By Marilyn Robertson

If you have not renewed your membership yet for the 2023–2024 year, this is the time to do it!

FOCAL Membership has been restructured! Join or Renew today as Gold or Silver member. Visit our website at https://www.focalcentral.org/membership.php and use PayPal to renew your membership or make a donation. Or, if you prefer, mail the form in the back of this FOCAL points with your check.
Fun with FOCAL

May 13, 2023, was a special day at the library for FOCAL members and others. Attendees included authors and book lovers from around the city.

First, there was a tour of the Children’s Literature Department along with its soaring ceilings led by Senior Librarian, Tina Princenthal. The tour started in the picture book room which houses over 17,000 books. Around the corner is the puppet stage built by rock radio hosts, Mark and Brian. Tour members were introduced to some of the library’s hottest new books, including graphic novels and Vox books that read the book aloud to the reader.

Next was a tour of “Our Story is Yours: A Los Angeles Public Library Sesquicentennial Celebration” led by exhibit co-curator, Christina Rice, Senior Librarian of the Photo Collection Department. Highlights included never-before-seen images of the library fire along with large photos of the branches, then and now, a look at puppets created by Carole Onofrio for WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE, and a facsimile of a brand that Charles Fletcher Lummis used on books when he was head librarian at the turn of the last century.

Finally, attendees visited a meeting room to receive snacks and water as well as copies of STORYBOOK PUPPETS created by Onofrio to showcase the winners of the FOCAL Award between 1980 to 2013. You can see many of the puppets along with their books on display in the Children’s Literature Department. Jesse Kingsley and his wife, Moira MacDonald, are the current puppet-makers.

A grand day was had by all. Next time, perhaps the FOCAL group can go down, down, down the escalators to see the Octavia Butler make-and-take classroom and learn more about all that our central library offers. Stay tuned.
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

To join FOCAL, please visit FOCALcentral.org/membership
Or if you prefer, mail this form with your check to

Children’s Literature Department/ FOCAL
Los Angeles Public Library
630 West Fifth Street
Los Angeles, CA 90071

Name ____________________________________________
Address __________________________________________
City/State/Zip _____________________________________
Email _____________________________________________

Membership is for the calendar year, January through December.
Dues are tax deductible.

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