



## Shen of the Sea: Chinese Stories for Children

*Arthur Bowie Chrisman , Else Hasselriis (Illustrator)*

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**Shen of the Sea: Chinese Stories for Children** Arthur Bowie Chrisman , Else Hasselriis (Illustrator)

A series of fascinating Chinese stories, strong in humor and rich in Chinese wisdom, in which the author has caught admirably the spirit of Chinese life and thought.

## Shen of the Sea: Chinese Stories for Children Details

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Author : Arthur Bowie Chrisman , Else Hasselriis (Illustrator)

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# From Reader Review *Shen of the Sea: Chinese Stories for Children* for online ebook

## Donalyn says

I added a star to my rating after one of my students declared, "It wasn't awful."

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## Kristen says

Newbery Medal Winner--1926

This is the second collection of stories to be awarded the Newbery medal, and like the previous, this one comes from a culture rich in history and story. Many of the stories explain things important to Chinese culture--how chopsticks came to be used, how firecrackers and kites were invented, why plates are called "china." My favorite is probably the story that this collection takes its title from, "Shen of the Sea," a story about water demons who threaten to flood a kingdom and are instead entrapped in a bottle by the clever king. An interesting collection.

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## Sue says

I read this as part of my quest to read all the Newbery Medal winners sometime before I die. It's taking me that long. Anyway, this one is a product of its time. It's important to remember when reading some of these older books that weren't offensive at the time and our sensibilities are more enlightened now. Hopefully. Taken at face value these are some cute stories about how some things were invented, words came to be, and moral things we should all know. But they are couched in insensitive language by a story writer and not a folklorist. So don't be looking for authentic Chinese folk tales here.

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## katsok says

Seriously, the Newbery winners of the 1920s are making me despair for the children who were reading them. Doctor Dolittle was good when I read it originally. It now seems like the best book in the history of books in comparison with the other winners. Blah. Smoky is up next.

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## Warren Truitt says

Arthur Bowie Chrisman was a famous storyteller and collector of tales in the early part of the twentieth century, which is why the stories collected in *Shen of the Sea* read the way they do. Amusing tales and great adventures, but I'd like to hear them told aloud. I think they would be that much more powerful and humorous.

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## **Mitchell says**

And the Newbery Winner read/re-read continues. Another early one, and not a good one. A book of unauthentic Chinese folktales told in such a way to make fun of the culture. At best Shaggy Dog stories. There were some that held my attention for a bit, but most of them were just a slog. And besides the dumb names which were clearly chosen to amuse someone by their play on language for English, they also got details about pretty much everything wrong for China. And yet told one at a time these stories might have worked read aloud with small details changed.

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## **Miz Lizzie says**

As a folklorist I am deeply disappointed in this book and I would be hard pressed to recommend it to any child today. It was hailed at the time as "authentic" but cultural authenticity is regarded a little differently today. It's about as authentic as "The Mikado" (also regarded as "authentic" at the time). It has the trappings of Chinese folklore but it is not Chinese folklore. It is a Western interpretation/appropriation of Chinese folklore. I do like the inclusion of Chinese words and I do appreciate, that for the time, it was big step forward in accepting and introducing other cultures to children. But presenting it as authentic Chinese folktales to children today would be a misrepresentation. I think I would have liked it better if, like *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, the author had made clear that it was "inspired" by Chinese folklore though I'm not sure that distinction would have been one understood by the author or readers at that time period. I think perhaps Shen of the Sea could use a little light editing (such as Dr. Dolittle received) or at the very least a forward to clarify the author's use of another culture's bits of folklore to create new literary inventions.

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## **Samuel says**

The first thing to understand is that this is probably not a book that could be written today, and it's certainly not a book that could be published today. In order to deal with it at all, we have to have that understanding up front.

Although Shen of the Sea is subtitled "Chinese Stories for Children," it has no source notes of any kind, and none of the tales are recognizable versions of any standard Chinese folktales. All of the stories, in fact, seem to be either entirely Chrisman's invention, or so wildly changed from their original form as to be unidentifiable. This is true despite the fact that a large number of the tales are porquoi stories about the origin of such things as chopsticks, china plates, tea, and kites.

Indeed, Chrisman's "China" is a sort of hazy fairyland, one constructed almost without relation to any place or time that may have really existed. Although there's a definite fondness for the idea of China in his writing, his grasp on the details of the country and culture is tenuous at best -- perhaps understandably so, given that he knew only a handful of words and phrases in the language, and, unlike Elizabeth Foreman Lewis and Elizabeth Coatsworth, never personally visited Asia. One simply can't read this book and expect to find cultural or historical accuracy.

So, it's fairly off-putting to 21st-century eyes. It fails any given test of authenticity, and it smacks of cultural

imperialism, to say the least. Those are the facts, plain and simple.

And yet, Chrisman's wry humor and folk-style plotting are still effective. I found *Shen of the Sea* perfectly readable; it wasn't a chore to trudge through in the same way that something like *Smoky*, the Cowhorse was. It's more comparable to *The Matchlock Gun* in that the writing is perfectly fine even when the content isn't -- and if Walter Edmonds' finely-tuned prose runs circles around Chrisman's sometimes stilted English, Chrisman doesn't consistently demonize and inhumanize his non-white subjects like Edmonds does. Is that faint praise? Maybe. You certainly couldn't give *Shen of the Sea* to a kid without any explanation, and you might not want to give it to them at all.

But like so many of the other early Newbery winners, it's hard to definitively say that *Shen* wasn't the most deserving book of its year. The best-remembered titles from the 1925 publishing year weren't eligible: *Emily Climbs*, by L.M. Montgomery (Canadian); *Gallery of Children*, by A.A. Milne (British); *The School at the Chalet*, by Elinor M. Brent-Dyer (also British). The only Honor book was Pádraic Colum's *The Voyagers: Being Legends and Romances of Atlantic Discovery*, which isn't one that inspires a lot of fervor. The few other eligible books that are more or less still in print aren't necessarily ones most people would argue for either: *The Adventures of Little Joe Otter*, by Thornton W. Burgess; *Raggedy Ann's Wishing Pebble*, by Johnny Gruelle; *The Lost King of Oz*, one of the many inferior sequels by Ruth Plumly Thompson.

Maybe it's another reason to be grateful that the Newbery was instituted. If these early winners tend to be of...uneven quality, I don't think it can be argued that the state of American children's literature is orders of magnitude better than it was back when the award was instituted -- and of course, that's one of the main things the Newbery was supposed to encourage.

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## **Kati says**

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I imagine the panel of readers reading this book thinking they were really offering the world something great. Patting each other on the back and congratulating themselves on the amazing contribution to children's literature they were making. Children everywhere will have cultural knowledge of the East with these Chinese folk tales. They will gain an appreciation for the culture and the people. They will be so educated. Except, well, they aren't actually Chinese folk tales. Actually, they don't resemble anything in Chinese culture. So, some very white dude who thought China was kind of cool, met a talkative Chinese lady once, made up some stories, and sold them as 'Chinese Stories for Children'. And the panel bought it. Hook. Line. Sinker.

The part that really got me was the short story on how chop sticks were invented. The emperor actually threw away his fork and spoon in favor of short sticks. Because of course he started with a fork and spoon, right? Of course. Thank you Newbery panel, for teaching us all about Ethnocentrism. That is a long word. Look it up.

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## **Laura says**

I stopped reading this book after about 1 and a half stories. I found the stories slightly interesting, but got a little hung over the names and places. They were so different from anything I was used to and I had a hard

time keeping them straight. I eventually fell asleep while reading this book and never picked it up again. I only feel slightly bad because it is a Newbery Medal. I might recommend this book, it just wasn't for me.

\*Taken from my book reviews blog: <http://reviewsatmse.blogspot.com/2009...>

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## **Nicola Mansfield says**

Reason for Reading: Read aloud to my 9yo son. We always have a book of folktales, fairy tales, myths, etc. on the go, reading one story every school day.

Comments: I have read this book once before to myself some time ago, as an adult, and came away with the impression that it was OK (maybe 3 stars) but now I think I've found out the problem with that first reading. This book is meant to be read aloud! The stories are told in a storyteller voice that just rolls off the tongue when reading out loud and brings them gloriously to life. The stories are hilarious and I can't say that my ds or I didn't like even a single one the tales. I'm not convinced these are traditional Chinese stories (I've read a lot of folktales in my life and never heard any of these before) but would guess that Chrisman wrote them himself based on the style of Chinese tales. The tales often rely on repetition, some are origin stories and they cover a wide spectrum of characters from peasants to princesses and Kings. A number of the stories are about someone who is not too bright or is incredibly lazy or stubborn. While the great majority of tales are folktales a few pass over into fairytale territory with the appearance of a few dragons and other Chinese mythical creatures. Every single time this book came out my son's face lit up, he thoroughly enjoyed it! I also had a ton of fun reading it. This book has a habit of getting mixed reviews and to those who give it low ratings, I ask you to read aloud a couple of stories to a child or group of children. Then see if you don't change your mind! I've found in my 21 years as a mother that some children's books just beg to be read aloud and don't do the trick when read silently. The only thing I'm not too keen on are the silhouette illustrations. Yes, they add to the ethnicity of the book but detailed drawings would have been more fun to look at.

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## **Crystal says**

1926 Newbery Winner

Culturally insensitive literature is kind of hard to swallow. There are a few fun aspects to the stories here, but any of the good was wiped out by the enormous amounts of badness. How can the title be "Chinese Stories for Children?" when they are told by a non-Chinese person who gives no citations or real background information about these stories. It seems they are all just made up in what Chrisman determined was the style of Chinese folktales. I much prefer Grace Lin's way of doing it. She explained and lets us know how she created the stories in *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*.

In addition, Chrisman really, really paints the Chinese in a negative light. I am not nearly informed enough to explain all of the ways in which this book is inappropriate culturally, but as I read, I just felt increasingly uncomfortable with the way he characterized the Chinese and it felt that he was completely mishandling the culture of the Chinese. Writing about a people's culture when it is not your own is always a tricky thing to do well. He fails to convince me that he is knowledgeable and careful enough to be selling this to kids.

At the time, people probably thought they were great for adding multicultural literature, but honestly,

something is not always better than nothing.

Oyate has a great way of looking at books like these <http://www.oyate.org/index.php?option...> These are many of the red flags that went up for me while reading Shen of the Sea.

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### **Ann says**

Really this book is 2.5 stars, but I decided to be nice and round up.

My enjoyment of the book definitely suffered because of what I wanted the book to be in comparison to what it actually was. As a book of short stories and humorous tales it succeeds more often than not. It is not the best short story collection I've ever read, and I'm not a huge fan of short stories, so this is not going to be anywhere near the top of my "best Newbery winners" list, but the stories themselves were generally enjoyable. The writing style was a bit choppy in places, but there were some genuinely funny turns of phrases here and there, and the stories were more-or-less clever. If I don't see evidence of genius, at least, from a purely readability sense, it's not a bad book.

My large problem with the book basically boils down to it having been written in 1925. Understanding of cultural appropriation, accuracy in cultural representation, and how and why someone can say that a story is "Chinese" have changed radically in the last 90 years. None of these stories, as far as I can tell, are actually authentically Chinese. Where the Mountain Meets the Moon, a Newbery Honor book in 2010, also features Chinese folktales. But that modern book makes it clear that the author was "inspired" by the tales and is now using them in her own way to tell a slightly different story (which she does fabulously). Here, however, Chrisman presents the stories simply as "Chinese", yet appears to have made them up wholesale. Contemporary practice says that you cannot say that your stories are "Chinese Stories" simply because you chose to set them in China, a land Chrisman had never visited. A land he had apparently never researched either, because there were several little things that even I, who know very little about China, noticed was wrong. Several of the names were clearly written to be "funny" - Hai Low or Ah Fun for example - which is not really appropriate. It's one thing when someone from a culture pokes gentle fun, but it's a significantly different manner when someone from outside that culture does so.

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### **Benji Martin says**

I'm finding myself feeling some of the same things I felt after I finished Tales from Silver Lands. I wasn't in love with this book, but I did kind of enjoy reading it.

I think some of the harsh criticism it has gotten by some contemporary readers might be a little unwarranted. I've heard the racist word being thrown around a lot by reviewers, but I don't necessarily think that it is racist. There were some characters who might have been buffoons, and some people might think that these people fit into old Chinese stereotypes, but there were also a lot of characters who were admirable and good. Racist is a strong word, and to say that Chrisman saw all Chinese people as inferior or even in a negative way would be, I think a false accusation.

Then there's the issue of these stories being actual folklore. Most contemporary reviewers don't seem to think that these stories are actual genuine Chinese folktales. I guess the question you have to ask is, how many

people need to tell a story in order for it to be considered a folktale? No, Chrisman never visited China, but he claims to have collected these stories from Chinese immigrants. If even one Chinese immigrant was telling Chrisman these stories, and that person had received the story from someone back in China, then I don't have any problem with these stories being labeled as folklore, even if they weren't told widely throughout the Chinese region.

It's really easy for us to look back on the 20's and think, "Those silly people of the past. Why would they even publish this? But they give it the Newbery award?" I think that contemporary people sometimes unfairly look at the citizens of the past in a condescending way. We think that if we had lived back then, we would have done things differently. The librarians and the Newbery committee of the 1920's were awarding the book they thought was the best of the year for the kids of their time. This book made me laugh out loud several times. There were some really good stories here. There were some that dragged too, but for the most part. I am glad that I read it.

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## Joe says

Ghostly in its cultural appropriation, but not nearly as offensive and as poorly written as *Tales from a Silver Lands*.

This is not to say the book isn't offensive. To the modern reader, it absolutely is.

But I try to read these sorts of books with my brain firmly planted in an historical context. That is, I try to think like someone from that time period reading. In that sense, I can totally see why this won the Newbery Medal. It was probably *way* ahead of its time (and, dare I say, likely considered to be groundbreaking and "multicultural" - even though no such thing existed in the 1920s).

A few of the stories were entertaining and memorable, and other were meandering and pointless. All attempted, on some level, to be porquoi tales. Without a true culturally-appropriate connection, they come across as empty, hollow, and thoroughly uninteresting: a white person's interpretation of a non-white culture.

The book does serve, though, as a sturdy reminder of how far we've come. We still have a long, long, long, long way to go... but at least shit like this isn't getting churned out.

As an aside, I am dreading the other Newbery Medals from this time period. I have heard nothing but bellyaching about *Smoky the Cowhorse*, *The Dark Frigate*, and *The Story of Mankind* - a book I will likely save until last. Apparently both authors and the Newbery committees of the 1920 *hated* children. Just hated them.

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