



MARGARET CHANG

"Long ago, when I was sitting in my high chair in California having breakfast, my mother used to think, 'The boy Margaret's going to marry is somewhere eating his cornflakes.' Little did she know.

"I grew up as an only child in Whittier, a suburb of Los Angeles, surrounded by people like my parents—transplanted Middle Westerners. Just beyond Whittier's city limits stretched a vast, intriguing, multicultural city. I was five when we went downtown to eat Chinese food at Tang's. It tasted a lot better than my mother's Indiana cooking, and I still

remember the small dish of yellow mustard with a drop of bright red hot sauce in the middle.

"My parents took me to the beach whenever they could, beginning my lifelong love of the Pacific shore. Another family pleasure was reading. Every night before bedtime, my father read aloud to me. I met Dorothy Gale, Robin Hood, Mowgli, D'Artagnan, Jo March, and brave, determined children from the Grimm and Andersen fairy tales. Later, reading on my own, I discovered Jane Eyre, Elizabeth Bennet, and Anna Karenina. But I never stopped reading children's books.

"After graduating from Scripps College with a degree in English and a minor in art, I went east to library school at Rutgers to become a children's librarian. I worked as an elementary school librarian for the Lexington Public Schools in Massachusetts and as a children's librarian for the New York Public Library. I met Raymond Chang, the boy who'd been eating his rice porridge in Shanghai while I was having breakfast in my high chair in California. We married at my home in Whittier and moved to Williamstown, Massachusetts, where Raymond taught chemistry at Williams College for many years. We have one daughter. With her, I returned to the West Coast for yearly visits with my parents and our Chinese family.

"A master's degree from the Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College enabled me to pursue two parallel careers: writing and teaching. While Raymond and I coauthored four children's books set in China, I taught both graduate and undergraduate students of children's literature at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams. The Institutes offered by Children's Literature New England (CLNE) inspired my teaching for twenty years.

"After taking a long break from teaching to finish *Celia's Robot*, I expect to continue writing stories and promoting children's literature for many years to come."

CELIA'S ROBOT Grades 4-7 ♦ 978-0-8234-2181-7



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HOW CELIA'S ROBOT CAME TO BE

"I was thirteen when I discovered science fiction. Even though the characters were mostly active guys and helpless girls (because the books were written mostly by men), I loved science fiction for the same reasons I had loved fairy tales and fantasy as a child: I could leave my everyday life behind and travel to worlds of imagination and possibility. It wasn't long before I read Isaac Asimov's I Robot series, with its Laws of Robotics.

"When I was a school librarian at Joseph Estabrook Elementary School in Lexington, Massachusetts, I loved talking to boys and girls about all kinds of books, from my favorite childhood family stories such as the Little House books to fantasies such as The Chronicles of Narnia books and Lloyd Alexander's The Chronicles of Prydain.

"My marriage to Raymond Chang, who grew up in Shanghai, China, during World War II and the civil war that followed, made me part of a large Chinese family. My mother-in-law welcomed me, though she didn't speak a word of English, and taught me to cook some of Raymond's favorite dishes. I read about the events and beliefs that shaped his family's life and carried what I learned into the field of children's books.

Raymond and I had already written a popular book on the Chinese language when I took a graduate course in writing for children that led to a novel and three picture books set in China, coauthored with Raymond. Because I was also teaching college courses in children's literature, I examined American children's books about China, and I spoke at scholarly conferences on what American children might learn from these books.

"Meanwhile, I raised one daughter who owned a lot of stuff and was only slightly less messy than I had been. (I was the one who pitched socks into an overhead lamp.) The idea of a robot that could help a girl clean her room and organize her life had been bouncing around in my head for years. I wrote some scenes, and discovered I was telling a family story with a touch of science fiction.

"I decided to write about the family I knew: a wife and husband of different races, each with an absorbing career, raising a biracial child in a community with very few Asians. The mother would be a cellist, and she would name her daughter Celia, after the patron saint of music.

"For the science-fiction part I needed more information about artificial intelligence and robotics in order to understand the father's work. Many women are writing science fiction now, creating girl characters who are anything but helpless. Celia couldn't be a passive recipient of her father's gift. As I read about the boyhood of computer scientists, I knew I wanted Celia to have those boys' quirky obsessions with locks and keys, with taking things apart—behavior we still don't expect from girls. Celia's definitely her father's daughter, even though he doesn't always recognize her talents.

"I wrote and revised. I spoke with robotics experts at two local colleges. I visited a college locksmith and borrowed a pin tumbler lock. I wrote and revised, and wrote and revised again. Now that Celia's Robot is finished, I realize that it is not just about a girl and her robot. It's about how we treat beings who are different from us. Are we frightened? Are we interested? Do we run away, or make friends, or fight, or work together? Or do we pretend that differences don't exist at all?

"Whatever I think Celia's Robot is about, it's now out in the world, where my story belongs to anyone who reads it."