



FOCAL Points



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FRIENDS OF CHILDREN AND LITERATURE -- CENTRAL LIBRARY

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FOCAL AWARD LUNCHEON

By Carol Raby

What a superb Saturday it was on December 9, 2017 when children's literature enthusiasts including librarians, authors, teachers, students and parents gathered to celebrate two-time FOCAL Award winning author Gennifer Choldenko's book *Chasing Secrets* (Wendy Lamb Books, 2015). This year we met at the historic Millennium Biltmore Hotel across the street from Central Library. What an elegant backdrop for our event. There was great variety on the buffet which provided something delicious for everyone! Each table was decorated with a student created centerpiece that cleverly depicted the book's plot and setting.

This day is always full of highlights, including the presentations from the winners of the student essay contest. They did a fantastic job of expressing what *Chasing Secrets* meant to them. The strength of the book's female protagonist and the need for girls and women to speak up for what they believe in, and to seek opportunities equal to boys and men were central themes in the essays. The presenters were inspiring, and they were clearly excited about reading a book with such a strong female character from the turn of the century who could serve as a role model for today's young women.

Newbery Honor winning author Gennifer Choldenko gave a fascinating talk, with writing anecdotes. She shared photos covering her in-depth historical research for the book, and she answered questions before autographing

books for her admirers. One very special detail that must be mentioned was the beautiful Gilded age dress and hat Gennifer wore to the luncheon. She looked as though she had just stepped out of her book! This definitely added to the ambience of the day.

We appreciate the service of our FOCAL Award Committee members: Brooke Sheets, Chair, Patricia Douglas, Sara Elwood, Jessica Ko, Meredith McGowan, Alicia Rodriguez, and Molly Schroeder. Sara Mozer, ex-officio, and Caroline Gill, FOCAL president, served as advisors. Kudos to our Essay Contest judges, our spectacular puppet maker Jesse Kingsley, and all of the librarians and educators who encouraged and inspired student to compete in this year's contest. Our sincere thanks goes to FOCAL President Caroline Gill and the FOCAL Board for the work done throughout the year that makes this event so special. Old acquaintances are renewed, new friendships are kindled, and everyone leaves with anticipation for next year!



Student Art

The artistic centerpieces enchanted everyone who entered the dining room. But the story behind those unique pieces is heart-warming.

Each year, Ray Moszkowicz, who teaches art at Alfred B. Nobel Middle School in Northridge, challenges his students to create original art based on the winning FOCAL Award Book. They read the book, have group discussions about its meaning and events, and then create centerpieces that depict themes from the story. "Is this a class assignment?" you ask. No - the inspired students devote their lunch periods and free time to achieve this interpretation of the author's story.

So, here's kudos to Ray and the talented young people of Nobel Middle School: Yume Johnstone, Jason Bravo, Diana Daus and Michelle le.



What do you do on the third Saturday of each month? Watch reruns on television? Dust? Do laundry? How about interacting with dedicated librarians and teachers, and helping children and parents find just the right book? If the latter appeals to you, contact Lara Clardy at lara@clardy.com, and join us at Central Library for book sales.

Chasing Secrets by Gennifer Choldenko is a great story that taught me about life in 1900 in San Francisco. I learned about treatments they used at that time to handle diseases like the plague, and how people were treated differently if they were boy or girl, rich or poor. I am glad that I did not live at that time because it would have been frustrating to be a smart girl!

Lizzie, a doctor's daughter, impressed me because she wanted to overcome the barriers faced by girls at that time. Nothing stopped Lizzie from going after her goals. When a plan didn't work, she tried another way. She preferred to go with her father on house calls to sick people instead of going to Miss Barstow's School for Young Women to learn dancing and elocution. She figured out how to set a broken arm and comfort a little girl. She loved to talk about mucus, and boils, loved reading books and learning on her own. Her rich aunt discouraged her from studying science because Lizzy was a girl. Lizzie was a gutsy girl! She went to Chinatown at night to rescue Jing, their beloved cook, who was trapped in the quarantine for the plague. Lizzy secretly helped Noah, Jing's son, who was hiding in their house due to the quarantine. When the maid became sick, Lizzie treated her with courage. Lizzie realized what was happening, even when adults denied it was the plague.

If I met the author in person, I would tell her it was cool that she chose a girl to be main character. Has she ever thought of making Lizzie an American Girl? I would love to read other books about what happened when Lizzie went to college. Lizzie would be a great role model!

Nadia V. Wilson. Grade 4, Vintage STEM Magnet Elementary School, Northridge, CA

Chasing Secrets, by Gennifer Choldenko, is one of the most inspiring books I have ever read. The book includes scenes that deal with racism and sexism. Noah, a Chinese boy, and Lizzie, an American girl, are best friends and value their friendship. However, they are afraid of being seen together in public because of the racism that's present. Ms. Barstows School for Young Women teaches females to be fine housewives, instead of independent, educated young women. They learn "the virtues of patience, the proper use of calling cards, and how to marry a man of stature". Young women, instead, should be taught the virtues of braveness, the proper use of knowledge, and how to fend for themselves. Chasing Secrets allows people who are being discriminated against to understand that they can be as great as any other person. Confidence is built as we read the book and truly understand that everyone is capable of great things.

One scene that stuck with me is when Dr. Roumalade tries to destroy Lizzie's vision. He infers that she's interested in nursing. She goes on to tell him that she wants to be a scientist, and he tells her that the closest she can come to that dream is to "marry a scientist". I believe that no one's dreams should be crushed because all humans are capable of greatness, no matter gender or race. We are and should always be considered equal.

Meeting Gennifer Choldenko would be so inspiring. She uses historical fiction to empower others and me. I would like to know what inspired her to write about the topics of racism and sexism. I would love to be given the opportunity to thank her personally for writing about these topics and using them as a way to truly inspire others.

Stephanie M. Mata, Grade 8, Sepulveda Middle School North Hills, CA.

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