

Dear Reader,

I'm thrilled to introduce you to *Made in Asian America: A History for Young People* by award-winning historian Erika Lee and three-time Newbery Honoree Christina Soontornvat. I cannot overstate what an honor it's been to work with Erika and Christina, both titans in their fields, who have crafted a book that makes history come alive in ways I never thought possible.

I distinctly remember being in high school and seeing the Khmer Rouge genocide—a cataclysmic event for my family, myself, and every Cambodian person alive—reduced to a brief, sanitized paragraph in my history textbook, yet simultaneously observing hundreds of pages and multiple volumes dedicated to white European and American history. I remember feeling confused, and frustrated, and small, like I didn't belong. And now, looking back, I wonder how differently I might've moved through the world if I'd had access to a book like this one that so powerfully captures the story of the generations of Asian Americans who have transformed the United States, and who continue to shape what it means to be American today.

*Made in Asian America* is thoroughly researched and highly informative, but it's also deeply intimate and personal. It'll spark conversation and help readers better understand themselves and the world. It'll also provide the kind of hope that I think has been in short supply these days—for what awaits today's generation of kids, and for the capacity we all hold to chart a better way forward.

We hope you enjoy this groundbreaking force of a read, and we'd love to hear from you if you do!

Happy reading,

Jennifer Ung

Executive Editor, Quill Tree Books

Author's Note: ERIKA LEE

I need to make a confession: I never liked history when I was a kid.

I bet you're thinking: Aren't you a historian? Don't you write history books and teach history classes?

It's true. I did not like history when I was growing up. I thought that history was only a timeline of wars and presidents that you had to memorize for a test. It was boring. And it wasn't just about how we learned history; it was what we learned, too: battles that had happened a long time ago and guys in powdered wigs.

In elementary school, we learned about the pilgrims who had come over on the *Mayflower*. We were all in awe of one of my friends whose family history dated back to that time. One of his ancestors had actually sailed over on the *Mayflower* and was a famous leader who was in our history books. My friend got to play his famous ancestor in the school pageant. I got to play his wife.

While I stood in the hot sun in the Puritan-style bonnet that my mother had sewn for me, I remember thinking why my own ancestors—or anybody who looked like me or my Asian American and African American friends—weren't in the history books. And what was our history anyway? Sometimes I would hear the grown-ups talking about how my grandfather came to the United States when he was sixteen years old and could not speak a word of English. Or how my mother and her sisters competed to see who could make the most egg rolls each afternoon after school for our family restaurant (my aunt May always won). But those were just family *stories*. They weren't *real* history, right?

In high school, I finally had a teacher who made learning about history interesting. Mr. Davis taught us that history wasn't just about the past; it was about the present as well. We studied current events and we analyzed historical documents. We learned about important leaders but also everyday people like women and workers. And even though the class was about European history, I began to realize that history did not have to be boring. And that real people made real history.

But I still could not see how my own family histories fit into the *American* history that I was learning in school. It was like we did not exist as real historical actors; as real history makers. And unlike Plymouth Rock, there were no monuments marking Asian American history as far as I knew. We were invisible in the textbooks and invisible in America.

In college, I was able to take classes on Native American, African American, Latinx, and Asian American history for the first time. I learned about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Angel Island. I read books by Anne Moody and Louise Erdrich. I met Asian American historians Sucheng Chan and Ronald Takaki, who told me that there were so many more Asian American histories to tell.

Yes, I thought, someone needs to tell these stories! Why aren't there more books, teachers, films, and monuments? Why do we have to wait until we're grown-up to learn our histories? Why can't we learn them in every grade? The more questions I asked, the angrier I got.

And then it struck me: maybe *I* could tell our histories. They would include the stories of my own grandparents' journey to America. And those of other immigrants and refugees, workers, civil rights activists, and changemakers.

So I stayed in school. I read a lot. I learned a lot of American history, world history, and Asian history. And I started to research and write Asian American history. On the weekends, I

gave tours of the Angel Island Immigration Station and helped it become a National Historic Landmark. I wrote books about Chinese immigration and about the experiences of immigrants on Angel Island.

When I began teaching students of my own, I realized that there were so many histories yet to be told. My students talked about how they and their parents had escaped persecution in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and were struggling to find their places in America. Their stories were the latest chapters in our diverse history, but they were not yet in our books. I didn't want them to feel lost and invisible in history like I had.

So, in 2015, I wrote *The Making of Asian America: A History* and dedicated it to my students. I wanted them to see their histories represented in the larger story of Asian America and of America. Since its publication, I have had countless conversations with readers telling me that it was the first time that they had ever read anything about their own families and communities. They say that it has helped them understand their parents' (and their own) journeys to the US and their lives in America. It is used in high school and college classrooms. It served as the guide for the Peabody-award-winning film series *Asian Americans*. I thought that my job was done.

Then, during the COVID-19 pandemic, lawmakers and others started to use racist and xenophobic language about the virus. They called the coronavirus the "kung flu" and told Americans to blame China for it. Asian Americans started getting attacked, verbally harassed, and even killed. On March 16, 2021, an armed gunman entered three Asian-owned businesses in the greater Atlanta area and killed eight people. Six were Asian women.

Asian Americans started organizing. They protested against anti-Asian violence and racism. They called on their lawmakers for change. And it wasn't just grown-ups. It was young people as

well. In fact, many were leading efforts in their communities to demand Asian American history in their classes. They saw the need for a history education that included all of us, not just some of us. And that the invisibility and erasure of Asian Americans in our history led to ignorance, hate, and violence for Asian American communities today.

More and more people were reading *The Making of Asian America*, and they were asking me if I could write a book for young people. We needed something that could help young people understand the world that they live in today and give them the tools to be active members in their communities during these trying times.

I agreed. But I also knew that I could not do it alone. Then I met editor Jennifer Ung and author Christina Soontornvat. I had just finished reading Christina's *All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys' Soccer Team* and was beginning to read *A Wish in the Dark*. She is an incredible storyteller and advocate, and after just one conversation, I knew that we shared a vision for this book.

We've added more stories and told Asian American history through the experiences of young people, including some of the activists who are inspiring change today. *Made in Asian America: A History for Young People* is the book I wish that I had had when I was growing up.

It is a book about history, about things that happened in the past. But it is also a book about the here and now, and how the world we live in has been shaped by the actions and choices of previous generations. Above all, this book is about people. People doing amazing things under sometimes unimaginable conditions. Taking chances. Making choices to leave, to stay, to fight back, and to imagine different futures.

Their stories are important to share because what they did helps us understand the making of Asian America. And how a new generation—made in Asian America—is drawing inspiration from those who came before them to create a better future for all of us.

Author's note: CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT

I have always loved stories.

I became an author because I loved reading stories and telling stories of my own. As a kid, I always enjoyed learning history because it meant that I got to hear the stories of real people.

But in all my years of K–12 history classes, the only time we focused on stories of Asian Americans was when we discussed the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor during World War II. I never read a single book written by an Asian American author in school. At the time, I didn't question any of it. I simply took it for granted that stories of Asians and Asian Americans were missing from both my history and my literature classes. It seemed like this was just the way things were.

Fast forward a couple of decades, to 2019. By that time, I had found many Asian American authors to read and be inspired by. And some of those authors had started an online book club that I joined. One month, the book club chose to read a history book: *The Making of Asian America* by Dr. Erika Lee. As I read, I flipped the pages faster and faster. I took notes and highlighted passages. It felt like I was trying to drink water from a fire hose. There was *so* much I didn't know. *So* much I had never been taught in school about my own history.

For example, I had never questioned why my father and almost all our Thai American friends and family in the US had immigrated at around the same time in the late 1960s. I had assumed that my dad was a trendsetter! But *The Making of Asian America* taught me this was actually because, after a century of shutting out Asian immigrants, the US passed the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which finally lifted restrictions that changed the lives of so many Asian Americans and literally made my existence possible.

When I finished the book, I felt so many emotions. I was embarrassed that I had made it to forty years old without knowing this information. I felt angry and frustrated that no one had ever taught it to me. I was sad and hurt by all the cruel things humans have done to one another during our country's history. For the first time, I was learning the many ways people of Asian descent have been systematically excluded and discriminated against. It helped me connect the dots to the racism I had personally experienced throughout my life.

Reading Erika's book also gave me a renewed sense of pride in being American. Her pages were filled with inspiring stories, stories of solidarity and allyship, and stories of ordinary people who were true heroes. A big takeaway from the book was that Asian Americans have shaped our nation for the better and have held it to the ideals it was founded on.

I saw how my own personal story was related to the stories of so many people who had come before. Throughout school, I had often felt like I was watching from the margins in history class, but this book showed me how we all fit together. The story of America was so much bigger than what I had been taught.

And so you can guess my reaction when out of the blue, in 2021, I got an email from editor Jennifer Ung, asking if I would like to work with Erika on adapting her original book for young readers. (If you are imagining me screaming and jumping up and down with glee and with tears in my eyes, then you have the right picture.) This felt like it would be one of the most meaningful projects of my career.

While we were making this book, Erika, Jennifer, and I had a lot of conversations. We talked about what we thought all young readers should know about Asian American history, but more than that, we talked about how we wanted young readers to *feel*. We wanted light bulbs to go off.



We wanted you to know the truth about our nation's history, and we knew that it would probably make you feel angry, frustrated, and sad at times because we have all felt that same way, too.

We also wanted you to feel inspired by the heroes in these pages. And we want you to feel hopeful for the future because one day very soon, *you* will be the one making history. Ultimately, we hope that every reader who picks up this book feels connected to these stories. These stories are the stories of our nation. And they belong to all of us.