

The Comeback

Dear Reader,

When I was six years old, I watched Michelle Kwan skate for the first time. Snuggled under my parents' comforter, excited to be awake past my usual bedtime, I sat transfixed as the Chinese American Olympian floated down the ice in her bejeweled blue dress. I remember how grainy and small she seemed on our bulky television, but beautiful all the same.

I grew up in a town where most children had light hair and pale skin and looked nothing like me. My sister and I were two of the only Chinese American children in our large suburb, a fact that I became aware of in junior high, when boys stretched the corners of their eyes and spoke gibberish Chinese to me in the hallways.

After long days at school, I sought refuge in Michelle Kwan's elegant spiral, Kristi Yamaguchi's triumphant smile, and Mirai Nagasu's unparalleled jumps. *They* were not beaten down by bullies. They were tough, powerful women. They were honored to represent their country and proud to be Asian American.

I wanted to be just like them. So, I started skating every weekend, first in group lessons and then in private lessons, where I earned blisters and bruises after crashing on the ice many, many times. But I fought to get back up (and invested in an unattractive but very useful butt pad that cushioned my falls). My body healed and grew strong. In more ways than one, I learned to fly.

In my middle-grade debut, *The Comeback*, Maxine Chen is a twelve-year-old Chinese American figure skater who is also trying to nail that perfect landing. Spunky and confident, she is determined to glide to glory. But she finds herself on uneven ice when a bully at school starts teasing Maxine about her Chinese heritage. And at the rink, she meets a talented new skater named Hollie, whose skill threatens to edge Maxine out of the competition.

While Maxine is a much better skater than I ever was, she embodies many of the same struggles and triumphs I endured. We have both learned that we can look to family and friends to help us battle bullies and forge unlikely friendships, even with our competitors. And we both know that there's more than one way to make a comeback.

This story is a love letter to all those who wrestle with their identities and learn to love who they are—who can find a place for themselves and strive to be great. Thank you so much for reading *The Comeback*.

Sincerely,



E. L. Shen



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The Comeback

Q&A with author E. L. Shen

1. How has your experience as a writer differed from your work as an editor? What has it been like being on the other side of the process?

This is such a good question! To be frank, I think that my author journey has enabled me to be a more empathetic and patient editor. When I'm juggling dozens of books, I often become lost in the number of projects on my plate and my subsequent efficiency. But as a writer, I'm focused on my singular story and my words. I'm understandably much more vulnerable and anxious. Recognizing these feelings in myself helps me to better understand my authors' worries, goals, and visions.

2. Maxine is an ice-skater, like you were. How much of your experience and childhood did you draw from while writing?

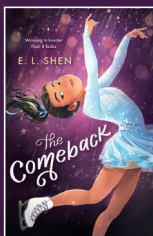
I started skating when I was nine years old after deciding I was going to become a late-stage figure-skating prodigy and "be on television." Alas, this did not happen. I joined a skating club, found a coach, attended skating boot camp, and competed in one competition (I came in fourth . . . out of four), before deciding to quit six years later to pursue my other passions. In a way, Maxine fulfills some of those dreams my younger self had. Maxine's identity, experiences with bullying, and general spunk, however, are all facets of my childhood self. In fact, Maxine's "comeback list" is almost identical to one I made in middle school. Like Maxine, I wrote down the insults I received at school, made up responses, and practiced them to perfection. I even tried to force my friends to bully me over email to bolster my comebacks. As you might expect, they felt very uncomfortable doing this and refused.

3. Maxine is learning to juggle many things throughout the novel: middle school, dealing with a bully, and competitive ice-skating. What advice would you give to her in handling these aspects of her life? How do you juggle the day-to-day struggles in your own life?

My advice is always: Lean on your loved ones for support! Often, we think we need to take on life alone. Maxine, for example, is too embarrassed to tell her parents about Alex bullying her, and too prideful to confess that she's jealous of Hollie. But if she communicated with her parents, coach, and teachers, she might realize that they are more than happy to offer understanding and guidance. I, for one, constantly turn to my family and friends whenever I'm feeling sad or overwhelmed. Even in the pandemic, I talk to my two best friends from middle school every day. I'm lucky to have them by my side to go through life's daily trials and tribulations.

4. What is your favorite skating move, and what is the most complex trick that you can do?

My favorite move has to be the Biellmann spin, which is when a skater holds one foot over and behind their head to form a teardrop. It's such a difficult move, but when executed properly, it's stunning. As far as my own tricks, I just resumed skating lessons last year, so I'm still pretty rusty. Right now, the most complicated combination jump I can do is a salchow toe-loop. When the rinks open again, I'm excited to nail my Lutz, and perfect my camel spin.



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5. Like Maxine and Hollie, we often feel in competition with others. What do you think Maxine can learn from Hollie and vice versa? Have you ever been in strong competition with someone, and what did you learn from that experience?

Sometimes, our competitors don't have to be our enemies. They can be our friends. That is one of the biggest lessons Maxine learns from Hollie when she realizes how kind, goofy, and sweet the talented new skater is. And in return, Hollie opens up to Maxine about her anxiety and the pressure she faces as a young skater. The person you're competing against often understands your struggles the best, a reality that rings true for both girls. I am certainly a competitive person myself so I understand how hard it is to lose. In college, I was up against my classmates for many a short-story award, which I, of course, wanted to win. But the best part was that while we were entering these writing competitions, we workshopped each other's pieces in our fiction class. I got to read some absolutely exquisite work. And when my classmates won these short-story competitions, I was so happy for them and so sure that they deserved these achievements, that I didn't even remember to feel sorry for myself. That, in itself, was a pretty rewarding feeling.

6. Who are some of your favorite professional ice skaters?

Oh goodness, I have too many favorites to count. Michelle Kwan, obviously, is the queen, and the woman who inspired my early love for skating. Yuna Kim is truly a legend—her artistry is unparalleled. Nathan Chen is a humble yet jaw-dropping powerhouse. I love every single one of Mariah Bell and Alena Kostornaia's programs. Jason Brown is an absolute delight. And Alysa Liu is a budding star. There are so many others, but in order to not bore you, I'll stop here.



7. As someone who is writing from an own voice perspective, what do you think of the representation of Chinese American children in children's literature? What do you hope your book will bring to the genre?

When I was a child, there were two books I read over and over again: *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius* by Lisa Yee, and *Good Enough* by Paula Yoo. Those were some of the only stories I could find at the time by Asian American authors about Asian American characters. Nowadays, authentic Asian American representation in children's literature is much more plentiful. I am thrilled (and a little wistful for my younger self). It is so important for BIPOC children to see themselves on the page. It is also necessary for everyone to read about and learn from experiences outside of their own identity and perspective. I hope that *The Comeback* is a lighthouse for every Asian tween pulling at their almond eyes, trying to fit in, and striving to be great. I see you, I hear you, I'm with you.



About the Author

E. L. Shen is a writer, editor, and former figure skater. Her childhood skating career was not nearly as prolific as Maxine's, but her personality is just as fiery. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Barnard College of Columbia University, where she majored in English with a concentration in creative writing. Originally from upstate New York, she currently resides in Manhattan.



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