

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

The Bone Collector's Boy

Grades 4 - 8

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1. Novel Summary

In 1907 Vancouver, 14-year-old Bing-wing Chan is miserable. His father has the dirty job of digging up human bones in graveyards to send back to China. He also gambles away all his earnings. Now Bing must join him at work. At their first job, they uncover a set of bones that lacks a skull. Bing is nervous about ghosts, so his father calls him a coward. Bing takes another job, even though his employer's house may be haunted. Bing finds himself trying to learn the truth behind two ghost stories. At the same time, anti-Chinese racism erupts violently in Chinatown, and Bing is caught in the midst of a destructive riot.

Bing and his father are immigrants living in an immigrant community, so these ideas around immigration are found in the story:

- High expectations of new homeland
- Disappointment in new homeland
- The importance of family
- Adapting to the new homeland
- Trying to succeed
- Impact of racism
- Different cultural practices

2. Author's Note

I wrote this story when Tradewind Books asked for a novel about Vancouver's anti-Chinese riot of 1907.

At first, I didn't think the riot would work in a book for young readers. The riot was a large, violent event that involved several thousand people. The mob swept through Chinatown quickly, in minutes. As well, the force behind the riot—anti-Chinese racism—was overwhelming in its power and scope at that time.

I was challenged by my publisher's interest in this topic. How could an uncontrollable riot fit into a realistic but believable story about ordinary people? I knew I wanted the riot to play a role in the novel. I didn't want the riot to be just in the background.

To me, ordinary people could not triumph against the immediate swell of the riot. Therefore, I decided to write a ghost story. Only a supernatural force could turn back crazed rioters. I also realized I needed several inter-connected levels of conflict in order to effectively draw the riot into the story.

3. Background

- In the 1900 decade Vancouver became home to Canada's largest Chinese community. Previously, it had been in Victoria.
- In the 1900 decade, 120,000 people lived in Vancouver. 3,5000 were Chinese.
- In and around Vancouver, the Chinese worked in land-clearing, logging, and fish-canning. They were servants, farmers, laundrymen, tailors and merchants.
- Canada tried to stop Chinese from immigrating by charging them a head tax. It was \$50 in 1885, \$100 in 1902 and \$500 in 1903. These amounts were worth much more at that time.
- People had emigrated from south China long before they came to North America. They established the practice of sending bones home to China for final burial.

4. The Craft of Writing

4.1. Setting

- 4.1.1. You are a newspaper reporter from Toronto visiting Vancouver. Write an article about what you see and feel while visiting Chinatown as described in this novel.
- 4.1.2. The novel takes the reader to the cemetery three times. Do you find the cemetery a scary place? Why or why not?
- 4.1.3. You are Bing, writing a letter to your cousin in China. Tell your cousin what it is like to live in Vancouver in 1907.

4.2. Character

- 4.2.1. You are Bing, writing a letter to your mother and grandmother. What do you tell them about yourself and Ba? You don't want to make them worry, yet you want them to understand some of your problems.
- 4.2.2. What is the reader's view of Ba before and after reading Chapter 13?
- 4.2.3. In Chapter 3, how do Uncle Won's views of Ba differ from those held by Bing?
- 4.2.4. Make a list of all the things that cause Bing to be afraid. How does Bing overcome his fear of each item?

4.3. Themes

- 4.3.1. Which of the following themes do you think best fits this novel? Why?
 - a. Conquering one's fears
 - b. The best of two worlds.
 - c. Keeping an open mind.
 - d. Loving a difficult parent.

5. Discussion Questions

- 5.1. Bing's father says he doesn't believe in ghosts. Was he lying? Or was he telling the truth until he dug up Shum's bones? In contrast, Bing fears ghosts from the novel's start. Does this make it easier for him to deal with the spirits he encounters?
- 5.2. This novel involves ghosts, but not every reader will find the story scary. Is this related to how the author tells the story?

- 5.3. Why does Bing throw Fortuneteller's stone into the waters of False Creek? What does this action symbolize?
- 5.4. As Bing tries to learn about the ghost at the Bentley house, he has problems getting information. Why was it difficult to learn about Mr. Bentley Sr.? How did Bing eventually put together the pieces of information to solve the mystery?
- 5.5. How are Mrs. Bentley's attitudes towards Bing alike and different from those held by Mrs. Moore?
- 5.6. There is a Chinese saying, "Do good, and good results; do bad, and bad results." What does this mean? How does this statement apply to this novel?

Questions regarding immigration.

- 5.7 High expectations of new homeland: What does Bing hear about Canada before coming to Canada? Does this make him want to come here or not?
- 5.8. Disappointment in new homeland: After arriving in Canada, what makes Bing unhappy with his new life?
- 5.9. The importance of family: What things in Canada remind Bing of his life in China?
- 5.10. Adapting to the new homeland: In a struggling immigrant community like Chinatown of 1907, why do you think a fortune-teller set up his shop there?
- 5.11. Trying to succeed: How does Bing's father try to succeed as an immigrant? What mistakes does he make?
- 5.12. Impact of racism: When Bing gets into fights with white people, he is always outnumbered. Why is this?
- 5.13. Different cultural practices: In the novel, there are ghost stories from the Chinese and European communities. Why do you think ghost stories are found in cultures all around the world?

6. Activities

- 6.1. The Canadian edition of the novel contains a map of early Vancouver. This map is called a *bird's eye view* map. Why this name? How is this map different from maps you see in atlases? Bird's Eye View maps were prepared for most major Canadian cities at the start of the 20th century. Can you find one for your city?
- 6.2. Many archives offer digital images of their historical photographs over the internet. For the 1900-1915 period, find photographs over the internet that show:
 - a. what men, women and children wore.
 - b. fire engines.
 - c. police officers
 - d. streetcars
 - e. horse and wagons used for deliveries
 - f. nurses
 - g. boxers

If possible, copy these images and share them with the class.

- 6.3. You are the police sergeant investigating the disappearance of Shum's skull at the hospital. A week after the riot, you write a report on the case. Describe the results of your interview with the hospital watchman and nurse who were on duty that night. How do you decide to deal with Bing and his father?
- 6.4. You are Mrs. Bentley. Write a letter to your husband describing some of the strange events that occurred in the house after the real estate agent's visit.
- 6.5. In this novel, many people are referred to by their nicknames (e.g. Dent-Head) or by a description (e.g. Red Checks). What nickname or alternate name would you give Bing, Ba, Lee Dat, Uncle Won, James, Mrs. Moore, Mr. Crew?

7. Further Reading

Yee Paul, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988, revised edition 2006).