How Books and Libraries Changed My Life

When I was little, I had an enormous secret—my parents and I were first-generation struggling immigrants from China, we lived in a motel, and life was very, very hard. Carrying around this secret was like carrying a gigantic backpack, one I could never put down, except when I was in the library.

We moved around a lot when I was a kid. I went to eight different schools for eight different grades. At some of these schools, the other kids would tease me about my weird-looking clothes (bought secondhand from a thrift shop) or my small eyes. I remember hiding in the library during lunch, crouching in between the aisles, hoping the librarian wouldn’t see me because we weren’t really supposed to be in the library at lunch. The librarian, of course, saw me. She came over, smiled at me—no judgment—and handed me a book.

From then on, I went to the library every day. What started out as my sanctuary, the only place I truly felt completely safe, quickly became so much more. Immersed in the pages of a book, I could be anyone. I could run alongside Lucy in Narnia and swim the chocolate lake in Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory! It didn’t matter that my parents and I worked seven days a week or that the last vacation my family took was coming here to this country—I could travel the world, be anyone, do anything!

And after I read each book, the wonderful librarians in my school would sit down with me and chat with me about
it. They would ask me questions that nobody ever asked me before, questions like "How did you feel after reading this book?" and "Did the ending make your heart sing?" I was so moved by their questions and their interest in me. It made me want to read more and I devoured book after book. I felt smart in the library, whereas in class, sometimes I felt a little dumb, particularly when we had to read out loud (which I wasn’t very good at) or we were given a difficult award-winning book, which for some reason I just couldn’t understand. On those days, I would shrink in my seat, wondering if I would ever make it out of the motels.

I did make it out of the motels. I went on to enter university at the age of 13 and graduated from UC Berkeley and Harvard Law School. I owe it all to the heroic librarians of this country who looked at me and didn’t see a poor motel girl with messy hair and tattered pants. They saw a girl with potential. A girl with promise in English, a language she wasn’t born with but through their kind, patient guidance, picked up and embraced as her own. The librarians saw something in me my own parents did not see. That is the only reason I am where I am today.

I am living, walking proof in the power of libraries and librarians to change lives. And now, as an author, I am so proud to be giving back, writing accessible and important books with diverse characters so that all children can see themselves in books. I hope my books bring hope and comfort to children of all walks of life, just as the librarians in my school brought me.

—Kelly Yang