

Book review on Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter **By Caren Shin**

In wealthy families, babies are born with a silver spoon in their mouths. Not quite for Adeline. In fact, the recount of Adeline Yen Mah's childhood is a relatively sad one even though her father was a millionaire. She was seen as bad luck to the family as her mother died after giving birth to her. She is always frowned upon by her older and younger siblings, neglected by her father and scolded by her stepmother. She has to learn to depend on herself as there was often no one to help her. The story reveals the two sides of her family: on the surface it is friendly and caring, while inside one can realize how the children are really treated by their stepmother Niang. As the youngest of five children from her father's first marriage, Adeline has to suffer many blows because every one looks down on her especially when she receives her father's praise. Adeline's main reason for her love of school was to be away from her stepmother so that she could become a different person that was admired by her peers as she topped her class regularly. Her whole personality changed when she was away from her Niang and with someone that knew her from the heart; her friend Wu Chung-Mei, her Ye Ye and Aunt Baba.

At age eight, Adeline was given a duckling, the only one left after all her siblings had picked their choice. Although it was not the best duckling, she still loved it dearly and treasured every opportunity that she could get with it. She named it Precious Little Duckling (PLT). I think this illustrates her love for her pet and that she was pleased that her siblings had left her one. It also gives a comparison of how each sibling is treated by their parents. Since she was the youngest and the least likely to make a fuss, her big brother took her duckling when her father ordered him to test the obedience training of his dog Jackie. Adeline immediately sensed her duckling's fate; she knew that PLT was going to die. When Jackie's demonstration of obedience was over, PLT was bleeding and passed away next morning. Adeline and her third brother buried PLT under a magnolia tree.

Adeline was saddened by the above incidence and recalled every time when she sensed the presence of a magnolia, she would remember PLT. I feel this demonstrates the love she felt for PLT and how heartbreaking the experience was. Throughout this passage of the story, I envision there are many emotions often shown as colours that were being pressed into Adeline's mind: white, yellow, black and brown. I have chosen these colours because white represents the magnolias, yellow symbolizes the feathers of PLT, black for the grim horror that happened, and brown for the eyes of PLT and the earth on top of PLT's grave.

When Adeline became a sixth former at Sheng Xin (Sacred Heart) Primary School, a democratic election was held in their class to see who would be their class president and head girl of the whole school. She teamed up with her friend Wu Chun-Mei who won the election for her. On her triumphant day, many of her supporters went to her house to give her presents. Her father and Niang were very upset and annoyed at the fact that Adeline's friends were at their house, disturbing them. When she was called to her father's room for the cause for all her friends to be there, Adeline did not know. Niang did not believe her and slapped her making her nose bleed. In front of all her friends (with blood still dripping down her face) she told them to go away because her father was sleeping. Then she was told to open all her presents in front of her parents and throw them all in the rubbish bin. I experience the sadness she has felt when she was

humiliated by her stepmother. Adeline must have had a determination not to show her weakness by crying. After this incident, Niang ordered her to pack all her things as Adeline, Niang and her father were going to Tianjin on an airplane. As she was on the plane, they had to fill out landing cards. Adeline's father forgot Adeline's Chinese name and her date of birth. Since her father had forgotten her Chinese name, Adeline felt deeply hurt as her father confused her name with her little sister's. This meant that her father had forgotten all about her and had only remembered her little sister, even though she was his *real* daughter. I feel dreadful at the thought that her father could forget her name. Her date of birth became her father's; November 30 because her date of birth was unknown.

In this story of Adeline Yen Mah's childhood life, I felt many ups and downs and how she might have felt. It was surprising to see a girl like Adeline being humiliated in front of her friends who wanted to support her. If I were in her shoes, I would feel scared and frightened because the supporters might not support me anymore because they had known of the family ugliness. I think that this family ugliness was hidden from other people seeing it by Niang and Adeline's father. To prove this point, when Niang met other people, she wanted them to know that the family only had her two children. She kept the five children from her husband's first marriage in the dark, thus swerving Adeline's father into forgetting his former wife's younger children including Adeline.

Her father and Niang went with Adeline to Tianjin and left her as a border in St Joseph's School. At first, there were many people attending the school but soon Adeline was the only student left in the whole school. All of them fled from the communist army. I feel how she must have felt in these circumstances as no one was bothered to look after her while she was the only student. She would feel bewildered and frightened at the same time as she was being punished from negligence by her father and stepmother. During this story I feel Adeline's sadness, despair and happy moments. I feel very grateful that I am in a different family and that I did not have to go through what Adeline had to undergo. The story of her childhood is a very sad one, but I hope that other children do not have to suffer the same case as she did. Her life had many hopeful and downhearted moments she had and only determination helped her live through this dark period. Encouragement from her Aunt Baba and her Ye Ye was the only source to give her the strength to be a good scholar and prove her Niang wrong.

In this story, Adeline has a message to neglected and unloved children of the world - within every one there is something precious and unique. Her childhood experience brings out the importance of perseverance in life. One must persist to do one's best when one is hopeless, to have the faith when one's spirit is down, and to change fears into courage and strength. Everyone of us can be Cinderella and successful as Adeline if we hold her belief that "one single positive dream is more important than a thousand negative realities."

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