

Year of the Horse for kids

*The Year of the Horse:
Tales from the Chinese Zodiac*
Written by Oliver Chin
Illustrations by Jennifer Wood
Immedium, 2014
Hardcover, 36 pages, \$15.95

By Marie Lo

The Asian Reporter

Five-year olds are a picky and particular bunch, and mine is no exception.

"Mom, this potato is touching the carrot. I can't eat it."

"There is a dot on this picture. It's ruined!"

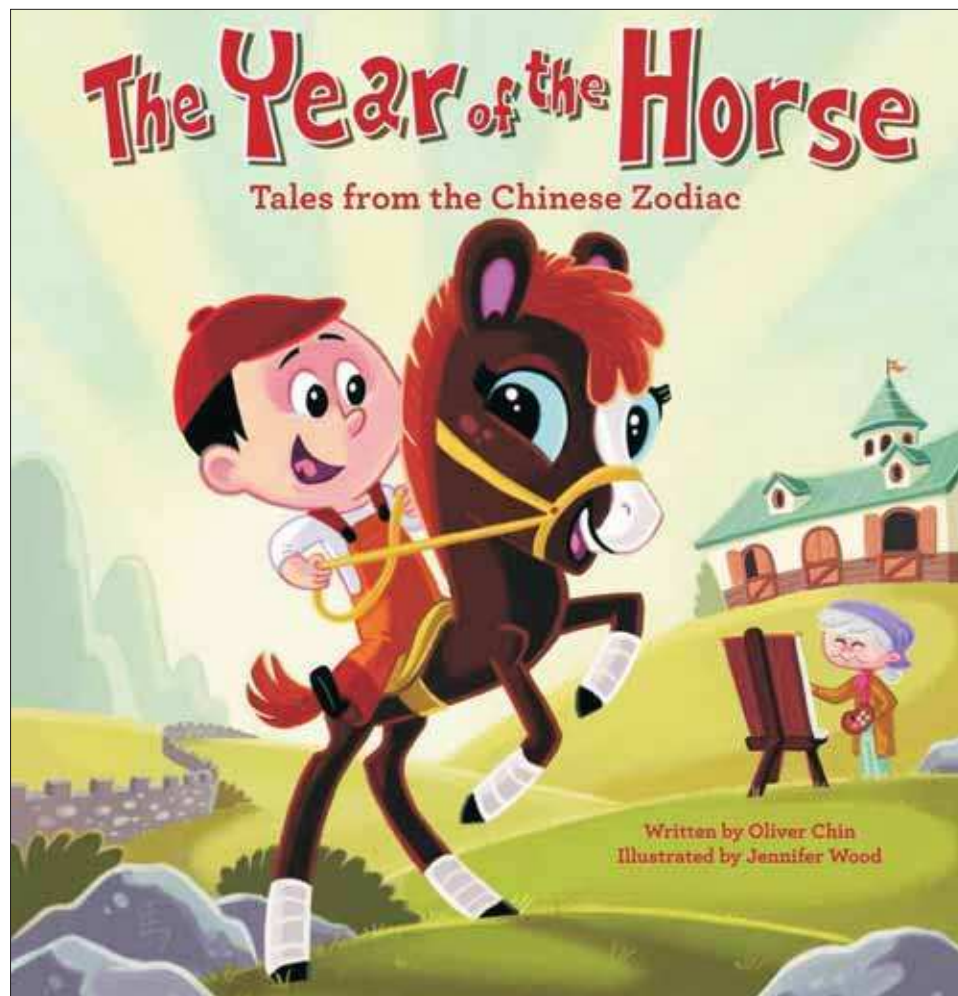
"Don't wear those tights — there's a big hole at the knee."

"But, mom, I love holes."

When it comes to books, she is the same way. There doesn't seem to be a rhyme or reason for why some books are loved and others are neglected. It may have to do with the book being too colorful or not colorful enough, the pictures too small or too big, or there being too many words or not enough. Who knows? She uses her own random algorithm of plot, pictures, and color to decide, and at this developmental stage, I'm embarrassed to say, she does judge a book by its cover.

Therefore, when the opportunity to review *The Year of the Horse: Tales from the Chinese Zodiac* by Oliver Chin came along, I wasn't sure how she would react.

As part of a series that features the signs of the Chinese zodiac, this one follows Hannah, a foal who embarks on a journey with young Tom to deliver art to the governor. Along the way, she demon-



strates the characteristics that typify people born in the Year of the Horse, and which the book sums up as energetic and animated, proud and attention-seeking, hot-blooded, headstrong, steadfast, and resilient.

The illustrations are adorable and bright, and hidden throughout the book are the other 11 zodiac signs. This

encourages children to learn the other signs and invites them to look out for them as they read.

My daughter's verdict: "I liked it."

Here is her review in full: "I liked it because [Hannah] proved she's big and strong and she said I can do it and she didn't give up and didn't have a frown."

While this story has a sweet message

and is entertaining, for parents interested in educating their children about Chinese culture they might be disappointed.

The story is a mishmash of Chinese and western cultures and is decontextualized from any particular time period. The main protagonists, Hannah and Tom, have all-American names, while the older generation has Chinese names and titles such as Uncle Fu, Auntie Yi, and Lao Shi, which simply means teacher.

Similarly, the older generation wears robes that are typical of ancient China while Tom wears a riding cap and overalls. Even the cover of the book reflects this confusion. There are grey and rolling mountains reminiscent of Chinese paintings and the fence seems to refer to the Great Wall. The stable, on the other hand, seems to be modelled after those in European fairytales, complete with turrets and a banner.

These may be rather picky details, and this kind of cultural hybridization is very typical of many cartoons today. (It is not a coincidence, I think, that the illustrator, Jennifer Wood, works for studios such as Nickelodeon and the Cartoon Network.)

Ultimately, how this story will be read will depend on how parents want to approach the book. For an engaging story about a lively, resilient, and steadfast horse named Hannah, then this book would fit the bill. But if parents are interested in using the book as a way to teach children about China or Chinese culture, there are better selections out there.

My own reservation aside, my daughter loves it. She is already asking to read more books in this series.



My team. My possibility.

At the Port of Portland, we stand together, richer for our differences. We celebrate the wisdom of collaboration and the strength of diversity.

www.portofportland.com

 **PORT OF PORTLAND**
Possibility. In every direction.®