

Asian-American girls saw pivotal icon in *Baby-Sitters Club*

By Terry Tang
The Associated Press

Author Ann M. Martin had no master plan when she decided to make one of the core members of *The Baby-Sitters Club* a Japanese-American girl named Claudia.

Claudia Kishi happened to be everything the “model-minority” stereotype wasn’t. She got bad grades. She thrived in art and fashion. She wasn’t struggling to belong. For those reasons and more, Asian-American girls in the ’80s and ’90s idolized Claudia and felt seen in teen fiction. Some of those now grown fans concede the books fall short dealing with race, but a new Netflix adaptation is bringing Claudia (and her pals) into the modern age.

In addition to the series that’s available now, the streaming service has released *The Claudia Kishi Club*, a short documentary. It’s filmmaker Sue Ding’s love letter to Claudia-philes.

“I want the vibe of the film to be you’re at a *Baby-Sitters Club* sleepover with your closest friends and you’re reminiscing,” Ding said.

In the 17-minute documentary, a handful of Asian-American writers and illustrators effuse about how influential the character was for that time.

“For some, their parents were actively not supportive of them pursuing more artistic career choices,” Ding said. “Even for those whose families were supportive, they didn’t necessarily see people like themselves working in media as directors or painters.”

Among those she interviewed was Naia Cucukov, one of *The Baby-Sitters Club*



ASIAN-AMERICAN ICON. This image released by Netflix shows Momona Tamada portraying Claudia Kishi in a scene from the Netflix series *The Baby-Sitters Club*, based on the popular book series. With 180 million copies in print worldwide, the books were a juggernaut during their 1986-2000 run. (Kailey Schwerman/Netflix via AP)

professor of library and information science at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, and a “BSC” fan, said Claudia is only one of two Asian-American characters she can cite from her own childhood reading.

A combination of little encouragement from Asian-American parents and the publishing industry contributed to that, Dahlen believes. After decades of pushing for more diverse voices in children’s books, school libraries started receiving federal funding in the ’60s and ’70s to help expand reading choices. But then came a “conservative backlash” against multiculturalism, which led to skittish publishers and dried-up funds, Dahlen said.

“It was a combination of those things that caused this desert of diverse books in the 1980s and a little bit through the 1990s as well,” she said.

Marie Myung-Ok Lee, founder of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, recalls the difficulties of getting her first young adult novel, *Finding My Voice*, sold in the early ’90s even with the support of popular author Judy Blume. One publisher rejected the book, about a Korean-American teen in an all-white town, because “We had a book about Cambodia last year,” Lee said.

Today, there are a lot more Asian Americans populating young adult fiction. But Lee, who also teaches at Columbia University, said various studies indicate

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series producers. She remembers Claudia’s “aura of cool” jumping off the page.

“As an Asian-American kid growing up having only seen depictions of nerds, geisha, the villain, having that extra layer of someone who could be aspirational was incredible,” Cucukov said.

Another documentary participant, Sarah Kuhn, whose fourth novel in her *Heroine Complex* sci-fi series came out last month, called Claudia “this connective tissue between a lot of Asian girls.”

“Just when you mention her name on Twitter, it summons an entire generation,” Kuhn said. “It speaks to her lasting contribution.”

With 180 million copies in print worldwide, *The Baby-Sitters Club* books were a juggernaut during their 1986-2000 run. They follow Claudia, Kristy, Mary Anne, Stacey, and Dawn and their

babysitting adventures in the fictional suburb of Stoneybrook, Connecticut. The books are often credited with showcasing teenage girls as entrepreneurs.

Martin, who wasn’t available for interviews, was not trying to make a statement about Claudia’s ethnicity, said David Levithan, an editorial director and publisher at Scholastic who’s worked with Martin since 1992. She based the character on a Japanese-American friend from elementary school. In present day, Levithan thinks authors writing a protagonist of a different ethnicity would have “to be doing it for a reason, to have a connection to it, and make sure they got it right.”

It may seem odd that a white female author created an Asian-American icon, but the ’80s weren’t exactly conducive to Asian-American writers.

Sarah Park Dahlen, an associate

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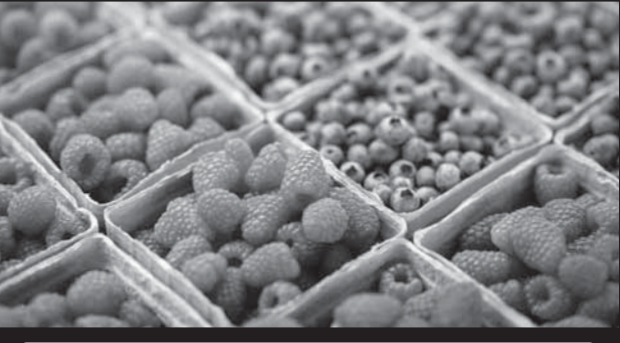
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