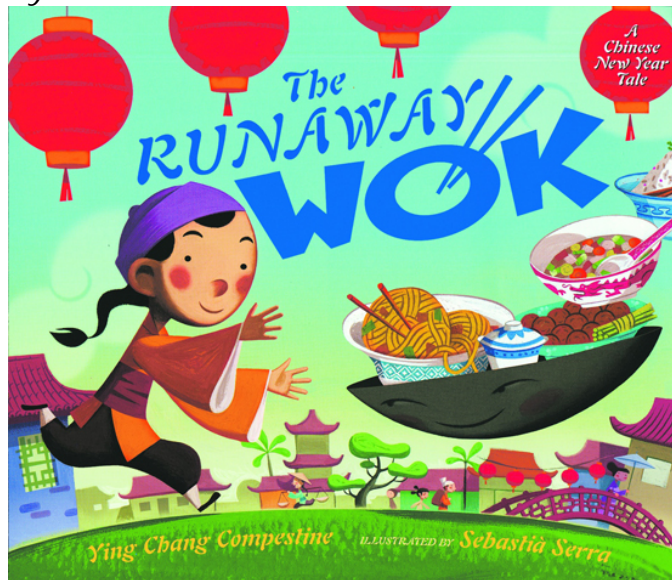


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Compestine's The Runaway Wok Heralds a New Year

By Lou Fancher



Cover image for The Runaway Wok provided

The 2011 Chinese New Year begins February 3rd, and Yin Chang Compestine's *The Runaway Wok* (Dutton) is the perfect non-edible way to celebrate.

The Lafayette author's new children's book, illustrated with vibrant intensity by Barcelona's Sebastia Serra, tells the story of Ming, a poor boy whose happy encounter with a runaway wok brings joy to his family and neighbors.

Ming's mother sends the boy to the market with their last remaining eggs, directing him to purchase enough rice to share with others. His father laments their poverty: despite the fact that he works for Mr. Li, the richest man in Beijing, the family faces a sparse New Year's celebration.

Instead, the wok "skippity-hoppity-ho's", retrieving a bounty of food, toys, and even gold coins from the stingy Li family.

Ming and his parents demonstrate their generosity amidst sudden abundance: "Mother Zhang served the food; Father Zhang divided the coins up among the families; and Ming handed out the toys to all the children."

Compestine avoids what could have been a too-sweet, heavy-handed lesson on sharing with a shadowy twist, when the wok swallows up the Li family and carries them away, never to be seen again.

"I wanted to write about Chinese culture and traditions, but in a fun way," Compestine said, in an interview about the book's origins. "I love folk tales. My editor, Stephanie Lurie, asked me, 'Have you read this Danish folk tale?' I read it at noon, wrote my story, and emailed it to her at 11:00 that night. The next day, she made me an offer."

It was the fastest Compestine has ever sold a book; she frequently writes 50-60 drafts and often exceeds even her editors' desire to "make it just this much better."

The intensity comes, in part, from her early years and her relationship with food.

"For many years in China, food was always scarce. So people treat it with respect. You offer the people you love the food, even if it means less for you. Food represents sharing, happiness, celebration," she explained.

The author of a number of cookbooks, Compestine spends the equivalent of months on the road; visiting schools, leading cruise workshops, and addressing writer's clubs.

"I am so busy!" she exclaimed, explaining the lack of local signings for *The Runaway Wok*. "I love visiting children at schools."

With a son, Vinson, a junior at Campolindo High School, Compestine says her parenting style falls in between Chinese and American.

"I have high standards, but I let him have a lot of fun. We are very equal and I encourage him to be open."

She said the best thing she can do for him as a parent is to take him to the real China.

"It's harsh conditions, but it's important. I want him to really understand his roots and to see how fortunate he is. In this country, with so much, it's easy for kids to forget about sharing."

Compestine usually celebrates the New Year with a family dinner or a party with friends, but this year she will be on the road, talking about her book and encouraging readers to practice the ancient art of sharing.

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