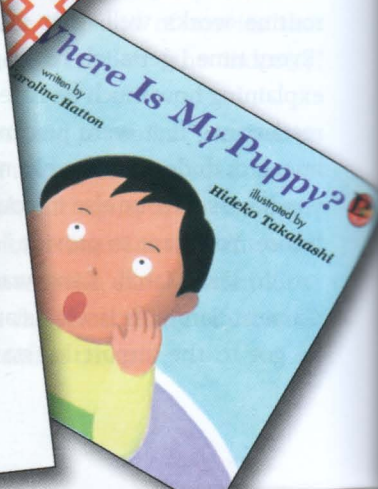
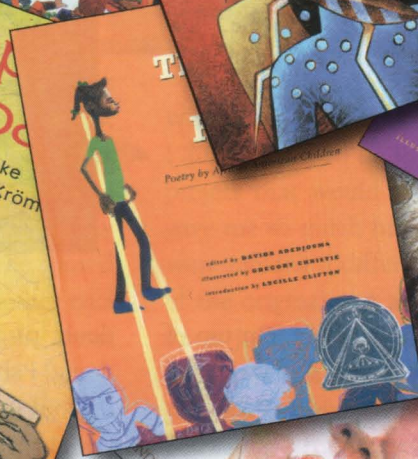
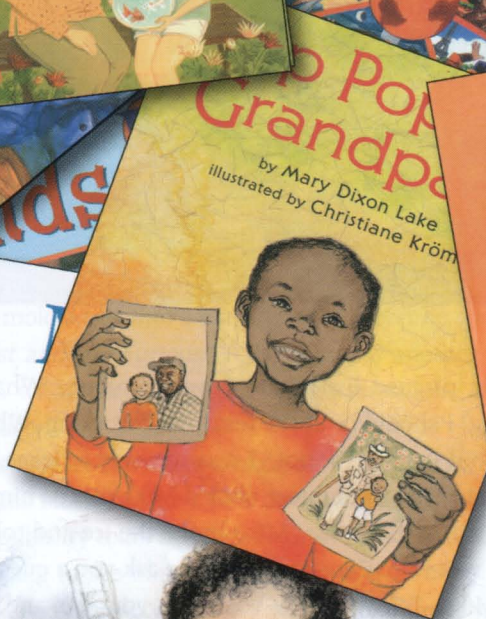
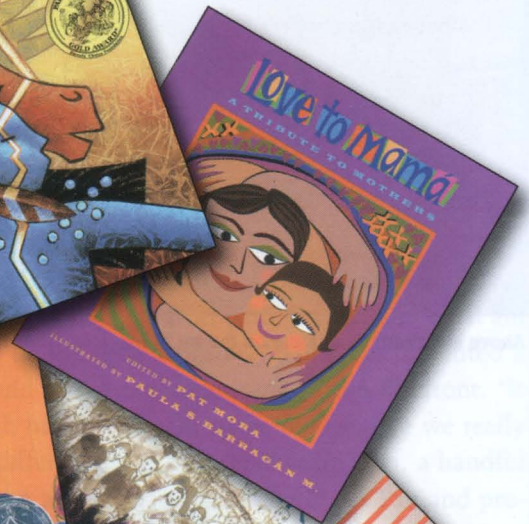
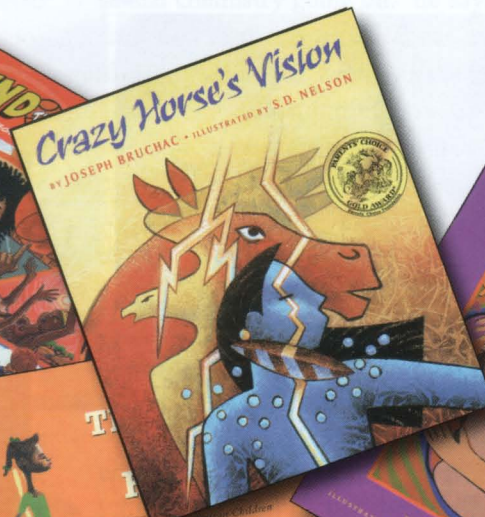
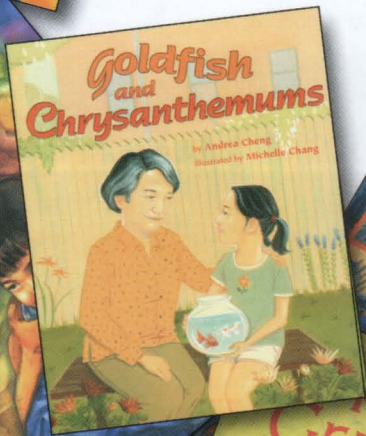
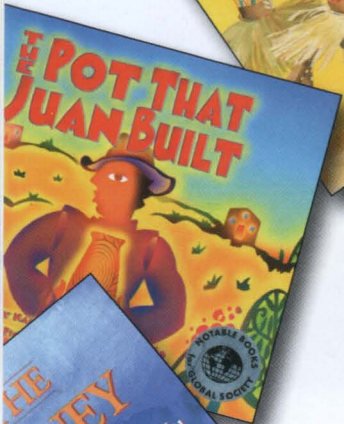


Lee & Low's journey bringing multicultural children's tales to young Americans everywhere is a story waiting to be told.

A Storybook Tale

STORY Lan N. Nguyen



Of the 4,000 children's books published in the U.S. in 1989, only 48 were written by or about African Americans, representing an anemic 1.2 percent. In 1994, of the 4,500 children's books published, only 473 books were about and by African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans, representing just 10 percent.

The Manhattan office of children's book publisher Lee & Low resembles most publishing offices: the walls are lined with books and the vibe is serene even while people buzz with work. The only clues a visitor might have that this is no ordinary publisher are the brown, yellow and black faces featured on the many book jackets. Lee & Low is a rare bird in what continues to be a Caucasian-dominated industry: an independent publisher owned by minorities that specializes in multicultural books for children ages 5 to 12.

The brainchild of Chinese American friends Tom Low and Philip Lee, Lee & Low has been publishing contemporary children's tales since 1991, from stories of historical figures and events like the Japanese internment experience in *Baseball Saved Us* to bilingual works like *Poems to Dream Together/Poemas Para Sonar Juntos*.

What readers won't find are folktales or stories about cute little animals. "The few multicultural books we saw at the time [in 1991] were a high percentage of folktales," says Craig Low, vice president and publisher of Lee & Low's Bebop Books, an imprint aimed at beginning readers. "We wanted to create stories about kids who could be your friend, neighbors, kids that our readers could identify with."

Since launching their first list in 1993, Lee & Low books have garnered much acclaim, from the Coretta Scott King Award to the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature. But perhaps the greatest achievement is that the business has grown to a staff of 15 in New York City (not including a sales staff of 100 reps and a warehouse staff of three in New Jersey) who publishes about 15 hardcover books a year.

"Our greatest accomplishment is the company's reputation for publishing great books year after year," says publisher Jason Low, 40. "When the company was founded, some believed and some did not believe that a publishing company focusing on diversity could be successful. We have disproved the naysayers."

Another crowning achievement was finding and nurturing minority authors and illustrators, says Craig. "For us, a book to be multicultural obviously features characters who are multicultural, but there is also the aspect of cultivating more people of color to the publishing world," says the 37-year-old father of two daughters. "That's why we hold a New Voices contest every year [since 2000]. It's cash prizes and a publishing contract."

Once Upon a Time

Tom Low, born in Queens, N.Y., was at loose ends in 1987 after selling his temporary service business. So the father of Jason and Craig, who were in college at the time, started to take classes in Manhattan in the hopes of writing a novel. Seven months later, Tom had a novel ready to sell. But like many first-time authors, he received a less than enthusiastic reception.

By 1989, he started thinking about launching another business and, after many networking meetings, Tom became interested in doing something for the Asian American community. A conversation with Philip Lee, then a marketing executive at *GQ magazine*, planted the idea of investing in a children's book publisher that specialized in multicultural books.



The colorful and highly detailed pages of some of Lee & Low's popular books.



Founder of Lee & Low Books Tom Low, far right, and his sons who have now taken over the business, Craig and Jason.

"There was a void in children's books," recalls Tom, now 65. "Most of the books were targeted to Caucasians or contained animals or fairy tales. There was nothing dealing with contemporary issues and people of color. The few that did primarily focused on African American titles. I felt it was a niche we could fill. I felt the books that we could publish would be important. It turns out we were right."

At the time, the offerings were pretty skimpy. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), a study and research library at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education, of the 4,000 children's books published in the U.S. in 1989, only 48 were written by or about African Americans, representing an anemic 1.2 percent.

When the CCBC started collecting stats about books by and about all minorities in 1994, the picture didn't get much brighter. Of the 4,500 children's books published, only 473 books were about and by African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans, representing just 10 percent.

Funded with \$1 million of Tom's own money, Lee & Low was incorporated in 1991 and published its first titles in 1993. By 1997, the company was in the black and well on its way to making a difference. Some of the books they are most proud of publish-

ing include *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan*, and *Elizabeth's Doll*, a tale of a Tanzanian girl who takes a rock as a doll.

"Lee & Low is one of the best," says CCBC director Kathleen Horning. "They were far beyond the presses that started up. They knew how to market things. And one of the things they did really well was finding new authors and illustrators and nurturing them."

Dora Ho, vice president of the Chinese American Librarians Association, agrees, adding, "Lee & Low differs from presses like Shen Books and China Sprout in that although they are a small publisher, they are in the mainstream of publishing multicultural materials in terms of the quality of work of their artists and writers."

According to Family Legend

In 1997, Tom's sons Jason and Craig joined Lee & Low, making the publishing house a family endeavor. Jason, who graduated from college in 1989 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts from New York's Parson's School of Design, was launching his own web design business when he considered working for his dad. "I joined the company for one simple reason: the mission," he says, himself a father of two sons. "I wanted to be a part of something meaningful." Jason eventually took over the helm in 2004 as publisher when Philip Lee retired.

While Jason was pondering the move, Craig too was looking for a change. After two years working for the children's wing of MacMillan publishing, Craig was working at a nonprofit that handled pensions for academia and became bored. He was plotting a return to book publishing when dad Tom suggested that he come work for Lee & Low.

"I mulled it over and talked to my brother," recalls Craig. "Ultimately, I decided to come on board." He started in the order department, rather than the boardroom, learning how to cut checks, enter bills and operate in a small business. Craig now oversees the company's sales and operations as well as heading Bebop Books.

Of course, there are challenges to working with family in a small business. The company has an annual acquisition budget of 20 manuscripts with a print run for each book in the first year typically only 15,000 copies, so acquisition meetings between the Lows and the editorial staff of three can get quite interesting.

Still, the three men wouldn't have it any other way. "Working with family has been so rewarding and brings me comfort knowing that people I've known my entire life are working towards a common goal," says Jason.

"We're able to get together on a regular basis and keep our personal relationship updated and also have the professional experience of challenging one another," says Craig. "I am amazed I am still here after 10 years. I am in no way, shape or form bored with this business."

Nor do they have any intention of selling out. "My children and Craig's are very young," says Jason. "It's too early to tell with our children. Considering what Lee & Low has given to Craig and me, I would be proud to bring the children into the business one day. It would be an honor to share what we have built."

Still a Long Way to Go

Since Lee & Low's inception, the landscape for multicultural books has changed — slightly for the better. According to the CCBC, of the 3,000 children's books they received in 2006, 546 were written by or were about minorities, representing 18 percent of the market.

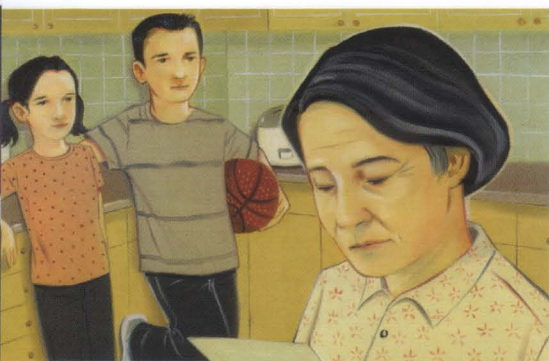
Lee & Low's contribution this fall includes *Hiromi's Hands*, a true account of a Japanese American girl who defies tradition to become one of New York City's first female sushi chefs, and *Chess Rumble*, a yarn narrated in free verse about a boy who learns to use his brain instead of his fists through chess. The company is also set to

"We wanted to create stories about kids who could be your friend, neighbors, kids that our readers could identify with."

— Craig Low, vice president and publisher of Lee & Low's Bebop Books

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— Jason Low, publisher of Lee & Low



Some of the illustrations of Lee & Low's multicultural children's books.

expand in the future as well. "As we grow, we will be adding additional products, whether it's CD-ROM or online products to sell to schools and libraries," says Tom, who still oversees the direction of the company and has a hand in sub rights and permissions. "We would also love to represent the authors more so we might eventually set up a site to sell original art. We are not content to being what we are. In order to stay in business you have to grow, and to provide opportunity for your staff you have to expand. That has always been my philosophy."

Still, there is much to be done, say the experts. One way Lee & Low could help further is to expand its scope. For CCBC's Kathleen Horning, "because Lee & Low has such a great track record of finding new voices, it would be great if they could start doing chapter books."

Elizabeth Bird, a children's librarian at the New York Public Library and a blogger on children's books at fusenumber8.blogspot.com, also wishes that Lee & Low could include older children in their mission. "I was on the Newberry committee last year and saw firsthand the severe lack of books containing subject matter and characters that weren't white as newly driven snow. We need something for older readers to latch on to."

Lee & Low certainly hopes to grow and "increase our sales so we can provide more opportunities for our staff," says Craig. And by continuing to do what they do, Jason hopes that "one day there will be no need to distinguish the kind of publishing we do as 'multicultural.' The stories will just be stories about extraordinary people." ❁

More Multicultural Books for Children

Red, yellow, black and white – multicultural publishing companies for children's books are diversifying kids' bookshelves.

Shen's Books

Maywan Shen Krach, the founder of Shen's Books, was a bilingual teacher from California. After visiting Asia, where she was looking for materials to share with her students, she was inspired to start a multicultural publishing company. Founded in 1985, Shen's Books was named after her Chinese parents. Today, the company distributes more than 2,000 children's titles and boasts more than 60 different versions of the Cinderella story. Krach sold the company to the Ting Family in 2001, who remain committed to the vision of spreading cultural understanding through literature. For more information on resources and people dedicated to increasing diversity in the youth's imaginations, visit Shen's Blog at www.shens.com/blog.

China Sprout

Though it's not a publishing house, China Sprout adds to the cultural mix with its specifically Chinese cultural and educational products, including books, music, arts and crafts, home décor, clothing and more. The online distributor's mission is to promote institutions as well as stores and boutiques that are interested in Asian cultures and lifestyles. The company distributes bilingual storybooks, translated Western books and other stories about Chinese culture, like *Uncle Peter's Amazing Chinese Wedding* and *Chopsticks*, in addition to folktale books and a series on the Monkey King, a popular figure and main character in *Journey to the West*, a classical Chinese epic novel.

Scholastic, Inc.

A well-known name in the children's publishing community (not surprisingly), Scholastic Inc. is the largest publisher and distributor of children's books in the world. Part of its mission is to provide products and services that will help children recognize the importance of reading, and understand the world around them. It has been in business for more than 85 years and is also an education and media company. The company reaches more than 35 million children through its distribution businesses, including Scholastic Trade, the Scholastic Book Clubs, Scholastic At Home and its book fairs. They offer a sizable collection of Asian-themed books as well.

— Joanna Wu