

book  
REVIEWS

## INTRIGUE AND ASHES

SOLVING DIVERSITY IN  
YA GENRE LIT IS NO MYSTERY  
FOR VALYNNE E. MAETANI

BY VICTORIA LAW

ILLUSTRATION BY SARA GUINDON

What would you do if, 10 years after your father's death, you stumbled across a letter indicating that your parents had been keeping secrets from you?

In *Ink and Ashes*, 16-year-old Claire Takata finds a puzzling letter revealing that her stepfather and late father—whom she assumed were strangers—actually knew each other. She, her brothers, and their friends begin to dig deeper and discover a dangerous connection to the *yakuza*—a transcontinental Japanese crime organization—that might jeopardize their lives.

*Ink and Ashes* is Valynne E. Maetani's debut novel, a fast-paced, thrilling read that kept me up until 3 a.m. It's also the first winner of Tu Books New Visions award, which was modeled after Lee & Low's New Voices award for unpublished picture-book authors of color. Tu Books is the fantasy, sci-fi, and mystery imprint of Lee & Low, and the award (which includes a cash prize and publishing contract) has brought more authors in these genres out of the shadows. "I personally think that science fiction and fantasy have a long way to go as far as diversity goes," noted Tu Books founder and editor Stacy Whitman. "Actively seeking writers of color is encouraging for new writers of color, particularly in genre fiction, because they're often told [by publishers], 'Realism is what we want from you.'" Even the finalists for the 2013 award have found agents and other publishers through the increased visibility accompanying their efforts. Middle-grade and YA authors of color, take note—the New Visions Award opens for submissions again in June 2015.

Scanning the YA shelves in any given bookstore reveals a plethora of books with white protagonists. Not many mysteries feature girls of color in the detective role. *Ink and Ashes* introduces readers to Claire Takata, a Japanese American teen who unwittingly gets embroiled in a mystery. It also demonstrates that books featuring girls of color don't need to focus exclusively on racism and overcoming societal challenges. Sometimes they can just be good, old-fashioned mysteries.

Maetani sat down to answer a few questions about the book, her inspiration, and why diversity matters in YA literature.

**What originally inspired you to write *Ink and Ashes*? Did that change over time?**

I have a sister who is quite a bit younger than me, so I wrote the book for her 18th birthday. Having grown up with two brothers and boys from two different families, I wanted her to get a glimpse of what it was like to be surrounded by so many boys. The other thing I wanted her to have was a book with a Japanese American protagonist. I never got to see myself in books unless the main character was in a setting involving war, an internment camp, or high fantasy. I thought the greatest gift I could give her was a book I never got to read.

**How long have you been writing? Who were your writing inspirations when you first started *Ink and Ashes*?**

I have been writing for almost seven years now, and mysteries have always been a passion of mine. In my day, there weren't a lot of young adult options, but I read Lois Duncan and V. C. Andrews. And then I discovered Agatha Christie and fell in love. As I began to revise *Ink and Ashes*, it seemed impossible to create something even remotely similar to Christie. Mette Ivie Harrison, author of the mystery *The Bishop's Wife*, told me I could do it, and then she offered simple advice that helped shape the book: "Make your readers believe anyone could have done it."

**Why did you choose to put the Takata family in Utah?**

Setting the Takata family in Utah was a decision made partially because I had grown up in Utah, but also because Utah seemed an unlikely place for a Japanese family to end up and, therefore, a safe place for a family who had secrets to hide.

**The Takatas aren't the only Asian (or even Japanese) people in Utah. Their ethnicity is never presented as an issue when they interact with others. Why did you choose not to involve any racial tension between them and other people in their community?**

While I think historical fiction is invaluable, every book I have ever read with Japanese American protagonists contained some form of racial tension or bias. As a young adult, I would have loved to have read a book where someone like me wasn't hated because of the way I look. Despite the lack of diversity, Utah's communities generally tend to be very accepting of all cultures, so I felt racial prejudice would not only distract from the plot, but would also be inaccurate.

**I found it interesting that Claire and her siblings don't read or write Japanese and, while they participate in some traditional rituals, don't have a full understanding of them. Why did you choose to write them that way?**

Many Japanese Americans whose families immigrated over a hundred years ago, like mine, were affected deeply by World War II. Some were placed in internment camps where they were not allowed to speak Japanese. There were Japanese people not interned, who chose voluntarily not to speak Japanese to their families and/or participate in rituals, in order to avoid persecution or prove they were loyal Americans. As a

result, there are traditions that have not been preserved in the way they might have been under different circumstances.

**In your author's note, you wrote that *Ink and Ashes* allowed you to write more about your heritage and the meanings behind some of the traditions. Can you give an example? Was there anything you learned that was a surprise?**

My paternal grandparents were especially superstitious. While they taught me things I shouldn't do or say, I never knew why, and I never thought to question my elders. Writing this story allowed me to go back and find answers. The most surprising thing I learned was why it is bad manners to pass food from your chopsticks to another person's chopsticks. I don't want to spoil anything in the book, so I won't explain why, but when I discovered the reasoning behind this, I thought, "How has no one told me this before? This is so fascinating!"

**Claire is the only girl among her two brothers and their gaggle of close friends. Why did you choose to have her be the sole girl?**

Placing Claire in a setting of predominantly males naturally created its own set of challenges—ones which I had faced and wanted to share with my sister. Our society tends to accentuate sex-distinction from birth, from the toys kids should play with to the roles they should fill. When a person doesn't fit this mold, it isn't easy for either gender to go against what women and men are "supposed" to do. Claire has the misconception that in order to be an equal and fit in with the boys, she has to abandon certain aspects of her character which she perceives as making her seem weak. Claire doesn't navigate this fight perfectly, but she's starting to find her voice and, with the help of the girls on her soccer team, a balance. I can imagine some teens will relate to Claire's struggles.

**How did you hear about the New Visions Award? Can you talk about your decision to enter?**

When I heard about the award, it was three weeks before the submission deadline. With so little time and a manuscript in dire need of revisions, I realized I couldn't make it. Determined to support their mission, I told myself I would send a manuscript in through their regular submission process at some later date.

## THE GREATEST GIFT I COULD GIVE [MY SISTER] WAS A BOOK I NEVER GOT TO READ.

But then someone replied to the announcement for the award in the following way: "I was slightly concerned to see that this publisher was seeking submissions for a contest, but only from writers 'of color.' It appears that the means to the laudable end of 'true diversity' in YA/MG lit is more submissions by 'authors of color.'" The person went on to ask why it mattered if the writer was white. She or he suggested Tu Books get rid of the term "of color" from all the fine print on their website.

I have read many wonderful books, with diverse characters, written by authors who are not "of color"—books that were meaningful and shed light on different cultures. But underrepresented voices are equally as important. This award matters. I am a Japanese American

writer who grew up in Utah surrounded by people who looked nothing like me and reading books about people who looked nothing like me. I am an author of color. Our voices matter.


At the time, I had buried myself in revisions for a different book that was being written with another author. Not wanting to slow the progress for my cowriter, I continued editing with him and squeezed in work on *Ink and Ashes* whenever possible. Fortunately, the New Visions Award submission required only a synopsis and the first three chapters of the book, so I worked hard and was able to get everything ready.

**Tell me about your own experiences with reading and seeing yourself (or not seeing yourself) in books as you were growing up. What are you hoping for your kids and for future generations of readers?**

One of the things I believe, passionately, is that every child deserves to grow up believing his or her story is important enough to be told. Children need to see themselves in books in a way I wasn't able to. Even though I was fortunate not to experience overt racism from the members of my community, I grew up feeling marginalized. I never

found myself in stories. There were no dolls or lead actors in movies who looked like me. At the heart of it, we are all humans at the mercy of human experiences, and our differences should be embraced and appreciated rather than dismissed.

#### What's next for you?

My current project is a collaboration with Courtney Alameda (author of *Shutter*) on a young adult Japanese horror/thriller titled *Seven Dead Gods* (working title), a retelling of Akira Kurosawa's film *Seven Samurai*. Our characters will be plagued by Japanese monsters instead of bandits and require the help of *shinigami*, death gods, to help protect them. After that, I hope to be working on the sequel to *Ink and Ashes*! 

**Victoria Law** is the author of *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* and the coeditor of *Don't Leave Your Friends Behind: Concrete Ways to Support Families in Social Justice Movements and Communities*. Her first writing assignment for *Bitch* was "Girls of Color in Dystopia," a blog series examining girls of color in YA dystopia. She likes to curl up with a good YA novel, particularly if the protagonist is a girl of color.

IF YOU'RE FEELING THE NEED TO DIVERSIFY YOUR YOUNG READER'S SHELVES, TU BOOKS HAS A FEW OTHER UPCOMING TITLES.

#### TRAIL OF THE DEAD by Joseph Bruchac (Fall 2015)

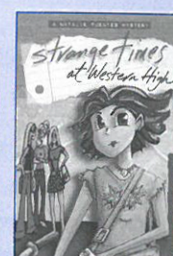
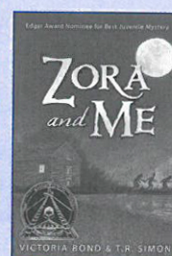
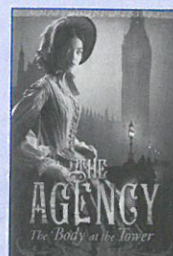
The sequel to the award-winning *Killer of Enemies*, this novel follows Apache teen Lozen as she fights genetically engineered monsters and tries to keep her family safe in a postapocalyptic world.

#### JUSTICE HIGH by Kimberly Reid (Spring 2016)

A mystery about Andrea Faraday, a teen from a con-artist family who joins forces with the local juvies to take down a corrupt politician.

#### SUMMER'S PROMISE by Uma Krishnaswami (Spring 2016)

In this middle-grade "A League of Their Own" story set in 1940s California, a Punjabi-Mexican American girl wants to play on her school's baseball team but must fight prejudice and tradition to do so.



#### LOOKING FOR OTHER MYSTERIES WITH FEMALE DETECTIVES OF COLOR?

##### THE AGENCY series by Y. S. Lee

Set in Victorian London, *The Agency* follows Mary Quinn, a thief-turned-spy, as she investigates theft and murder. At the same time, Mary struggles to keep her Chinese ancestry a secret and learn more about her father's disappearance.

##### ZORA AND ME by Victoria Bond and T. R. Simon

A fictionalized account of what Zora Neale Hurston might have been like as a child. Zora's always told tall tales. Her latest is about a shape-shifting gator man who lives by the marshes. When a man is found dead and headless by the railroad tracks, 10-year-old

Zora and her best friends are convinced that the gator man is the culprit. But how do they convince the rest of the town?

##### STRANGE TIMES AT WESTERN HIGH by Emily Pohl-Weary

On her first day of school, 16-year-old Natalie Fuentes not only gets on the bad side of the popular girls but also stumbles into a brutal attack on the school's janitor. The next day, she comes to school to find that someone has spray-painted "Back off nosy slut." But Natalie, who has been reading Nancy Drew since she was 10, is determined to uncover who attacked the janitor and why.