

# The BiblioFiles: Kat Yeh

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Hi, this is Dr. Dana. My guest is Kat Yeh, author of *The Truth About Twinkie Pie* and *The Way to Bea*. In *The Truth About Twinkie Pie*, we meet GiGi, a middle school student who, thanks to the efforts of her big sister DiDi, has moved to a new town and is entering a fancy new prep school. GiGi and DiDi are orphans. However, as the story unfolds, we learn that nothing is quite what it seems, both in GiGi's family and in the lives of the friends she makes at school.

Yeh's most recent chapter book, *The Way to Bea*, introduces us to Beatrix Lee. After a painful falling out with her best friends, Bea has decided to remain silent and invisible at school. But her mind and fingers can't be quiet, as she composes poetry and hides it in a special place in the woods. When someone begins leaving messages in response, Bea begins to understand that friendship, like life, can be complicated.

Yeh has a tremendous talent for characters, emotion, and capturing the tender, awkward, difficult, and uplifting parts of discovering who you are. Her stories fold you in immediately, bringing you into a circle of friends, a fight between sisters, the rush of realizing someone likes you. There is such strength and authenticity to her prose. Yeh's characters are meant to be discovered, shared, thought about, and loved. In addition to her chapter books, Yeh has also written picture books *The Friend Ship*, *You're Lovable to Me*, and *The Magic Brush: A Story of Love, Family, and Chinese Characters*. Kat Yeh, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

KAT YEH: Oh, thank you so much for having me.

DR. DANA: I'd like to start with your debut novel, *The Truth About Twinkie Pie*. DiDi and her sister originally hail from a trailer park in South Carolina. Their dynamic is unusual, as DiDi has assumed the motherly role for her little sister. So I have two questions. How did these characters originate, and which one entered your mind first, GiGi or DiDi?

KAT YEH: Well, I love talking about how this story originated because it really started a long time ago. And it came from a very special moment in my life, which was when my little sister, who is two years younger, got married. And I was her maid of honor, and she asked me to throw her a bridal shower. And she only had a few stipulations, and one of them was the food. And she said you know what? I really want to have this kind of groovy, cheesy, 60s, 70s hostess kind of vibe going on with the whole thing. And so we were all excited about it, and I threw this party. All the food was like Jell-O mold, kind of like the aspic, and the Jell-O with stuff floating in it, and things on a stick.

And afterwards, she said, wow, this is this is such a cool party. Let's, you and me, write a foodie movie that has a party like this and features food like this. And we had this whole plan. This was a good, maybe 17 years ago to do this, and it never happened. So, fast forward several years, and I still had this kind of foodie movie kind of feeling in my head. And I thought you know what? I'm just going to give it a try and see what happens. And I knew none of the characters. I had no plot ideas. I knew nothing, except I wanted a book that kind of ended with this kind of big fabulous party with this kind of food.

So I opened up my laptop to an empty page, and I thought you know what? I'll just start by writing a recipe. I read cookbooks all the time and I'm always looking at recipes. And I was trying to think of something that would be fun and kind of funny, and kitschy, and silly. And for some reason, Twinkie pie popped into my head. And we hadn't had it at my sister's party, but I'd heard of it, and I'd never eaten it before. I certainly had had Twinkies growing up in the 70s. And I thought OK, I know there's a thing called Twinkie pie. I'm just going to make up a recipe.

And so just on the fly, I started typing this recipe. And for some reason, instead of typing it sort of in standard recipe form, I started narrating a voice making the recipe. And the voice just kind of went, so the first thing you do is you take your Twinkies. Then you cut them up, and you soak them in maraschino cherry juice, just until the creamy insides turn the perfect shade of pinky red, just like Cherries in the Snow lipstick, which is the only lipstick my mom ever wore. As a matter of fact, if she went into a drugstore, and it wasn't there, she'd walk into the next one and the next one and the next.

And for some reason, this recipe kind of went off on a little tangent. And when I was looking at it later, I thought, wow. I kind of like this little lipstick thing I threw in in the middle of that recipe. And little did I know that would sort of become the driving plot point of the entire story. And that voice ended up being GiGi's.

DR. DANA: Accents can be difficult to write, but I think you nailed the cadence of GiGi and DiDi's Southern accents. Did you need to research those?

KAT YEH: Oh, you know what? I actually did. Part of it felt very natural, and I don't know if that is just from a lifetime of being an observer. I was always sort of the quiet person that was in the corner watching everyone and listening. I was always really a people watcher. And so I think maybe I had stores and stores, sort of in the back cabinet of my brain of all these voices I'd ever heard. But absolutely after I started drafting the story, both of my brothers and my father at one point had spent a lot of time in the South. I used to visit my brothers when they lived in the South. And of course, my dad had all these stories when he first immigrated to the US and was living in the South.

And one of our best friends from college lived there, and I called him up. And I said I'm working on a novel, and the characters are Southern. And I'd really like to come visit, and spend some time, and do some research, not only into the voices, but also into sort of what trailer parks were like. Because there were so many different kinds, and I really wanted to be open to not only the ones in the book, which might be a little scary or downtrodden, but also the beautiful ones and

the homey ones. And the food, just kind of checking out the food and the people. There really was a lot that I researched going into this.

DR. DANA: DiDi is a hairdresser, but she's also an informal chef. She actually wins a million dollars in a cooking competition before the book begins. So you talked about food. Every chapter of this book includes a recipe for something related to what's happening. Where did you find the recipes?

KAT YEH: Well, that was an interesting mix of the Twinkie pie recipe I made up. After I made up the initial recipe, which if you look at my rough draft, it's horrifying. Just the idea of soaking something in maraschino cherry juice is terrifying. [LAUGHTER] But I made up a couple. One of them, Tangled Up pie—it's like a pie you make out of leftover spaghetti—was something that my son loved that I made up one day that I know other people have done their version of it. I also looked at a lot of different cookbooks. I looked for recipes, and I looked online. I looked for things that I could kind of adapt or twist in order to fit into my storyline. Because as you mentioned, I did want each recipe to sort of say something about the emotion or the underlying plot point or story, the heart of what was going on in that particular chapter. And so I did a lot of tweaking and mixing and matching recipes to get what I wanted.

DR. DANA: So did you try all of them?

KAT YEH: Oh yeah. [LAUGHTER] I tried all of them, and I always say that taste testing the Twinkie pie was the hardest part.

DR. DANA: Really?

KAT YEH: Because Twinkie pie—oh, they are so—I'm not a super sweet tooth kind of person. And there's the amount of sugar in Twinkie pie is insane. But luckily at the time when I was drafting and taste testing it, my son, who was a teenager at the time, was living at home. And he had all his big hulking teen friends over, and they would help me test them out and go through the recipes with me. They seemed to have no problem ingesting all that sugar.

DR. DANA: GiGi eventually learns the truth about her family and about a few of her friends as well. Without giving away too much, how difficult was it to make your character go through these sometimes traumatic realizations?

KAT YEH: Oh, actually, any writer out there will know what I say when I actually started a journal of sorts during the drafting of this, in which I would say, dear protagonist, or dear GiGi, I am so sorry. Because there are so many things that she had to go through. Emotionally, she was just dragged from one place to the other. She had rough awakenings to certain things and very difficult first day of school and second day of school and friendship sort of things that she went through. And as much as I loved her, and she was such a dear character to me, and I wanted nothing more than to take care of her, I did used to write little letters just saying, dear protagonist, I am so sorry I am putting you through this, but I promise it'll be OK.

And this is just part of who you have to be. Because I guess if you think of anything in our lives that sort of makes us who we are, so many of those things are going to be the difficult times. And it's sort of what we talk to our kids and I guess our students and our young readers about, is when they go through hard times is that I promise it's eventually. I know it's hard now, but it is going to get better, and it is going to become part of who you are. And you get to choose how to do that.

DR. DANA: Your most recent novel is *The Way to Bea*. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read the prologue to the book.

KAT YEH: Oh, sure, I'd love to.

“When I'm figuring out a haiku, I place my right hand on my chest like we do at school for the Pledge of Allegiance. The first line of a haiku is always five syllables, and I like to count out each beat, starting with my pinky finger and working my way across.

*one, two, three, four, five*

I know it's exactly right when my thumb gives that final thump (five) over my heart.

There are only three lines in a haiku.

The first has five beats  
the second has seven beats  
and the last has five.

*(Five, seven, five)*

Haiku are nothing like the poems I used to write. Those were free verse, which is exactly what it sounds like. Poems that are loose and flowy and free. The kind you sing or shout or paint all over your bedroom walls. With free verse, you can pretty much do whatever you want.

A haiku is different. One wrong choice and you have to go back and start again.

But it doesn't even matter how different they are, because all poems begin the same way: from something you feel inside. Like being mesmerized by the sound of certain words. Or feeling sad that you're alone at the turn of a path.

Or being afraid.

A poem could begin one night when you're so lost and afraid that the last thing you're even thinking about is writing one. But the words will come anyway, whether you want them to or not, and you will find yourself with your hand on your chest, just like the Pledge of Allegiance, counting out the beats.

*I do not know the way*

Until that extra thump (*six*) on your heart tells you that you've made the wrong choice. Only this time, it's not just a haiku—it's real life. And there's no starting over.”

DR. DANA: Thank you. Bea is clearly a poet and writes both verse and haiku in her story. I'm interested to know if it was difficult to write the poems and what your relationship with poetry was like before you wrote this book.

KAT YEH: Oh, I have a long and loving relationship with poetry. When I was a little girl, being a poet was the first thing I ever wanted to do. I decided right then and there that I wanted to have poetry in my life, no matter what. When I was around seven or eight years old, my mother bought me this little green book that I still have. And it was a journal, like a calendar book. And it had a date on each page. It was really tiny, and I swore this oath, this grand oath to myself that I was going to write a poem every day for the rest of my life. And I still have it. And some of the poems are really, really funny, like shampoo a kangaroo in the zoo or things like that.

And I got through much of the year writing poetry. And even though I didn't fill out every page in that, I kept journals most of my life. And a lot of my entries are in verse form, a lot of free verse. It was natural for me to have a character. To write a character who was a poet felt very, very natural and for somebody to express the ways that they wanted to see the world by the different ways that they could write poems. And there's also a poem in *Twinkie Pie*, which I was very excited at the very end. GiGi writes a poem, and I was really happy to sort of have it sneak into that novel as well.

DR. DANA: In the story, Bea befriends a character named Will. Please tell us a little bit about him.

KAT YEH: Will is a character that I love so very dearly. I wanted to experience as you go through the book and if you read the author notes, you see that Will, if you had to put a label on him, which is something that I really wanted to avoid, especially for the way that Bea sees the world, he is someone with Asperger's.

But because I wanted Bea to just, in her very true, and innocent, and poetic way, just experience him the way he was without labeling him, she got to meet him simply as a potential new person in her life and someone who was different. But then she was feeling very different at the time, too. She was just sort of working with the differences that he had, and accepting them, and kind of going along with it. I loved him. I loved kind of doing my best to see through his eyes. And I loved writing the interactions that he had with Bea and their developing friendship.

DR. DANA: Many of your characters carry some complicated emotions. How generally do you develop the characters in your novels?

KAT YEH: Well, I think that-- I feel that everybody is complicated. I can't think of anyone that I've ever met in the real world who does not have complexities, whether or not they reveal to you right away. And I always knew writing that I would try my hardest to make sure that nobody was one note. If, for example, Bea's former best friend, S, knew that I didn't want to write just a mean girl. And for Briggs, the editor of *The Broad Side*, who she befriends, I knew he wasn't going to

be just like a loopy goofy guy who had a crush on her. I don't know. I guess I try to think of every single person as having something. There's going to be a little something. You're not just going to be—and I guess, I always am always interested in things not being exactly what you think they are. Because that's kind of how life is.

DR. DANA: The thing that I like about *The Way to Bea* is that instead of one major plotline and resolution, there are several. There's Bea and Will's fairly illegal trip to a labyrinth on a wealthy man's estate and Bea's discovery of who's been secretly responding to her poems and letters. There's Bea's new relationships at school and her disconnection with her mom and dad. Was it difficult to weave these threads together?

KAT YEH: Yes, it's always difficult. And thank you for saying that you like that because it's something that I worry about. Because I tend to get a lot of ideas, I have to remind myself that just because I have a new idea doesn't mean I have to write it in. And I think there were probably several other plot points I could have added to that.

I mean, to be very technical about it, by the time I had done several drafts, I really had to break it down and look at each subplot on its own. And find each place through the novel that it happened; print out a separate document where I just sort of outlined the plot and how it was developing, look at it on its own timeline to make sure it was going at a pace that made sense. And that anything that needed, if there was a twist, it was covered in some place and the seeds were planted. If there was sort of an arc in the story, that something was building up to it. It's not easy, but I have to say, it was so much fun. It was really, really fun, and I did love that part of working those out, especially when I felt like it was coming together. It got very exciting.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now?

KAT YEH: I'm working on a lot of things now. I'm working on a new picture book, which is what I was working on right before I talked to you. I'm working on another novel, and I have a couple backup novels I'm also working on. But this next middle grade I'm working on, I'm really excited about. And I'm very afraid of it, which is the way that I like to start my projects, being sort of afraid, because it means that it means a lot to me. Otherwise, I wouldn't be so scared of it. So I'm very kind of feeling all emotional and excited about it.

And my family, we just moved to Philadelphia. I grew up in Pennsylvania, and so it's been this whole adventure being back in Pennsylvania. This new novel that I actually started before we moved takes place in Pennsylvania. And so the whole thing just feels really-- just like it just all fits together, like a puzzle.

DR. DANA: Kat Yeh, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today.

KAT YEH: Aw, Dana, thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

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