



DEAR LIBRARIANS,

My elementary-school librarian turned me into an author with just a sewing machine and a sheet of gold foil stickers. She instructed my classmates and me to each bring in a typed and illustrated story. A few weeks later, she presented us with our finished books—pages sewn into a cloth-bound cardboard cover adorned with a gold sticker. It was then that I started to believe that I could make real books. My librarian changed my life, and that first book became a prized possession. I keep it in my studio still.

I have been trying to make sense of my mixed-race identity since childhood. In fact, the story I wrote and illustrated for my librarian was about a bear who doesn't know whether she is a panda or a red panda, until she looks into a pond to see her reflection. Seven years ago, I moved from a diverse neighborhood in New York City to a homogenous, rural village in Vermont, and I was confronted with the questions and observations I had been gathering since I was a kid about being caught between two cultures: Chinese and white American. I began to explore my thinking through comics, the first of which was about how the names of invasive species (in this case, "Asian carp") can hurt communities. As the Covid-19 pandemic spread in 2020, the President used the terms "Chinese virus" and "kung-flu," fanning the flames of anti-Asian hate. My comic about these names no longer felt like a small, personal obsession, and *Names and Faces* began to take shape.

With this book, I wanted to ask: what does it take to understand yourself accurately among reflections that are distorted or incomplete? In my search for answers, I explored a wide range of topics and periods of my life, including: dying my hair blond in a quest for beauty and belonging; looking for representation from American Girl dolls; chasing an authentic Chinese self as a recent graduate in Beijing; and inheriting generational pain as well as a love of photography.

I believe many readers in your community have also grown up between worlds—races, identities, religions, cultures, nationalities—and they might deeply relate to my book's stories. I hope that by writing and drawing about seeing and being seen, naming and being named, I've cleared a little bit more space for more of us to claim our complex selves. In a time of global instability where many are tempted to oversimplify and stereotype, I think this space beyond simple categorization is more important than ever.

I would not have been able to finish *Names and Faces* without my access to many wonderful libraries. Libraries in Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Virginia, and Stockholm provided the journals and books I needed for research, as well as quiet spaces to think. Thank you for all that you do to keep libraries one of the most vibrant and important places in a community.

LEISE HOOK

Author of *Names and Faces*

