



An Interview with Author Laura Gao

Laura Gao is a comic artist currently living in San Francisco. Laura's art career began by doodling on Pokémon cards and has since blossomed to being featured on NPR, HuffPost, and most notably, her parents' fridge. She is a proud, queer, Asian American immigrant who strives to inspire others to live unapologetically loud. In *Messy Roots*, Laura illustrates her coming of age as the girl who simply wants to make the basketball team, escape Chinese school, and figure out why girls make her heart flutter.

Messy Roots evolved from your webcomic "The Wuhan I Know." Can you tell us what inspired that piece and how you came to turn it into a memoir?

"The Wuhan I Know" came to life in March 2020 at the rise of COVID and anti-Asian racism. My hometown had transformed overnight from a city nobody knew to an infamous household name. Every day, I'd endure derogatory depictions and misinformation about Wuhan from the media, then have video chats with my family in Wuhan, praying they were safe. It felt surreal and messed up that nobody was talking about them, the actual people, and how the media affected them. But I realized I had a platform, an iPad, and most importantly, a voice to stand up for them after decades of staying quiet. I thought if I could change just one mind about Wuhan and Chinese people, it'd be impactful.

When the comic unexpectedly went viral, I received countless heartwarming notes

from people worldwide! The one that struck me the most was an Asian American mother whose daughters had read and were inspired by the comic, asking if I was planning on writing more.

And that's how this book began.

What was the most challenging thing about writing about your own life? What was the most fun?

The most challenging part was writing about my identity-seeking journey when I still haven't finished it yet! I'm light-years ahead of where I was when I was a teenager. But at 23, I was still playing identity tug-of-war with my poor therapist. Thankfully, writing a memoir is therapy 2.0. Reopening old wounds and unpacking memories I had suppressed for years was exhausting. But the moment another queer Asian girl beta-read the book and told me how seen she felt, I knew it was all worth it.

This interview courtesy of

BALZER + BRAY

Imprints of HarperCollinsPublishers



continued...

The fun part was writing all the jokes and shenanigans I got into as a kid! There's nothing like reminiscing on how angry you were (and still are) and laughing about it.

You're younger than most memoirists – you were 23 when you started writing *Messy Roots*. Why did you feel it was vital to write your story now?

I don't think anyone simply wakes up and thinks, "Yes, today is the day I write my memoir!" However, at the time, anti-Asian racism, the pandemic and Wuhan, immigration, and LGBTQ+ issues were getting so heated I couldn't ignore the urge to tell my story.

I see my youth as an advantage. After undergoing my identity-seeking journey and coming out just a few years ago in college, I wielded a new, powerful voice of pride and self-love. My memories were still fresh, so I could tap into all the raw emotions I felt as a teenager and retell my story in the most authentic way.

You posted your grandfathers' delighted reactions (via video, from China) to their depictions in the illustrations. What has your family's response to the book been so far?

My extended family hasn't read the entire book since I'm not out to them yet (one day!), but I've shown them the pages set in Wuhan! They love how I've captured each person's quirks, like Popo's menacing knife, Yeye's cooking, and Canjie's spunkiness, and joke that I could've drawn them to be even more attractive. They're also in awe of how I make Wuhan look larger than life

with scenes drawn in Chinese watercolor and in a color scheme that imbues a nostalgic, magical mood. That's exactly how I experienced Wuhan the first time I went back.

Dede, my grandpa from my dad's side, was particularly emotional when I showed him the book. His generation of the family has only ever been farmers, so learning that his granddaughter will be a published author made him tear up – which made me cry, too!

The chapters set in China are especially beautiful (and will make readers hungry with their mouthwatering depictions of Wuhanese food!). The book feels like something of a love letter to Wuhan. Can you talk a bit about this?

Yesssss, the foood! Food was my favorite thing to draw, and my poor iPad got drooled on too many times while I was drawing. Though a lot of the book is about discrimination, so much of it centers around the joy and wonder of discovering yourself!

Each time I visit Wuhan, I fall in love with something new – waking up to smells of reganmian from the street stalls, seeing the beautiful Wuhan skyline reflected on the Yangtze River at night, feeling the cool countryside breeze on my face as I sneak out with my cousins. I wanted the art to mirror these intangible feelings for the readers so they, too, will be as enthralled by Wuhan as I am.

What do you hope readers take away from the book?

I hope readers understand that everyone's search for identity and home is different and complex. And that's okay!

I just wrote a whole memoir about it, and every day I'm learning new things about myself. However, by letting your voice shine above the doubts, you'll realize the right people and places will naturally gravitate toward you. No matter how messy your roots are.



Messy Roots: A Graphic Memoir of a Wuhanese American

Laura Gao

Balzer + Bray • 2021 • IL YA

After spending her early years in Wuhan, China, riding water buffalos and devouring stinky tofu, Laura immigrates to Texas, where her hometown is as foreign as Mars – at least until 2020, when COVID-19 makes Wuhan a household name.

1721LP0