

An Interview with Author Dr. Karen Su


The *Leaders Like Us* series showcases more than 20 illustrated biographies of diverse leaders created by representative authors and illustrators. For Grades 1-4, each title highlights an important leader in fields such as science, the arts, government, sports, and more. To create biographies of Asian American leaders, Rourke Educational Media selected Dr. Karen Su, founding director of the Asian American Resource and Cultural Center and current faculty member in the Global Asian Studies Program at the University of Illinois Chicago. Dr. Su's first two books feature social activist Grace Lee Boggs and labor leader Philip Vera Cruz.

How did your career or life experiences lead you to writing for young readers?

I was an avid reader as a kid. I couldn't wait to get home from school so I could just sit and read! There were very few books portraying Asian American stories, yet I still loved reading, especially biographies. My favorite go-to in the school library was the biography section. I read a lot of biographies about girls – white girls really – many U.S. presidents' wives and queens and princesses of the British monarchy.

I finally found Asian American literature in graduate school and went on to teach Asian American literature and Asian American studies at the college level. When I became a parent and was looking for books to read to my kids, I noticed there were still very few children's books that portrayed Asian American stories. When my son's fourth grade class focused on a biography unit, the only biography available was about the great Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi. That made me decide to write books about Asian Americans for young readers so there would be books out there for everyone to learn more about our diverse communities.

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“What I love about the *Leaders Like Us* series is it shows all young readers that they, too, have the power to become the leaders we need in the world.”

Dr. Karen Su

What do these two leaders in your first two books have in common?

Both are passionate about changing the world for the better. They figured out how to contribute toward movements for justice. They not only fought with and for Asian American communities but also with and for Black and Latinx communities. Many of my college students learn about them for the first time when they take my Introduction to Asian American Studies class. Many of my students have expressed dismay that they had not learned about leaders like them before and affirm how it would have made a difference for them to learn about Asian American leaders when they were younger.

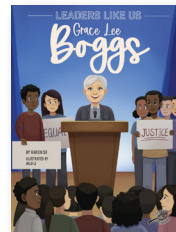
As a college professor, how did you adapt these stories for elementary school students?

Each book opens with a question or two that relates to young readers' lives and brings them into the lives of Grace Lee Boggs and Philip Vera Cruz. I also had to explain some concepts and details in a way that younger readers would be able to follow. It was good for me to learn the process of trying to paint the forest clearly and not get bogged down in all the trees.

I especially enjoyed developing the extension activities at the end of each book to encourage young readers to continue exploring what they can do in their own lives that's related to the leader featured in the book. I would love to hear from teachers, parents, and young readers in the future to find out how their extension activities went!

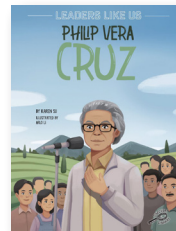
Did you find anything in your research that you liked but were unable to include?

I found it interesting when Grace Lee Boggs invited her husband-to-be, James Boggs, over for a first dinner date – by the end of the night, he proposed marriage to her! For Philip Vera Cruz, I learned more about his siblings whose education in the Philippines he helped to support. He reunited with them 62 years later, when he returned to the Philippines for the first time since he left.

LEADERS LIKE US »**Grace Lee Boggs**

Dr. Karen Su • Discovery Library 2023 • UE

Grace Lee Boggs was a Chinese American woman who went from earning a PhD in philosophy to becoming an activist in the Black power movement in Detroit. She used ideas about revolution to inspire people to create a new world and imagine a new way of living. Learn all about Grace's early life and all of her accomplishments.

**Philip Vera Cruz**

Dr. Karen Su • Discovery Library 2023 • UE

The United Farm Workers union has an interesting past, and it's all thanks to Philip Vera Cruz. This biography tells the story of an unsung hero and Filipino farm worker who led the historic Delano strike, grape boycott, and the formation of the United Farm Workers union.

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What do you hope readers will learn from these titles?

I hope that all young readers, no matter their background, will learn that there have been and are important Asian American leaders from all walks of life. It's truly life-changing for everyone to see all communities included fully in the curriculum. Otherwise, those who are absent seem like they aren't as important. That is psychologically damaging all around for Asian Americans as well as non-Asian Americans.

I'm feeling more optimistic with current efforts in many states to teach more Asian American curriculum at the Grades K-12 level. For example, Illinois became the first state to pass a curricular mandate to teach Asian American history at this level. I hope that all elementary classes will be able to include these Asian American titles from *Leaders Like Us* so that the full spectrum of our communities are represented. What I love about the *Leaders Like Us* series is it shows all young readers that they, too, have the power to become the leaders we need in the world.

— as first seen on sji.com

Interview courtesy of



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History is filled with inspiring leaders who made a difference in their communities and in our world. Each book in this illustrated biography series tells the story of an important leader in science, the arts, government, activism, and other fields. Texts focus on each leader's early life and greatest accomplishments. Each book includes a time line, questions for discussion, and an extension activity.

