

Unswept Graves by Robert Black is an engaging and educational work of historical fiction. In this adventure story using a "Back to the Future" approach, a 13 year-old Chinese American girl, Jasmine Wu, from the only Chinese family in a small Nebraska town and her caucasian girl friend, Oz, are accidentally transported back to the San Francisco Chinatown of 1898. Jasmine is immediately separated from Oz by Chinese kidnappers who sell her to a Chinese master where she is enslaved as a *mui tsai*, or domestic servant. In the male-dominated Chinese society, some poor families found it necessary for survival to sell young daughters to wealthy families. They reasoned that girls might be better off as servants than living in poverty. Mrs. Chiu, in charge of Jasmine's daily life, inflicts harsh punishment for any shortcomings. Unable to speak or understand Chinese, Jasmine's predicament is a desperate one, and rescue or escape seems unlikely.

Jasmine and Oz each encounter someone who resembles important people from their "future" lives back in Nebraska. Concerned that they might inadvertently "alter" the course of history, Jasmine and Oz must carefully ponder how to avoid doing anything that might prevent these people from eventually ending up in Nebraska.

When Jasmine challenges Mrs. Chiu over the way Chinese treat girls, she summons principles of Chinese morality based on Confucian teachings which hold that society involves a hierarchy of roles that must be respected as in the belief that children should be obedient

to parental authority. The Chinese respect for ancestors is conveyed through a discussion of *Ching Ming*, an annual ritual of honoring ancestors by "sweeping" or cleaning their gravestones. The lessons that Jasmine receives also serve to promote understanding and tolerance of cultural differences among readers.

Meanwhile, Oz seeks help from the staff of the Mission House, who regularly raids the living quarters of imprisoned slave girls. They rescue and provide the young women with a safe house. The aid of the Mission House staff and the police help Oz locate and rescue Jasmine. They are, however, still stuck in the past and have the challenge of discovering how they can return to the 'future' Nebraska. They do succeed, and return just in time to celebrate the town's Founder's Day. Jasmine honors the memory of her great great grandparents and uses the *Ching Ming* rituals as a model for all the townspeople.

The author, Robert Black, created a culturally accurate and sensitive picture of the extreme racism directed toward Chinese immigrants in America from the last part of the 19th century until well into the next century. *UnswepT Graves* highlights the subservient role of women in traditional Chinese society, one that did not improve but actually worsened due to the immigration policies of the United States which severely restricted the entry of Chinese women. This shortage of women made it profitable to bring Chinese women into the country illegally and force them into lives of prostitution or domestic service to pay debts to smugglers. The dramatic aspects in the plot make *UnswepT Graves* a compelling story, one that is strengthened by inclusion of details of the social

and cultural background of the lives of Chinese immigrants of that era.

John Jung is the author of four books on Chinese American history, and writes the blog, "A Chinese American Historian By Chance."

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The Power of Google

A few days ago I posted about the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California's annual observance of Ching Ming in Los Angeles followed by a visit to the gravesite of Miss Donaldina Cameron, the San Francisco missionary who rescued Chinese girls enslaved by prostitution rings. Thanks to Google, it found its way to a talented writer of children's fiction, Robert A. Black. He contacted me to tell me about the relevance of the information in my post to his forthcoming book, *Unswapt Graves*, which is a sort of "science fiction" story involving time travel about a young Chinese girl kidnapped into servitude and her rescue to the protection of a mission home back in the 1890s. It's great to hear of his book and hope that it will help inform a wide range of middle school aged children about the historical realities of the past.

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CHINATOWN, SAN FRANCISCO, 1890s
UNSWAPT GRAVES
Robert Black
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信 禮 仁 義 智
UNSWAPT GRAVES
Robert Black
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
義 智

Robert Black grew up in Indianapolis where his parents were both high school math teachers. He attended Park Taylor School in Indianapolis (also where his parents taught) from kindergarten through high school. He graduated from Vanderbil University in 1986 "M.S. Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering and Mathematics. Not exactly what you'd expect for someone writing historical fiction, but that's how things turned out." He has been writing for children since the mid-1980s, when he worked on the Nickelodeon TV series, *Zoom Car's Do That Or Die!* When he's not working or writing, he enjoys singing in the church choir, hiking in the California foothills, and taking pictures. He is also a space exploration and auto-racing enthusiast.
His previous book for Royal Fireworks Press is *Liberty Girl*, set in Baltimore during the First World War and based on his grandmother's real-life experiences.

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ABOUT ME



John Jung

Growing in Macon, Georgia, where we were the only Chinese in the whole city during the days when Jim Crow still ruled,

it was difficult for me to understand who I was, ethnically speaking. Even after we moved to the Chinese community in San Francisco in the early 1950s, my ethnic identity was different from those Chinese who had grown up around other Chinese. Then just as I was 'becoming' Chinese American, I moved to other places where few Chinese lived, so I had to just ignore or neglect my "Chinese-ness" and concentrate on my career development and become a 'color-neutral' person.

When I was about to retire after a 40-year career as a professor of psychology, I returned to the question that I had avoided many times during my life, namely, how do I, as a second-generation Chinese American fit in a predominantly black and white society.

In the past six years, I have enjoyed researching, writing four books, and speaking all over the U. S. about several important but generally overlooked aspects of Chinese American history.

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Posted by John Jung at 12:51 PM

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