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Interview with Author and Illustrator Hyewon Yum

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For our spotlight in this spring issue, we hear from picturebook author and illustrator Hyewon Yum. In this interview, she will share her experiences as a burgeoning artist in the picturebook industry. And she will share her stories as a Korean-American immigrant and a mom living in New York City.



Hyewon Yum is a highly recognized children's book author and illustrator. Acclaimed picturebooks written and illustrated by her include *Saturday Is Swimming Day* (2018), *This Is Our House* (2013), *The Twin's Blanket* (2011), and *There Are No Scary Wolves* (2010). She deftly interweaves parents' love, children's resourceful imagination and the power of art altogether. *Mom, It's My First Day of Kindergarten* (2012), in particular, received the Ezra Jack Keats Award for its universal appeal both to childhood and motherhood.

It is an honor that JoLLE can cover the interview with Hyewon Yum, a highly recognized children's book author and illustrator. The following is the interview with her that was conducted through email correspondence.

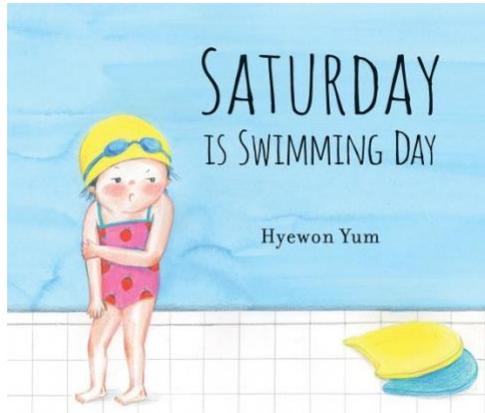


Figure 1. Book cover of *Saturday Is Swimming Day* (2018) written and illustrated by Hyewon Yum

Eun Young Yeom (EYY): Would you tell us about yourself briefly?

Hyewon Yum (HWY): I am an author and an illustrator of many picturebooks. I was born and grew up in South Korea, came here to study the illustration in the MFA program at the School of Visual Arts, New York. And now I am living in Brooklyn with my family.

EYY: You have a visual arts background and have been working as a picturebook author-illustrator. What was your impetus for choosing the current career path when studying visual arts? And what do you think are the magical or wondrous points of picturebooks?

HWY: I studied painting and printmaking in a university in Korea. I love making art but not the way you show your art to the world. I was more interested in telling the stories, and I always loved books and making up stories. Then I discovered picturebooks, I

didn't really know much about picturebooks and great authors like John Burningham and Maurice Sendak until I became an adult. I fell in love with them. Of course, I wanted to tell my own stories. I found out picturebooks are the perfect medium for me: I can tell your stories with pictures. Every page can bring you to wonderful, fantastic and magical worlds.

EYY: Although your works feature many themes, most of them seem to share one thing in common – the love of family. What or who inspire(s) your works, especially the works regarding the love of family?

HWY: As a little girl, I had the most loving, picture-book-perfect family. I have a twin sister, who has been my best friend ever since we were in mommy's belly, the funniest dad, caring mom and troublesome little sister. Now I have two lovely sons who grew up with my book titles. I am very close to my family, so the relationship with them inspires all of my works. Only my poor husband isn't in my book until now, my friends pointed out. But my next book will be about him and our little one, respectfully.

EYY: Many of your illustrations are filled with emotions as seen in emotional ups and downs of a mom or greedy twin sisters who are in the tug of war over the blanket. How do you catch such a depth of emotion of adults and children? And in what ways do you try to convey the inner-most feelings of human beings?

HWY: I think adults and children don't feel differently. I am all grown up, but still feel anxious when I start new things, still little jealous for my sister. Readers of the picturebooks are not just kids. But most of time grown-ups read picturebooks to their kids. I thought it would be nice if both of them can relate to the stories. So I try to tell the stories from both sides, if possible, in a humorous way.

EYY: Among the many impressive awards that you received, Ezra Jack Keats New Illustrator award stands out to me. Ezra Jack Keats is well known for its recognition of cultural diversity and creativity. When writing the award winning book “Mom, It’s My First Day of Kindergarten!” did you take cultural/racial diversity into account? If you did, why do you think characters with (presumably) Korean cultural/racial background is important when creating this book, inclusive of other books featuring Korean protagonists?

HWY: As a first time mom, like everybody else, every new start for the child is a struggle. But as an immigrant, you have to deal with other things. With cultural differences, establishing your child's identity (not only yours) in the community was and still is not an easy task. I am constantly conscious about who I am, and who my kids are. However, I don't want my kids to feel the way I do, it's a harrowing experience. I do think it will help kids take themselves as who they are if we see more kids who look like you represent in books, movies. You can always connect with the characters more if they look like you. I also tried to show diverse people living together, it's a beautiful thing. One of the main reasons I love living in New York City.

EYY: In “This Is Our House,” you illustrated (seemingly) Korean immigrant family who build up their lives successfully on the U.S. soil. As a Korean reader, the most distinctive character to me is the white blond American son-in-law. It is very hard to find such a character in picturebooks regarding Korean American immigrants. Would you tell us why you chose to bring the distinctively white American character into this story?

HWY: I grew up in Korea and I haven't had a chance to think much about race and interracial marriage. Then I came here, and met many beautiful couples who accept each other from very different backgrounds. And they share their food, culture and

raise kids together. Isn't that lovely way to break the wall between people if there are any? If love can't change things, what else can?

EYY: As a picturebook author-illustrator with a Korean background, what were the hurdles that you faced mentally, emotionally and socially in the U.S. or even in the global market and publishing industry?

HWY: I always thought my English is not good enough, and I always felt I haven't read much of American children's literature. I have read lots of books with my kids, I am catching up. I am still afraid my English is not what I think as a writer's, but it keeps me going.

EYY: If there is and if it is appropriate, would you tell us about your next book project that you are currently working on or planning to work on?

HWY: This year, two books I illustrated will be published. *Bark in the Park* by Avery Corman, and *Clever Little Witch* by Muon Thi Van. For my author/illustrator book, as mentioned earlier, it will be about this lion dad and his son who does not want to go to the barbershop. I am very excited about this project.

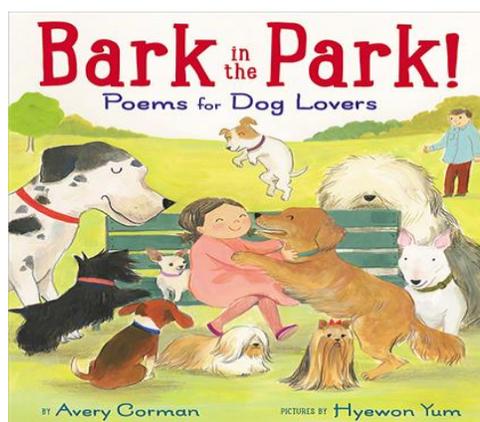


Figure 2. Book Cover of *Bark in the Park!* (2019) written by Avery Corman and illustrated by Hyewon Yum

EYY: How do you see yourself as a picturebook author-illustrator transforming in the next 10 years?

HWY: I've wanted to write for older kids. I always adore William Steig's picturebooks but love his longer stories. If I ever become chattier, I would love to write chapter books.

EYY: Do you have dreams that you want to achieve other than being a successful picturebook author-illustrator?

HWY: I want to adopt a dog and want to become a great gardener.