

Dragon Fire O C E A N M I S T

Interview with Yvonne Palka, author of *Dragon Fire, Ocean Mist*

Whidbey Island, Washington

February 2009

Q: You're an award-winning sumi-e artist--seems like painting would keep you busy all by itself! What prompted you to write a children's book?

YP: Yes, painting could keep me busy. But for several years I also had the idea that I would like to stretch my painting skills by illustrating a children's book. And at the same time I had a collection of dragon stories that I had been telling my grandchildren over a period of years. After I wrote and illustrated the stories for my grandchildren for Christmas one year I gave them to an editor and asked her if they had the potential to be published. She said she would be glad to help me work on them to bring the manuscript to publishable condition. We then began working on key changes in the characters and the plot to make the story appropriate for a larger audience.

*Q: You're a naturalist and environmental educator. So it's not surprising there's a strong theme of respecting and protecting the environment in **Dragon Fire, Ocean Mist**. The children in the story meet these dragons in a very beautiful place -- Shi Shi Beach, Washington. What's special about that place?*

YP: To me the wilderness coast of Pacific Northwest is one of the most beautiful places in the world. When our children were young, our family spent many summers camping on Shi Shi Beach and absolutely loved exploring the beautiful tide pools, caves and arches by the sea. It is a land of beauty and mystery. With my grandchildren we have continued the tradition of beach camping and it has been a great delight to share with them the complex world of the intertidal wilderness. In my work as a volunteer naturalist I try and stress the importance of respecting all forms of life, even the ones that seem strange to us – the barnacles and sea anemones and kelp - and help children and adults learn good beach etiquette. The more we all know about the complexity and diversity of life the more we all can enjoy and respect it.

*Q: You're the illustrator as well as the author of *Dragon Fire, Ocean Mist* – and all of the illustrations are sumi-e (Asian brush painting). Can you tell us a little about sumi-e? What's it like to illustrate a book using brush painting technique?*



YP: Sumi-e is a wonderful and free artistic medium. When your mind and body are relaxed the brush can dance and the ink can sing with energy. One thing I love about sumi-e is that it is possible to convey the spirit of the subject (e.g. a dragon) with just a few strokes that tell the whole story. However, very few books are illustrated with sumi-e (a fact that I didn't know before I started the book) because it is such a free medium. Illustration demands that the art fit into certain spaces, that characters in the story have identifying and consistent characteristics (the horns in the case of the Shi Shi dragons) and that the illustrations carry the story along. It's challenging to adapt the freedom of sumi-e to the constraints of illustration and it was definitely a daunting task to be given a list of 78 illustrations to finish in a certain period of time! I did the illustrations many times until they were right and were paintings with life, energy and expression in them. And to top it off, just before I was about to begin the illustrations I broke my painting arm in a ski accident! People often ask how long it took me to do the illustrations – it took about 9 months after I was able to start.

Q: How can children and adults learn more about sumi-e (brush painting) and try it out for themselves?

YP: The very best way is to find a class or a teacher. Next best is to find a good book and there are a lot of good books recommended on our website, www.nwdragons.com in the Asian Art section. There are also some free learning activities on Asian art there as well. Or better yet, I'd be happy to come and speak to a group and demonstrate sumi-e. I can even teach you some painting if the group is small (under 10 people). Again check out the events section of our website if you would like to schedule an event.

Q: Teachers and parents are going to love the short essays in the back of your book. Can you tell us a bit about those?

YP: I wrote those essays with teachers and parents in mind. One is devoted to the wild and beautiful coast of Pacific Northwest and the animals and plants that live in or near the sea. Another is about the elements of Asian brush painting. A third is on dragons, some of the legends surrounding them and how there came to be dragons on the Northwest coast. As an educator I can see using these essays to introduce a topic, e.g. tidepool animals, to a group of children. Since children love dragons I might have them read the book as part of this learning activity and then have them work with the material



in the essay. There are also free learning activities in these same three areas (beaches, Asian art, and dragons) that teachers and parents can download from our website, www.nwdragons.com for use in classrooms or at home.

Q: The book has elements of magic and mystery, but it also has a peacemaking element. Is it possible for dragons and humans to live in harmony?

YP: Of course it is! Dragons and humans have lived in harmony throughout Asia for thousands of years! In ***Dragon Fire, Ocean Mist*** harmony didn't always reign on the beach. Danger lurked in the form of Zorg and his brood who were thieving and dangerous to the dragons of Shi Shi as well as to Jaxon and Allie, the children in the book. Yet the children learned to be strong and to confront the danger with courage. Together with the Shi Shi dragons and help of the magic heart rocks, they took the action necessary to bring about the transformation of Zorg so that his good nature could once again come to the fore and harmony could exist between the different tribes of dragons and their human friends.

Q: What do you hope that children who read this book will take away from it?

YP: Several things. First, that people or dragons who are behaving negatively have usually had painful experiences in their past. However, it is possible for them to change if they encounter a fierce and compassionate source of love – a love that is not soft but one that sets a high standard of respect for all life. Secondly, that the natural world of plants and animals is a beautiful and interesting one, and is worthy of our respect and care. And lastly, that they remember the book as a good read and an intriguing story!

