

My Bridge Across the Sky

How did a writer who, as of age 60, had never even visited the Angel Island Immigration Station that was only a 20-minute ferry ride away from where he lived, come to write a novel based on the station's history? He was Chinese. He knew the general story of Chinese immigration through Angel Island. His own father entered the country through Seattle via the same process as the Angel Island immigrants. He was searching for a book to write that a publisher would buy. Yet, he had no interest in writing about Angel Island.

What changed his mind?

What changed *my* mind?

I am that writer, and the book I eventually wrote is *Bridge Across the Sky*, a verse novel in which my teenaged main character is dragged to a country he didn't want to come to, battles an enemy who turns out to be a friend, pursues a girl he ends up wronging, and discovers a reason to be in America that he never expected.

Why did I decide to write it?

By age 60, I thought I knew the whole story:

- How Chinese immigrants in the 1800s faced hate and violence that led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibiting further immigration from China except for a few narrow categories.
- How the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed family records, opening the way for Chinese to enter the country by pretending they were the close relatives of Chinese already living here.
- How the station was built to house those immigrants while their stories were checked out by comparing their answers to questions about their past lives in China with the answers given by their supposed relatives in America.

It's a fascinating episode in our history—an especially important one in these times of politicized fear of immigrants—but that wasn't enough to persuade me to write about it.

Then, at age 60, I learned one more fact:

- The Chinese detainees, in their anger and despair over the harsh conditions inflicted on them and the unfair nature of the examination process, carved poems into the walls of their barracks.

I thought about the messages West Berliners scrawled on their side of the Berlin Wall, about the diary of Anne Frank and the letters of Civil War soldiers. I thought about the Stone Age cave painters all over the world who projected the moving, breathing reality of their lives onto two-dimensional canvases of stone. I walked down the street and took in the murals—and the graffiti—that marked the walls of my city.

And knew I had to write my novel.

The Angel Island poems are yet another example of humans doing most human thing we do: tell our stories. On the walls of a cave—or of a prison cell or downtown alley, if that's the only medium available to us—and then on clay tablets or papyrus scrolls, via brushstrokes or pen strokes or keystrokes, on paper or film or encoded in 1's and 0's, we continue a long conversation with each other about who and what we are. The Angel Island poets entered that conversation in the early 1900s. A hundred years later, in 2024, I joined them.

To study literature or history is to eavesdrop on that conversation. To write, to paint, to compose, to perform—to pin or snap or post or share—is to contribute to it. It's a conversation that will go on as long as we do, as long as we have stories to tell.