



The Five Chinese Brothers

Claire Huchet Bishop , Kurt Wiese (Illustrator)

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The classic picture-story about five clever brothers, each with a different extraordinary ability, has been in print for over 50 years. "An original nonsense tale told with...spirit and gusto." -- *The Horn Book*

The Five Chinese Brothers Details

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Author : Claire Huchet Bishop , Kurt Wiese (Illustrator)

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From Reader Review *The Five Chinese Brothers* for online ebook

Sonky says

This book is a disgusting example of *Orientalism* in action in the educational system of the United States during the 20th Century. The cover alone should warn you of the prejudicial and stereotyped contents.

I love this book dearly.

R. says

The freakiest illustration was the brother who swallowed the ocean.

And why didn't he just breathe through his nostrils instead of killing the little boy?

In the same league of cruel Oriental childrens stories as the, ah, filmstrip *Rikki Tikki Tembo No Saremba Chari Bari Ruchi Pip Berry Pembo*.

Speaking of which, back when SNL was *good* (the Charles Rocket years) there was a oneshot character named Filmstrip Man who spoke in that...that *style*.

Beep.

Kah-lick.

Sincerae says

I read this book in Colliers Junior Classics when I was child. Today such a book would probably be considered politically incorrect for the postmodern classroom. I enjoyed it when I read it in my childhood and thought it had great adventure and humor. However, I don't know what my impressions would be of it today. I wonder how Chinese people would perceive it. That would be more my concern.

Rebecca says

Absolutely one of my favorite books as a kid. I took it out from the library over and over again. When I was a teenager and my brother was 4 or 5, I started taking it out again to read to him. An entertaining story of 5 brothers and their special abilities, and how they used them to help each other.

Amy says

3.5 stars. I read *The Five Chinese Brothers* to my niece and nephew last night. It's a book that my husband

read as a child, and so I thought I'd give it a try on the kids.

The story is violent, I won't lie. A kid drowns and The First Chinese Brother in this story is held responsible for the kid's death. He's arrested, tried, and ancient Chinese justice is meted out to this brother (i.e., he's sentenced to death, and the method in which that sentence is to be carried out is grisly). Hijinks ensue, and basically children are treated to a story in which the five Chinese Brothers thwart four gruesome attempts to carry out the death sentence. Yeah, it's lovely bedtime fare.

BUT, although violent, and kind of repetitious, the story is good. My niece especially thought this book was great--she kind of liked the shock value, and she liked trying to figure out how the brothers were going to get around this punishment. My nephew was drawn in to the story and he certainly listened, but when we finished reading it he was, "still trying to decide" if he liked the story or not. It's probably a little much for little kids--we just balanced this out by reading Dragons Love Tacos again. The illustrations aren't all that attractive, but the kids didn't really seem put off by them. I think that they kind of liked the fact that this story was not warm and fuzzy, and I think that made the story all that more interesting and intriguing for them. Still, it's not one that I'll probably read to them again any time soon, and certainly not before bed.

UPDATE: After discussing this book with my friend Brandy, I realize that I don't think this book warrants a 3.5 star rating! The violence was intense, the illustrations were unattractive on multiple levels, the story could be interpreted as having racist undertones, and it centers on the brothers evading justice. Thank you for talking to me about this book, Brandy! It really helped me do a better job of evaluating this book!

Shiela Chan says

(In the Phils) Remember when Nido powdered milk gave away stuff when you purchase the huge can? There was a time when the freebies were collection of short stories in little pamphlets. I was estatic! Literally begged my mom to keep buying milk to get my little hands on 'em (even if I'm lactose intolerant - stomach discomforts for the price of imagination). And I didn't regret it even once.

This story is one of my beloved fairy tales.

It starts like this. There were 5 chinese brothers and they look exactly alike. One had the power to swallow an ocean.

I'll stop right here... This statement blew my little mind! I can still remember how I felt at that time when I read this.

Books that withstand the test of time, retain that indescribable giddy sensation you felt when you immersed into its world are those that unquestionably deserves to be rated 5 stars. (at least for me)

Stephen says

3.0 stars. I remember reading this as a kid and liking it because it was unlike most of the other stories I was reading. A fun little Children's book.

E says

It's a classic, but it was way too upsetting for me when I read it in kindergarten and I never liked it after that. (The death of a child and four attempts at execution? I know the Grimms' fairy tales aren't much better, but sheesh...)

Like many, I'm also not too keen on the illustrations. It is SUCH an old racist stereotype to portray all Chinese as looking the same. The pictures - true products of their time - don't help kill that misconception. Of course it's absurd to think that every kid will automatically become racist from reading this, but it's also naive to think such images unchecked have no influence. When an eight year-old kid in my classroom pulled his eyes into a slant and sang, "I'm a ching-chong-Chineseman!" while his Vietnamese classmate sitting two seats away from him turned red, I know he didn't come up with that stereotype on his own.

I don't think the book should be banned, but I don't think it should be read unsupervised either. People like my father are very sentimental about the book since they have fond childhood memories of reading it - just as many progressive people have fond memories of Little Black Sambo and Topsy. Nevertheless, if it's going to be read to young children, I think it absolutely fair to alter the illustrations in modern publications to be less overtly caricaturing, as seen in the reproduction of Little Black Sambo into Little Babaji. The original versions can and should be preserved for children old enough to have a discussion about our bleak history of racism.

Franci says

In Afrikaans gelees as "Die Vyf Chinese Broers" vertaal uit Engels deur Lydia Pienaar.

Baie oulike storie. Ek het die illustrasies ook vreeslik geniet.

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

Every team is a group...but every group is not a team - the five Chinese brothers work as a team and accomplish more than a group could. Great book for a child just starting to participate in team sports.

Stef says

This book was first published in 1938 by an American author and is based on a well-known Chinese folk-tale. It tells the story of five identical brothers, each of whom has a specific and unusual ability. One can hold the sea in his mouth, one has an iron neck, one can stretch his legs, one can survive fire and one can hold his breath forever. These abilities are all put to the test when one of the brothers is sentenced to death for the accidental drowning of a small boy who died because he failed to keep a promise he made. Each of the brothers survives a different form of execution and are eventually pardoned. The illustrations have been considered controversial in contributing to a stereotyped view of the Chinese. Similarly, the story has been

criticised for being macabre - the forms of execution include beheading, suffocation, drowning and being burned alive! However, the story has a clear moral to it and is fundamentally concerned with loyalty, trust and keeping one's word. The illustrations have a cartoon like quality to them and a simplicity that reinforces the moral of the story. The story is vividly told and the narrative is enhanced by the illustrations which effectively tell the story in pictures. This is an unusual book which was out of print for a number of years and may be too much for sensitive readers but the story is compelling and stays in the imagination. It would be suitable for children aged from four upwards.

Morgan Hale says

This book was given to my uncle, when he was a kid, and then passed on to me. I absolutely loved it. I remember reading it time and time again and was actually surprised when I saw so many complaints about it.

The first complaint is about racism, specifically the charge that the book is suggesting all Chinese people look the same. Now, I've read it as a child and I've read it as an adult, and I was never given that impression. The only characters the book says look alike are the five brothers. I always just assumed they were quintuplets, so of course they looked the same. If you changed the ethnicity from Chinese to Australian, this book would not give you the impression that all Australians look the same. While I understand this to be a culturally sensitive point, I think, in this case, more is being read into the story than was intended.

The second complaint is about appropriateness for children. As an adult, I can say that this book had no adverse effects on me. I'm college educated, married, employed, have no history of drug or alcohol abuse, and no fixation on death. Despite the fact that a death does occur in this story and there's multiple representations of attempted executions, I turned out better than fine (as did my uncle, who read it before me). There's no reason to believe that kids today won't handle these issues just as well. If it makes your kid ask questions, fine. Answer them. That's what a parent does. For my part, I didn't have any questions about death or ethics when I read it as a kid. I just thought it was a funny story and I tried to figure out which of the brother's powers I would most like to have.

If you can handle all that, then I'd definitely recommend this book.

I do have a question, though, for those more knowledgeable about it than I am. My edition of the book has the same image shown on this site, but the cover is red instead of white. Does anybody know why this is? Is it merely an older version? I haven't seen any images of a red cover anywhere else.

Rachel says

According to my mom, when I was very young, I used to come into the bathroom every single night while she was trying to take a bath and tell her the story of The Five Chinese Brothers. Evidently, I was quite annoying. But not only do I not remember doing this, I also didn't remember the story at all. Even though as an adult I've reread most of my childhood favorites, this is one I never sought out, probably because I've been hearing for years that it's a little racist. Then today, I discovered a Little Free Library (which incidentally is a bizarre and wonderful concept and everyone needs to get one in their neighborhood) a couple of blocks from my house. I looked inside and there was a copy of The Five Chinese Brothers! I might have squealed a little.

So I brought it home and read it and I still do not remember this book at all. I didn't find it racist, although I suppose if someone wanted to make something out of, "once upon a time there were Five Chinese Brothers and they all looked exactly alike," one could, but I don't, so let's not. It's a pretty dark story though. The first brother takes a kid fishing and the kid gets killed, so the first brother is sentenced to death, but because each brother has a physical oddity that makes him immune to a particular method of execution (and because they all look alike), each time the town changes the method, a different brother stands in.

So my two thoughts on this book are, first, that it's a lot of attempted killing for a kid's book, although no worse than Hansel and Gretel or the Wicked Witch of the West, so I'm sure if you let your kids read it, they won't end up warped. And second, it's only about 500 words long, so I really didn't need to bring it home; I could have just stood on the sidewalk and read it.

Jon williams says

This was my favorite book in kindergarten. It may even be the book responsible for motivating me to become a reader. I loved the story and I love reading it to my kids now.

Jennifer says

It is absolutely no secret I am pretty obsessed with China, I just got back from Beijing and I can't help but want to read anything set in China.

This is an older book and you know kinda disturbing as it is a children's book. It is pretty much five brother's trying to avoid an execution. Dark stuff right?

Yeah I loved every page. Not sure what that says about me.

The story is fantastic and I do think it is a great book kids should read though as it teaches about Team work and the importance of listening to people so you don't get killed seriously.

Most rules exist for reason and kids need to listen anyway I digress. I enjoyed this very quick children's book and I think it is certainly worth reading as it does teach a lot of basic lessons I do think some kids are lacking. If I ever have a kid I will be ok with he/she/whatever gender they choose reading this.
