



Circle of Cranes

Annette LeBox

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A lyrical fantasy blending fairy tale elements with contemporary issues

Thirteen-year-old Suyin is a poor orphan who has a strange gift with languages and a mysterious connection to the cranes in her small Chinese village. When a shady human trafficker arrives promising luxury and riches beyond belief in America, the villagers elect Suyin - whom they consider lucky - to go as their benefactress. But instead of luxury, Suyin is forced to work in a sweatshop in New York City's Chinatown. Suyin's future seems hopeless, until her beloved cranes arrive and reveal that she is no ordinary girl - instead, she is the daughter of the Crane Queen. Now her mother's life is in danger, and Suyin must prove herself worthy of her position as the Crane Princess, in order to save her mother and the entire clan of cranes.

For fans of Grace Lin and Laurence Yep, this is a beautiful story of the meaning of family and finding one's true path in life.

Circle of Cranes Details

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Author : Annette LeBox

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From Reader Review Circle of Cranes for online ebook

Briana says

Circle of Cranes offers readers an intense and unique story, focusing on Suyin as she enters the world of Chinatown's sweatshops, where everyone knows the law is being broken but only a few have the courage to speak out. The reality is bleak and very harsh, but Suyin and her friends manage to bring a ray of home to both their own situations and the book with their perseverance and love for each other and their families.

Ironically, the sweatshops are the good part of the book. The story here is intense and very moving. The magic that Suyin experiences with the cranes is not drawn nearly as well. It is somewhat confusing exactly how the magic works, and it does not blend very well with the realistic parts. Also, the "secrets" that the cranes intend to reveal are somewhat obvious and ultimately make everything fit together way too neatly.

The clashing of these fairytale-like aspects and the realism of the New York scenes do more than make the book a bit muddled in style and plot, however. They muddle the reading level as well. Circle of Cranes reads very much like a middle-grade book in terms of writing and the light romance, but it also features a decent amount of violence and clearly sets forth prostitution as an alternative that some girls who fail to find riches in America choose.

It should finally be noted that there are some strange gaps in this story (perhaps because it was an ARC?). For instance, one character will make a remark, and no one will really respond. A response might be technically unnecessary in the given situation, but the text is a bit choppy as a result and the story occasionally became disorienting.

The strong points are the portrayal of the sweatshops, the lessons that Suyin learns, and the villains. Some of them are delightfully creepy, and it is actually good to see that they do not all suddenly reform, as the structure of the rest of the book might lead one to suspect.

This review was also posted at Pages Unbound Book Reviews.

Cathie says

middle and upper grades
third person POV
AR test
glossary
information about the Saving Cranes organization

Suyin, a 13-year-old Chinese village girl, is selected by her village to go to America with smugglers and work in the garment industry in order to better the village. She is also the Crane Wife's daughter, so there is a fantastical element as this Asian folk tale is woven into this present-day story.

Jenn says

Circle of Cranes is a beautifully written mix of fable and historical fiction. The author's expressive style draws you in as you begin to learn more about Suyin and her life story, interwoven with a retelling of the classic story of the Crane Wife. .

The author has created a wonderful blend of ancient legend with modern day illegal immigration, connecting the horrors of life in the sweatshops with the beauty of the natural world inhabited by the cranes. There is a gentle introduction to and great expression of the Chinese migrant experience and the difficulties they encountered (cheating, violence, poverty, despair, depression) and the struggles of youth in this situation.

Life isn't easy for Suyin. She's technically alone in the world, as her father has died and her mother went away one day, never to return. She is 'mothered' by a series of aunties in the village who care for her in a rotating schedule, yet none of them have offered to adopt her as their own. Additionally, due to cruel final request by her father, Suyin cannot embroider like the other girls in the village, and therefore lacks the status and prestige that a female from her area should have.

Despite this, those who care for her consider Suyin 'lucky'. Drawn to talk to the cranes that life in the nearby marsh, Suyin is happy in her life with the aunties and her best friend, Shin Shin. All this changes though, as Suyin is sold to a 'snakehead' migrant trader who ships her off to Gold Mountain (America) for a price. It is when she arrives in America that the story really begins to take off.

Perhaps most impressive piece of this story is the presence of strong female role models, and the beautiful use of language, especially ancient proverbs, as they allude to Suyin's life experiences. Language itself plays a rich part in the story. There are stories and proverbs hidden in embroidery, an oral retelling of Suyin's history (both human and crane), and a description of the secret language of women (both written – Nu Shu – and physical in embroidery). These different methods of communication keep Suyin connected to her heritage and her true destiny, and provide her with courage in times of need.

While Suyin works hard to create a new life for herself, it is when she connects to her past that she begins to grow towards adulthood and to truly take her place in the new world of "Gold Mountain". There is a strong lesson here about staying true to whom you are. It works is because it doesn't whack you over the head about it, allowing the reader to come to the understanding as gradually as Suyin.

Overall, this is a wonderfully rich book that encourages a rich discussion about language in all forms with the reader. It's a fantastic read for both middle school and young adult readers; just be warned that some of the descriptions of life under snakehead control may be unpleasant for the more sensitive reader. Additionally, this is a very female-centered story, so engaging the male reader may be more difficult with this book.

“She knew more than most that not all acts of courage are rewarded. But finding her voice was the greatest risk for she had to open her heart to all the women in the world, her family, the one in which she truly belonged. At last she understood that her life mattered, that every life mattered, not just to herself, but to the world, and that losing her life would not just be a loss to herself, but to everyone.”

~ Quote from the ARC of Circle of Cranes

An ARC copy of Circle of Cranes was provided by Razorbill in exchange for an honest review.

Pamela Kramer says

'Circle of Cranes' by Annette LeBox is a story that might not appeal at first glance -- but look again -- this book is a wonderful story. It's a combination of realistic fiction, mythology and fairy tale.

Suyin is an orphan. She lives in a small town in rural China where she spends time living with different families. Because she was not adopted by one family, Suyin feels like an outcast.

Because her grandfather forbade the women in the village to teach her the all-important art of embroidery, Suyin is sure that no boy will ever want to marry her. However, she has an amazing, almost unnatural, ability to speak foreign languages.

A "snakehead," or human trafficker comes to the village and offers to send a villager to "Gold Mountain," (as America is known) for a huge sum of money. The villagers pool their meager resources together for a downpayment and send Suyin.

The problem is that Suyin doesn't want to go. And the trip is hardly the "cruise" that the lying criminal told the village it would be. Barely escaping death, Suyin and her companions begin work in a sweatshop.

Continue reading on Examiner.com Review of 'Circle of Cranes' by Annette LeBox - Chicago Young Adult Fiction | Examiner.com <http://www.examiner.com/young-adult-f...>

Nafiza says

If you were to judge this novel by its cover, you would perhaps peg it as a light story, involving some retelling of a fairy tale. Something pretty that can be read, put away and out of your mind as you move on to other books. You would be wrong because a Circle of Cranes is definitely more substantial than the majority of its counterparts. It deals with a folktale that is not commonly known in North America – at least I didn't know it – and the protagonist is not a first world citizen confident about her status in the world she is living. I won't lie, I thought I would zip through the novel but I found the experience a lot more ponderous than I had expected it to be.

While the retelling is a folktale, the issues the novel discusses is most definitely contemporary. The antagonists in the novel smuggle Asian (in this instance, Chinese) children into America and then put them to work in garment factories and other hovel-like places. They are overworked and underpaid. They are imprisoned like sub-humans and treated like animals. They have no rights and their only link to their families and the lives they left behind in their country of origin is through letters and these too are controlled by their bosses.

Circle of Cranes is a story of a sisterhood both the mythical crane sisterhood and the more immediate, more real sisterhood that the smuggled girls along with the protagonists find themselves forming through shared experiences, losses and hopes. The book is sometimes a bit too dry but it is consistent in tone and delivery. It does not waver from its true purpose and that is to seamlessly intersperse the magical with the mundane.

There are no enchanting princes on white chargers, there is not even a mysterious boy in a biology class. This book takes the average reader out of her element and places her stock and barrel into a world as alien to her as our world must have seemed to Suyin. I loved the glimpse of the different culture and how unapologetically LeBox narrated the differences in the Miao culture and the North American one. The journey Suyin goes through is gradual and I liked seeing her grow in increments from the child she was to the woman she becomes at the end. The romance, too, is shy and bashful and I liked how delicately LeBox wove it into the narrative thread.

Again, I don't think this novel is an easy read. It makes you confront the wrongs that are being done and makes you look at a very bleak sort of life. But it also shows that beauty persists no matter the surroundings and that hope is always present. It is just a matter of recognizing it. Do I recommend it? Certainly. It's very different from everything else I have read so far.

Ana Banana says

The story line is actually very good. However, I thought that the book lacks character development. I feel like there were rooms for each main characters to be more elaborated so that the reader would think along with them, feel their sadness more, etc. There were a few places that the events could have been told in a more gripping way, such as Suyin's journey to her mother at the Gray World. The point where she rescued her mother was very nicely written, but I thought that the journey itself was lacking some excitement to engage the reader.

A good read, nevertheless. Thus, the 3 stars. Thank you Ms. LeBox!

Regina Peters says

An ancient Chinese myth. Labour politics in 21st-century New York. You wouldn't expect these things to fit together, but Annette LeBox combines them with enviable grace.

It's the details that sell it. The writing is as lovely and precise as her heroine's embroidery. When Suyin transforms into a crane, LeBox names her bones as they transform. When she remembers her beloved mother, it's with the exact clothes and jewelry that represent the traditions of her culture.

Besides that, LeBox never hesitates to challenge her heroine. Being the princess of a flock of magical bird-women in no way excuses Suyin from having to learn things the hard way. As an undocumented immigrant, eating rats to survive the boat ride and working in a sweatshop to pay off her travel fees, her challenges are the sort most white North American readers like me can barely imagine. She doesn't always respond heroically, either; she snaps under pressure, stays quiet when her co-workers are bullied, and generally acts like a 13-year-old human being.

This only makes it all the more satisfying when she does evolve into someone who can control her impulses and protect her friends. Every success, financial and emotional, feels earned.

This may be a fantasy novel, but the most beautiful things in it are true, and so are the most frightening. Chinese women really did develop a secret form of writing centuries ago after being forbidden to learn men's writing. <http://scriptsource.org/cms/scripts/p...>

The villagers near Cao Hai Lake really do protect endangered birds.

<https://www.savingcranes.org/cao-hai-...>

Factory owners really do exploit immigrants in North America to this day.

<https://www.good.is/articles/ethical-...>

Shape-shifting and parallel universes are just the icing on the cake.

For more reviews, please visit my blog: <https://eatdrinkreadlisten.blogspot.ca>

Carrie says

Suyin is an extraordinary girl. She is an orphan living on the charity of others in her village but she has amazing luck. The villagers appreciate her talents and as a result pool their resources so she can become their benefactress in Gold Mountain (America). Suyin travels in a migrant ship, surviving horrific experiences and arrives in America to be seamstress in a New York sweatshop.

When I began reading Circle of Cranes I assumed this was taking place in the past. Early 20th century at least. The opening scenes in Suyin's home village do nothing to dissuade my initial impressions as the village is poor with no electricity. Few of the children can afford to go to school. The village is so desperate to increase their wealth they send Suyin away to America.

So imagine my surprise when one of the opening scenes in the section about Gold Mountain mentions a cell phone! This tale, so horrible and tragic, is taking place in present day. It's frightening to think that the treatment Suyin endures, the hunger and fear, the long hours for little pay, the violence towards these illegal immigrants still occurs.

Through all of this, Suyin stays strong. She learns that she is not an ordinary girl; instead she is a member of a secret society, the Crane Sisterhood. Her role within the sisterhood is also more than she expects: her mother was their Queen making Suyin a princess. She must figure out how to save her mother (who is trapped in the Grey World, an in-between world) and also how to save the entire sisterhood from becoming extinguished. This parallels Suyin's normal life as she needs to figure out a way to save her friends from being taken advantage of by the snakeheads and people smugglers.

As Suyin discovers who she is and develops her embroidery abilities (a talent forbidden to her despite the cultural importance to her) she comes to realize that she was never alone and that while she was not officially adopted by any one person in her village, the entire village agreed to care for her. Suyin learns she has more family than she ever thought possible.

Overall I really enjoyed this story. The language is simple, yet compelling. I found I couldn't put it down and I'm certain mid-grade children (the target audience) will feel the same. The lessons Suyin learns in this story can apply to any child.

I was provided an ARC of this book by RazOrbill Canada. No other compensation was given and all opinions are my own.

Nicole Skutelnik says

This book is extremely well researched, and is a big eye-opener when it comes to the sweatshops in New York's Chinatown. I know the author personally and I am very impressed with the book. Even though it's targeted at a middle grade readership, it has a fable-like quality that makes it appeal to readers of all ages.

Bonnie (A Backwards Story) says

CIRCLE OF CRANES is based on an old Asian folktale you may have never heard of, The Crane Wife. While the most well-known version of the tale is Japanese, there are various renditions of the tale in other Asian cultures as well. Annette LeBox reveals the tale as she writes for anyone unfamiliar with the story and weaves lore of women who can turn into cranes into a sophisticated story full of truth as it reveals the grit and crime of the world's underbelly. I'll admit that for most of the time I was reading, I labored under the wrong impression that I was reading historical fantasy from the turn of the twentieth century as immigrants flocked to the melting pot of the US in unsavory conditions in order to prosper. Sweatshops and labor strikes flourished at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, and that's what I thought I was reading. It wasn't until the end when one character has a cell phone that I thought, "Huh, that's odd." It turns out that LeBox has woven her novel around a smuggling incident that occurred in British Columbia, Canada in 1999/2000, where ships were intercepted and shown to be inhumane, the passengers in the worst of conditions. She also looks in-depth at the "intimidation methods used by human smugglers toward undocumented garment workers in the sweatshops of Chinatown, New York" (pg. 338). I had no clue that such places still existed today and that in some ways, life never evolved. The thought is horrifying.

Lebox's blog features more articles involving her detailed research into CIRCLE OF CRANES. She also talks about her trip to China, where she discovered the Miao Minority in Guizhou, which she calls "the poorest and least visited province in China." The area very much follows the ways of the past, having never modernized, which is one reason I thought I was in Ancient China when reading about Cao Hai Lake at the book's beginning. There is a custom that girls must be exquisite embroiderers. If they aren't, they have less of a dowry and can't make a good marriage.

In CIRCLE OF CRANES, main character Suyin is forbidden to learn embroidery. Her grandfather thinks her mother's embroidery ensnared and ruined his son. This lowers her prospects at marriage and a good life. With two parents and her grandparents dead, Suyin bounces from house to house with no permanent home. When a Snakehead (What the Chinese call human smugglers) comes and offers to take one person from the village to the United States in exchange for payment, the village chooses Suyin. She's promised a cruise ship and streets paved with gold, only to find herself crushed into the belly of a dinky boat crammed three-to-a-bed, with little food and too many rats. In New York, she's locked away in a safehouse, and seldom paid for her labor. There are hired thugs willing to kill if immigrants attempt escape without repaying their debt. On top of that, most of the workers were paid between \$1-\$3 USD, which is despicable and well below minimum wage.

Suyin suffers in the new world, hating that she and her entire village have been duped. Back home, she had an encounter with cranes and was told that she was to undertake a quest, able to one day turn into a crane herself. In New York, the cranes teach her how to embroider, and she slowly tries to improve her

circumstances and take her place in the world, to both fulfill her quest to become one with her crane sisters and stand up for what's fair for the friends laboring with her in the slums of New York.

CIRCLE OF CRANES is so much grittier and deeper than I ever expected it to be. I want to learn more about all of the topics and situations LeBox touched on now that the novel's over, and I love the extra information she's featured on her blog, as though she knew I'd come looking. I can't believe humans still live in such deplorable conditions in today's world, that our government turns a blind eye and does nothing. Reading this novel, I truly felt I'd fallen backwards a century, and to find out that this was happening today was shocking. I didn't realize the book was going to feature such deep issues when I picked it up, thinking it would mostly be about a girl's journey to becoming a crane sister. It was, but it was so much more, too. The novel is gorgeously written and really gets into the mind of Suyin as she adapts to her new life, betrayed by everyone and forced to continue on in such revolting conditions. The book is well worth reading and will truly open your mind in more ways than one.

Far says

[her mom dies because of her and then flies off later toward the end... way to not instill the guilt (hide spoiler)]

Jacci says

I enjoyed this book because I learned about a different culture and got an inside look at human trafficking. I also got to learn a lot about cranes, China, and embroidery. It was a many layered book about friendship, greed and community. Great work Annette!

Lynda says

This was unusual. Suyin is taken from her home in China by a human trafficker to work in a New York sweatshop. It is based on fact and in modern time, but is also taken from a myth about women and a secret society of cranes. (the women turn into cranes) It was unexpected fantasy, but told in a modernistic way and it was an enjoyable read.

J says

My very first goodreads first reads giveaway book!

I'm very excited to read this book! I absolutely adore fairy tales re-told, especially asian folktales.

Will rate and post a real review once I receive the book! yay =)

I'm back and ready to review. What a coincidence - I recently saw the trailer for the movie "Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" (which is based on the book Snow Flower and the Secret Fan. It's the story of two women who form a life-long sister bond and share messages written in nu shu, a secret phonetic form of writing (there's more to it than that, but that's the abbreviated version).

I had *never* heard of nu shu, or the "sister bond" before, so a double dose of both these things within one month? It must've been fate that I won this giveaway =)

Anyways, I'm getting a little ahead of myself. So if you read the summary provided above^ by Goodreads, you get the gist of the story. The sisterhood and nushu are major motifs throughout the book. Suyin has to leave her life-long sister and best friend, Shan-shan, when she travels to America. But as you'll find out, their friendship surpasses physical distance.

Nushu was invented by Chinese women as a way to communicate with each other, and a sort of silent rebellion against the men who dictated their lives. It would be passed down from woman to woman (mother teaches daughter etc..). Suyin uses nushu throughout the book to comfort herself and feel connected to the sisterhood, and it also becomes an integral part of her journey to prove herself worthy as crane princess.

Anyways! Enough of the history lesson.

The writing in Circle of Cranes reminds me of the good ol' times before Twilight burst on the scene and exploded paranormal romances and mediocre authors on us. It's lyrical and expressive without feeling forced. Eg the author isn't just trying to use big, pretty words.

I enjoyed the integration of the crane fairy tale and the gritty reality of Suyin's life in New York. The fairy tale magic is never used as an easy out to get Suyin out of a bad situation; more it's like spiritual support to aid Suyin through difficult times.

The characters are also wonderful, especially the heroine Suyin. She was a real person. She wasn't perfect, her emotions clouded her judgement, she made mistakes...but she continued to try and make the best of a horrible situation and never gave up. If I had been thrust into her situation, I don't think I could have handled it with as much courage and selflessness that Suyin did. Similarly, the other characters are not portrayed as only "good guys" or "bad guys". They were people, who did bad or good things in order to survive. Real life!

One teensy problem I had with reading is the way the storyline sometimes seemed to jump ahead. One moment Suyin knows nothing, next sentence she realizes everything. It broke the flow of the story and made it a little awkward to get back in to the book. But I'm just being nitpicky right now because everything else in the book made up for it.

The biggest shocker: this book takes place early 21st century. I couldn't believe it...I couldn't believe that some of the settings and events took place so recently. It's heartbreaking and really opened my eyes to my own ignorance.

Good for Annette LeBox for opening my mind and not shying away from describing the reality, especially in a book that's meant for middle school students. I don't know what books are promoted in middle schools anymore, and not saying that students shouldn't read books like Twilight or similar* (let's be honest: they can be entertaining), but for every one of those books that someone insists on reading they should also read a book like Circle of Cranes.

Also, major props to Annette LeBox for her amazingly thorough research. I've found that books that blend history and fiction, especially books for the younger crowd, can be messy in the research. I thought Annette must have made up certain descriptions in this book or done pure "book research" but no, she actually went to visit the physical locations and talk to the people. Awesome! If you end up reading a Circle of Cranes, which I highly recommend you do, check out her website www.annettelebox.com just to get the background and see the truth behind certain scenes in the book.

*though hopefully with enough good judgement that they don't take the book seriously

Adelaide says

I had gotten *Circle of Cranes* from a Goodreads giveaway and it's one of the best giveaway I've ever gotten.

This book is set in the times when it was popular (because the American laws hadn't gotten around this problem yet) for illegal Chinese migrants were smuggled into America by snakeheads, who promised gold and fortune but did not deliver.

Despite the heavy issues, such as death and betrayal, the book is lighthearted enough to not let the readers go too deep in the darkness of that time period. It helped that a little fantasy, which was inspired by the Asian crane legend, was involved as well.

This story is not focused on the living conditions of those Chinese labours. It's mainly focused on the growth of the main character, Suyin.

Like many before them, Suyin's village was bought in by a snakehead's silvertongue and had sent her aboard the smuggler's ship in hopes that she would send them American money, which is worth a lot in China in that time.

Starting from her journey to America, Suyin is faced with problems such as loneliness, homesickness, deceit, starvation, ridicule, a girl's jealousy, betrayal, theft, a boy's attentions, shouldering the hopes of her village and her crane family, hopelessness, and much more.

However, in the midst of all that, she finds hope, courage, and strength to survive the harsh conditions and come out on top of it.

However, I find that the story moves really fast. I know that months, and perhaps even years, had passed in the book, but the way it just suddenly jumps from event to event makes the lengthy time less noticeable. That and the passing of time isn't often mentioned - one minute I think the story is still at time A, and then suddenly, the next sentence reveals that it was actually six months after time A.

Also, I get confused at times as to what language they are speaking. For instance, sometimes when I think they were speaking in English, they were actually speaking in Chinese. It wasn't until it was mentioned that they had switched to English that I found out. Also, when it came to Chinese, I get confused as there were both Mandarin and Cantonese pronunciations. And sometimes, it was mentioned that they were speaking in Cantonese, but not all people from China know how to speak Cantonese. Mandarin (or Putonghua) is more commonly spoken there.

Anyhow, all-in-all, this is a good book and I would recommend it.
