

Bok Choy

by Paul Mason



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"I don't know how you can eat that muck," said Mrs Bishop from next door. She had come out with William to beat their carpet, talking as if Ah Sum wasn't even there.

"It's called bok choy," said Mother, giving Ah Sum his coins with a smile. She was a regular customer and always bought something. "Thank you, Ah Sum," she said. Mrs Bishop sniffed.

William sneered at Jacob once their mothers were indoors and Ah Sum had moved on. "Chinaman," he said, putting down the carpet beater and pulling back his eyes with his thumbs.

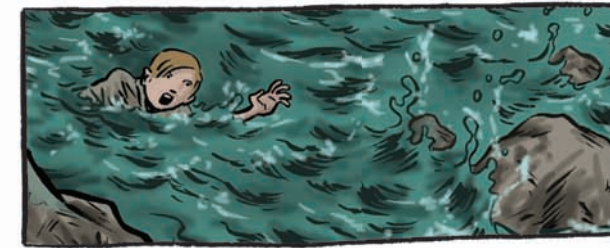
Jacob's face flamed. "I hate those Chinese cabbages, too," he said.

William just scoffed at him and began thumping the carpet again, sending out clouds of dust. Jacob knew he'd get more of the same at the schoolhouse. He glared at the figure of Ah Sum moving slowly down the street, clinging to the edge, his load weighing him down. Why did he have to choose that moment to come by?

Jacob could hear William still sniggering and had the sudden urge to go fishing. He wanted to get away.

It only took a moment for the river to steal him. A stumble as he cast out, his worn-out boot on the slippery rock – and he was up to his waist in the rushing water. The current closed in, swirling and tugging. Jacob was swiftly dragged away into the middle, where turquoise turned to deep blue.

Jacob flailed his arms. Then he tried to stand. Finally, he flipped onto his back, with his feet pointing down river. The cold squeezed his lungs. Dark shapes loomed up. Rocks – if he could only get to them! Jacob tried to move towards the rocks, but they came too soon. He'd got it wrong, and his body slammed against them.





The next thing Jacob knew, he was in a darkened hut. He forced his eyes open. In the gloom, he could see a man hunched near the doorway, tending a fire that was more smoke than flame. Jacob tried to sit up, groaning a little. The man turned and pressed him back down, pulling the covers up to his neck. Now Jacob recognised him. It was Ah Sum.

“Rest, rest,” Ah Sum said with a gentle smile.

“My mother?”

“Mother come soon,” said Ah Sum. He busied himself over the fire, then gave Jacob a mug of something hot. He supported the boy’s head with his hand while Jacob took little sips, the warmth flooding his chest.

“Walking home, I see you in water, on rocks.” Ah Sum clicked his tongue. “You are lucky boy.”

“I slipped,” Jacob said. Now he saw Ah Sum’s trousers were soaked, too. “Thank you,” Jacob said softly. Ah Sum nodded.

Jacob looked around the hut. Smoke clung to its low roof. Wooden boxes and sacks lined the stone walls. His own wet clothes – and more things besides – were draped over a rack that hung from the ceiling. There was a smell of something sweet, something peppery. Jacob had never seen inside one of the Chinese huts before. He’d never even been to the Chinese village. The way people talked, it wasn’t the sort of place you would want to visit. “Best they keep to themselves,” Mrs Bishop always said.

Ah Sum offered Jacob a dish with some rice, but Jacob shook his head. Ah Sum took some chopsticks and began eating the food himself.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Jacob Smith.”

“Jacob Smith,” he repeated.

“Your mother come soon. Ah Ling go to bring.”

At the back of the hut, on a low bench, Jacob saw paintings in dark frames draped with cloth. The pictures were of a man and a woman, both of them serious and calm looking. On the bench there was a bowl with an apple, a dish of something, and some burning sticks. It reminded Jacob of the altar at their church.

Ah Sum caught Jacob’s gaze and smiled. “Ancestors,” he said with a bow to the paintings. “Family.” Then he refilled Jacob’s mug from a teapot.

Jacob liked the tea. He was starting to feel better now. “Where are they?” he asked. “Your family?” Straightaway, he wondered whether he should have spoken.

Ah Sum smiled. “My family all in Canton. Wife, children, everybody.” He paused at the thought. “No come here to New Gold Mountain,” he said quietly, the words fading on his lips. Now Jacob could see Ah Sum’s eyes glistening in the weak light. He felt his stomach twist. He had been so angry with him earlier.



Mother came soon after that, ushered in by Ah Ling. She ducked in through the low doorway. Ah Sum struggled to his feet to greet her.

"Are you all right?" Mother said, dropping to her knees. She put a hand on Jacob's cheek. "What's all this about falling in the river?"

"Ah Sum rescued me," said Jacob.

Mother stood up and shook Ah Sum's hand. "How can I thank you?" she said.

Ah Sum just smiled.

Mother noticed Jacob's clothes hanging from the ceiling and brought them down. "Can you walk?" she asked him. "Let's get you home to bed."

Mother turned to the old man. "Come by the house tomorrow. I'd like to fix you up."

Ah Sum shook his head. "No money," he said. "No problem."

"I insist," said Mother.

Jacob and Mother walked back home through the Chinese village, which was little more than a handful of low huts clinging together in the shadow of the hill. A few old men worked in their vegetable patches; others sat outside their huts, nodding as the boy and his mother passed by. Jacob rubbed at the bruise on his head. His clothes were still damp, and they were cold.

On the path outside their cottage, they were stopped by Mrs Bishop. "Well, look what the cat dragged in," she said, chuckling at Jacob.

"He fell in, daft boy," said Mother, rubbing Jacob's cheek. "He was rescued by Ah Sum, the vegetable man, would you believe?"

"Was he indeed?" Mrs Bishop raised an eyebrow. "You'll be wanting to watch that. The Chinaman will be after something."

Mother's smile fell. She shook her head. "Whatever do you mean?"

"He'd probably sell his own mother for a ha'penny, given the chance," Mrs Bishop said.

Jacob thought about the paintings in Ah Sum's hut. The offerings to the ancestors. The lonely old man marooned in New Gold Mountain, a lifetime away from the family that he dreamed of.

"You've got that wrong, Mrs Bishop," said Mother, clenching her jaw.



"I hope you're not cooking that foul cabbage tonight," Mrs Bishop added, wrinkling her nose.

"It's called bok choy," said Mother quietly, taking Jacob's hand and leading him into their cottage.



illustrations by Ant Sang

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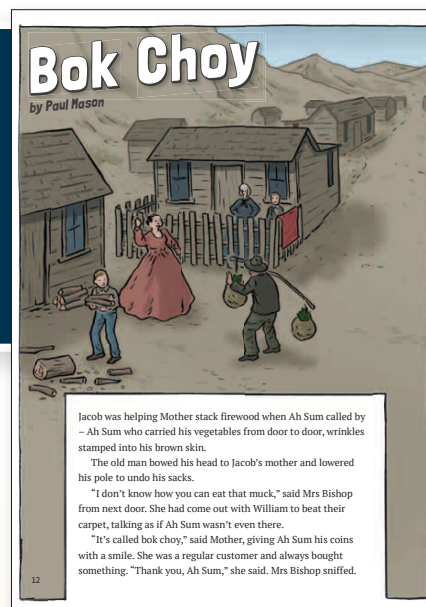
ISBN 978 0 478 44660 9 (online)

Publishing services: Lift Education E tū
Series Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione

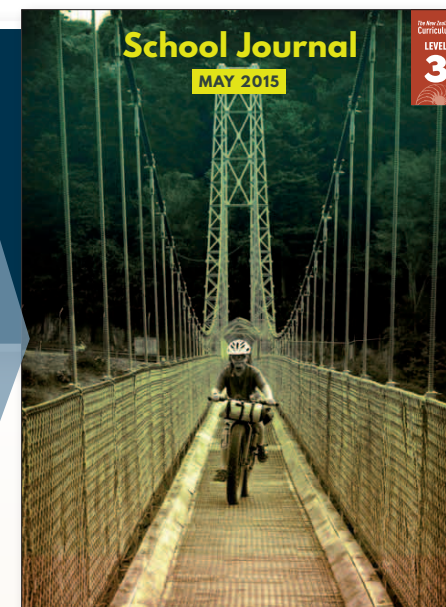


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SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3, MAY 2015

Curriculum learning area	English Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	Chinese, goldmining, history, immigration, prejudice, racial discrimination