



Utopian Grandparents

—Perry Nodelman

Balasubramaniam, Saumiya. *When I Found Grandma*.
Illustrated by Qin Leng, Groundwood, 2019. 32 pp.
\$17.95 hc. ISBN 9781773060194.

Chabbert, Ingrid. *A Drop of the Sea*. Illustrated by
Guridi, Kids Can, 2018. 36 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN
97881525301247.

Lê, Minh. *Drawn Together*. Illustrated by Dan Santat,

Disney Hyperion 2018. 40 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN
9781484767603.

Sage, James. *Old Misery*. Illustrated by Russel Ayto, Kids
Can, 2018. 40 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 97881771388238.

Uegaki, Chieri. *Ojiichan's Gift*. Illustrated by Genevieve
Simms, Kids Can, 2019. 32 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN
9781771389631.

Devoid of academic expertise in gerontology or aging studies, I have just one qualification for discussing these picture books about old people: having been born in 1942, I am now an old person myself. Like the old people in most of these books, furthermore, I am a grandparent; and for that matter, I also once had grandparents.

No wait, I have one other relevant qualification: I have read a lot of children's literature, especially picture books. And picture books have a sizeable population of grandparents. "Picture Books about Grandparents," a list on the Goodreads website, recommends 272 of them, most published in the last decade or so. One of them, Norton Juster's *The Hello, Goodbye Window*, illustrated by Chris Raschka, won the Caldecott Medal as the most distinguished American children's picture book of 2006; and in 2016, a Caldecott Honour Book about a grandparent, Matt de la Peña's *Last Stop on Market Street*, illustrated by Christian Robinson, won the Newbery Medal as best American children's book of the year.

While some of these grandparents start out by scaring or angering their grandchildren, all of them end up having wonderful loving relationships with them. In children's picture books, grandparenting almost always appears to be

a state of utopian bliss—much more so than parenting often is. Could it be that publishers perceive grandparents as a principal market for their products and believe that they might enjoy sharing a book about how great it is to have grandparents with their grandchildren?

The Caldecott winner *The Hello, Goodbye Window* offers a prime example. As its jacket flap suggests, it is “a love song devoted to that special relationship between grandparents and grandchild.” As Juster describes a young girl’s visit to her wonderful Nana and wonderful Poppy’s wonderful house from the girl’s point of view, it is nothing less than perfection, with drawers full of things to play with, a table to colour on, interesting pictures of the olden days to look at, an enchanting garden, and the window of the title through which those on opposite sides can play delightful peekaboo games. Most of all, there are the always kind, always accommodating, and always interesting grandparents, being eternally jolly as they prepare delicious meals and reveal their mastery of gardening and harmonica playing, and the narrator loves them unreservedly. These grandparents are so wonderful, the narrator ends up imagining a wonderful future in which she will be one herself.

The Hello, Goodbye Window sets impossibly high standards both for grandparent behaviour and grandchildren’s enthusiasm for it—a standard my grandparents, my grandchildren, and I have never come anywhere close to. When I was young, visiting the grandparents was more torturous than pleasurable. They liked to live in the dark; so, unlike Juster’s magical window, all you got to see when you tried to look in or out of their windows was thick curtains. One of them, my father’s mother, Esther, did like to tease children, as Juster’s Poppy does. But my Bubba Esther did it most often by suddenly and startlingly pushing her false teeth forward out of her mouth and then laughing maniacally as she sucked them back in again. A lifetime of smoking had given her a voice (and a laugh) in the bass range, and a history of immigration from Belorussia and then years as a widow raising eight children and running a boarding house in Toronto had left her with a strange mixture of Russian, Polish, Latvian, Yiddish, German, and English, words from which languages she used indiscriminately as she overconfidently tried to express herself. Most of the time, all I could understand of what she was trying to say were the frequent English swear words and obscenities she peppered her multilingual conversations with.

My mother's mother, Bessie, was a much gentler and refreshingly less interesting woman, who also had almost no English, and her husband, Schlaima, a disappointed patriarch supporting his six daughters by trucking vegetables to and from Toronto's St. Laurence Market, had no interest in me at all, other than to complain to my mother, again mostly in Yiddish, about how her moving away from the city and the Jewish community was dooming me to life as an infidel goy. He certainly never played the harmonica for me. He mostly just ignored me.

Except once. When I was ten or so, my mother sent me into the city to stay with her parents on the train, with instructions to wait for my Zaida once I arrived at Union Station. But when I got off the train, there was no Zaida. As I waited for him on the platform, I noticed a machine that allowed you to stamp letters and make words on little metal discs. It cost just a dime, I think—and I had a dime. I put my dime in the slot and was well into stamping out my name when Zaida suddenly appeared, incredibly angry. He'd been looking for me everywhere upstairs, where he said I was supposed to meet him. I tried to tell him I didn't know I was supposed to go upstairs, but he wouldn't listen and he wouldn't let me finish stamping out my name. I just had time to push the lever to get the disc out of the machine before he dragged me off.

The disc said PERRY NO. It pretty well sums up my relationship with him.

Nowadays, I believe, I have a better relationship with at least some of my grandchildren. We do play games and tease each other sometimes. We do talk about the meaning of life sometimes, or console each other on bad days. But then, I also sometimes get angry at them, for not eating or for not eating the right things or for eating too much of the wrong things or for messing my stuff up or for preferring TV to my company or the books I try to share with them; and as a result they sometimes get very angry at me. We have, in other words, real relationships with each other—and real relationships are always complicated. I am happy to have grown up enough to become a grandparent, but not for the sappy reasons Juster imagines the little girl in *The Hello, Goodbye Window* rejoicing in.

I report all this to provide a sense of the register against which I am evaluating the books I am reviewing here: the more perfect the relations between the children and the grandparents in them are, the less convincing I find them, and the more they seem to be intended less to suit

the needs of child readers than those of grandparents consciously or unconsciously working to make the grandchildren they read the books to adore them.

To begin with, I'm pleased to report that some of these grandparents do at least start out being as difficult as I found my Zaida and as my own grandchildren sometimes find me. In Minh Lê's *Drawn Together*, illustrated by Dan Santat, a young boy visits a grandfather who speaks a language he cannot understand, eats strange foods, and watches incomprehensible programs on TV. And in Saumiya Balasubramaniam's *When I Found Grandma*, illustrated by Qin Leng, Maya's wish for a visit from her grandmother who lives thousands of miles away in, I assume, India, turns sour when the grandmother brings gifts of strange sweets, makes food with horrible cashew nuts in it, and wears her embarrassing sari on a visit to Maya's classroom. But I probably should not be surprised when things change, in ways that make it clear that the only reason these children and old people start out their relationships on the wrong foot is so that they can learn better and become yet more happy couples in yet more love songs in celebration of the special relationships of magnificent grandparents to their lucky grandchildren.

The Newbery Medal awarded to *Last Stop on Market Street* confirms the apparently irresistible appeal of this storyline to the children's literature industry by offering another version of it. This time CJ is bored as he accompanies his grandmother on a bus trip after church to a soup kitchen near the last stop on Market Street, wishes he had a car, and dislikes how awful and dirty the neighbourhood is—although it's worth noting that Christian Robinson's cheerful images of the urban blight do much to undercut CJ's negative opinion. But as CJ's grandmother tells him of all the wonderful things there are to see if you open your eyes to them, CJ learns to celebrate the wonderfulness of the world, and not incidentally, of his grandmother. After CJ's Nana tells him, "Sometimes when you're surrounded by dirt, CJ, you're a better witness for what's beautiful," CJ "wondered how his nana always found beautiful where he never even thought to look."

Last Stop cleaves close to one of the central storylines of children's literature: a child is wrong about something until an adult teaches him better. In a way, it's an allegory of the basic didactic instincts behind the existence of children's literature, with the grandparent as the

loveable voice of wisdom. The same pattern can be found in Lauren Castillo's *Nana in the City*, in which an Auntie-Mame-like grandmother teaches her timid grandchild to love the "bustling, booming and extraordinary" city by knitting him a cape to protect him from its scariness—and guess what: "Nana was right." The children in Stan and Jan Berenstain's *The Berenstain Bears and the Week at Grandma's* are not so much frightened as they are annoyed about having to spend time with people who are "sort of . . . old." But not only are the grandparents grand fun, the children end up wondering how they got to be so smart, and Gramps tells them, "That's one of the good things about being an old person. You learn something every day. So that by the time you're old enough to be a grandparent, you know quite a lot."

While the grandfather in *Drawn Together* is not so aggressively wise or so aggressively determined to share his wisdom with his grandson, the conclusion that grandparents are amazing remains the same. After the boy gives up on his grandfather and retrieves drawing materials from his backpack, the grandfather turns out to have a sketchpad and they draw together, in clever illustrations by Dan Santat that reveal them at first conjoining and then combining their two different styles, one simple and cartoon-like, the other more complex and more referential of traditional Asian culture. As a result, as the boy says, they create "a new world that words can't even describe." (It's worth noting, though, that it requires the words of the text to point out that implication of the illustrations). A little more forthrightly in *When I Found Grandma*, after Maya's grandma wisely realizes the problem and adjusts to wearing less unusual clothing and giving up prayer at the temple for a trip to the amusement park on the island, Maya learns that cashews aren't so terrible after all, and that grandmothers are essentially wonderful.

Grandparents remain wonderful in two more of the books under review, with the significant difference that their grandchildren never question their wonderfulness. In Chieri Uegaki's *Ojii-chan's Gift*, Mayumi unquestioningly adores her grandfather—or at least the text reports nothing but their mutual ongoing pleasure in working in his garden of stones and gravel when she visits him each year in Japan; and in Ingrid Chabbert's *A Drop of the Sea*, Ali, who lives with his great-grandmother beside a desert in what seems to be North Africa, unquestioningly adores his great-grandmother from the very beginning: "Just her and him. Just him and her. They don't need anything more to be happy."

In the context of these happy couples, it might be relevant that the old woman in the books under review who most reminds me of my own Bubba Esther (and, to be honest, myself as a grandfather) is the one with no grandchildren: James Sage's nasty Old Misery, who tells her own story in the book named after her. Having grudgingly fed a passing stranger and been rewarded with anything she wants to wish for, she chooses to have anyone who tries to steal apples from her tree get stuck to it—and then finds a rich crop of animals and people, including the local vicar, and happily demands rewards for freeing them. Then, when Mr. Death comes to call for her, she tricks him into climbing into the apple tree and refuses to let him down until he agrees to let her live forever. But once out of the tree, Death curses Misery with eternally having an itch she can't scratch—which is why, we learn, "Misery will always be found in this here world."

Since this old woman turns out to be an allegorical representation of what her name suggests, I have to ask why she should occupy the body of an aging and grasping female. Ageist much? Sexist much? But there is an explanation for the ageism and sexism. While the information about *Old Misery* provided by its publisher never mentions it, this story is a version of an old folk tale rife with old values, one told particularly in Spanish-speaking countries. There is, for instance, a version in John Bierhorst's *Latin American Folktales*. The story clearly points to a moral about the results of too much self-care and too much reliance on one's own craftiness to foster it. It enforces the correct punishment on someone as essentially nasty and self-centred as Old Misery—someone who actually does deserve to be eternally miserable, just as the various inherently evil ogres and giants of other folk tales deserve what they get.

I still worry, though, about embodying this miscreant as an old woman, as if old women were as inherently miserable as ogres are inherently mean. And I find myself wondering what might happen if it were one or more of Old Misery's grandchildren who showed up and got stuck in the tree. In the utopian world of picture-book grandparenting, only one solution would be possible: horrified by the plight of her loved ones, the old woman would cease to be or even turn out not to be so miserable or frightening or nasty after all, and she and the grandchildren would become aware of the requisite love of their special relationship with each other.

But instead of grandchildren, Misery's tree traps Death. Nor is Death's presence surprising. It hovers inevitably and increasingly over the grandparent population of all these books. The mere fact of having a grandchild means you are old enough to be getting closer to the end—I am all too aware that I stamped my PERRY NO almost seven decades ago. Death seems present not just as a character in *Old Misery*, but with varying degrees of obviousness in all of these books. There seems to be no tension between the children and grandchildren in *Ojiichan's Gift* and *A Drop of the Sea* because the focus is less on what might bring them together than on what might part them: death. That Mayumi's Ojiichan, seen in a series of illustrations first standing unassisted, then needing a cane, and then a wheelchair as the story progresses, will soon be meeting Death is only a little less obvious than Old Misery's actual encounter with him. In *A Drop of the Sea*, the great-grandmother's decline becomes even more explicit as Ali notices that she is finding it harder to walk: "She looks like she's a thousand years old. And Ali knows people can't grow that old." While less noticeably present in *Drawn Together* and *When I Found Grandma*, death still seems implied in them as the inevitable result of the ongoing passage of time: the mere fact that young characters live in an environment so different from the ones their grandparents once knew and therefore need to be connected to old traditions now alien to them implies the inevitability of change—and therefore, eventually, the inevitability of death.

Since Ali lives in the same cultural environment as his great-grandmother, there appears to be no question in *A Drop of the Sea* about changes in tradition. But that death is so obviously imminent does seriously challenge the assumption of most literature for young children that endings are always going to be happy. It might be instructive that Chabbert has chosen to provide Ali with a great-grandmother rather than just a grandmother—a person whose unusually advanced age might give young readers less reason to fret about the possible deaths of their younger and more lively grandparents—grandparents like, for instance, me? One way or the other, though, all Ali can do is attempt to fulfill his great-grandmother's wish and go off to see the sea for her. When he returns with just a drop of the sea in his pail, she makes his heart soar by saying, "Oh, Ali, this is one of the most beautiful days of my life!" This apparently happy ending seems meant to deflect attention from the unavoidable unhappy ending of her actual imminent death.

But the entire idea of Ali going to the sea is a deflection. Think about it: it makes no sense that him going in a way that confirms his great-grandmother cannot go herself might make her happy, except for the fact that in his youthful innocence he believes it will. As I see it through the eyes of a cynical senior, his ability to go just rubs in the fact that she can't. Furthermore, Guridi's illustrations seem to hint that Ali's voyage is an imaginary one. The desert he travels across appears to be composed of bits of old maps shown backwards and upside down, perhaps implying that it is the visually represented desert depicted on and remembered from maps that he walks through and not the actual one; and while he is shown to arrive at the sea and fill his pail there, there are only a few drops in the pail when he offers it to his great-grandmother: "The long walk and the heat got the better of the treasure"—if, indeed, there ever was an actual treasure. Might the sea Ali reaches be a mirage? Might the few remaining drops be his own sweat?

Real or not, Ali's voyage represents a strange deflection from a story centrally about the death of an old relative—a way of using either his feet or his imagination to persuade himself that he has indeed done something positive when there is in fact nothing to be done. While all these books try to confront the fact that grandparents, great-grandparents, and old people generally are indeed old and growing older and therefore closer to their end, they then find ways of softening the blow. Misery and Death's mutual tricking of each other makes Death seem less scary, perhaps, as does Ali's voyage to the sea; and the focus on learning about and preserving traditions from the past in the other three books tends to mask a hidden assumption that the traditions are in fact dying out in ways that require them to be passed on—becoming extinct like the grandparents who represent them. The happy endings considered requisite in books for young children make them a less than ideal medium in which to confront aging and death in any way other than to attempt to muffle their darker implications in concepts of special relationships.

Those special relationships become necessary because of another muffled assumption the books share: that there does exist a gulf separating grandparents and grandchildren that needs to be bridged. Even though Ali lives with his great-grandmother, his belief in his own capabilities seems contrary to the more constricted and self-repressive values of the culture

his great-grandmother represents: a culture the illustrations establish with the clay house on the edge of the desert that he shares with her and by her being dressed in what appears to be a hijab. Like Ali's great-grandmother, furthermore—and also like my own grandparents—the grandparents in the other books come from non-mainstream immigrant backgrounds; and unlike Ali, the children in those books—and I—do not share the more traditional lifestyles that their grandparents represent and allow them to engage with. The publishers of all these books seem to have responded to the current interest in fostering books about diverse lifestyles by providing these characters with Vietnamese, Japanese, Indian, and Arabic roots.

Viewed together, these four books express a surprising unanimity about cultural matters—a vision of multiculturalism that mandates contemporary North American children, particularly ones from immigrant backgrounds, learn and honour the traditions of their ancestors from elsewhere. But there is a proviso: the traditions need to be adjusted to suit and interact with their new context. As a result, the traditions come to represent less what they once might have meant to those who followed them in the past than just the idea of tradition itself, of honouring the past without significantly engaging in its practices or its values.

The replacement of specific traditions with a celebration of tradition is another common trope in children's picture books. A classic example is Patricia Polacco's *The Keeping Quilt*, in which the speaker's great-grandmother, a Jewish immigrant to the United States from Russia, makes a quilt from fabrics from the old country in order to remember the old life there. The quilt is then used as a tablecloth at Sabbath dinners, as a chuppa, the wedding canopy at her marriage, as a baby blanket, and eventually, as a cover for her dying husband. As differing uses continue down the generations, the quilt comes to represent, not the meanings of the rituals and events it was once part of, but the history of this one family: "As the years passed and Traci and Steven were growing up, their grandmother took pleasure at every family gathering to tell the story of the quilt." It then represents connections between the grandmother's past and her grandchild's present—an honouring of what once was rather than a commitment to continuing to engage with the meanings of its beliefs and traditions.

Much as the quilt itself replaces the past it purports to celebrate, the culture and artistic traditions the grandfather accesses in his drawings in *Drawn Together* now matter less

for what they once meant than for their part in the new world he and his grandson create together—a world whose meanings are more about making a connection with the past than preserving it; and in *Ojichan's Gift*, Mayumi recreates her grandfather's traditional Japanese garden as a diminished portable version of itself that she builds in a bento box—a version less about gardening than it is an expression of her love for him. In making it, furthermore, Mayumi follows the lead of young girls with Japanese grandparents in two earlier books by Uegaki. In *Suki's Kimono*, Suki's decision to wear her kimono to her North American school leads to staring and teasing; but after remembering her Japanese grandmother's ability to keep calm and aided, tellingly, by the restrictive obi that helps her to keep her body straight, she attempts to perform a traditional dance she has not yet learned and then delights her classmates by doing her own improvisations of it. In *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin*, similarly, Hana asks for lessons after visiting her grandfather, a former symphony violinist in Japan, and then chooses to play at a school concert after only a few lessons; but again laughter turns to admiration when she remembers her grandfather making the sounds of birds and animals on his fiddle and his wise words about doing her best, and she invents some sounds on her own. All three of these girls have accessed tradition and then produced admiration for it by transforming it into something that fits into the less traditional values of their contemporary culture by expressing, not what it once was, but instead, the desirably imaginative ingenuity of a contemporary child.

While Maya doesn't adjust her grandmother's traditions in *When I Found Grandma* to make them more acceptable to her, her grandmother does adapt herself to her granddaughter's values—and thus creates a new context that allows Maya to engage with the old values and the old culture that supports them. But as happens in *Drawn Together*, Maya responds by adding her grandmother's old ways into her own less traditional ones, creating one more blend of past and present that ignores the significance of what the old ways meant in the past. It is instructive that, while Maya never makes it to the temple after her grandmother agrees to go the amusement park instead, the grandmother does give Maya the prayer bells Maya had earlier hidden from her in order to prevent her annoying praying. The bells, which “sounded like the sweet tinkle of Grandma's bangles,” now represent Maya's connection to her grandmother, not the faith they once played a part in.

Meanwhile, when the grandmother replaces her sari with slacks for the amusement park visit, she also buys herself a baseball cap at the pier: “She called it her all-American hat.” In Qin Leng’s illustrations, the all-American hat looks much like the MAGA hats of Trump supporters who hope to Make America Great Again—especially by limiting immigration from countries like the one Maya’s grandmother comes from. Whatever specific values it stands for, the red hat represents a vision of cultural adaptation that requires that there be less difference as the base for toleration of, and therefore the only theoretical celebration of, cultural differences.

The hat helps Maya find her grandmother in more ways than one—not just because the grandmother gets Maya to see where she is in the amusement park by waving it in the air, but also because her grandma’s purchase of it signals a willingness to change enough to make a connection with her deculturated granddaughter. It then represents something like a vision of a more or less deculturated melting pot—a vision that I have always thought of as American, as opposed to the more difference-accepting Canadian version of multiculturalism. It is interesting, then, that Greenwood books is a Canadian publisher located in Toronto, the city both the author Saumiya Balasubramaniam and the illustrator Qin Leng call home, and that the amusement park Maya’s family visits requires a trip on a ferry, as does the one on Toronto Island. I suspect, then, that the hat being all-American rather than all-Canadian is a gesture toward making American readers feel at home in this book—for there is no question about publishers like Greenwood finding it impossible to sustain a profitable business by appealing exclusively to Canadian readers, or about Canadian readers therefore being used to accepting the expectable presence of all-American content in their books. It’s worth pointing out that, while four of the five books under review here were published by Canadian publishers (*Drawn Together* was published in the US), all the other examples of picture books about grandparents that I’ve referred to are American and were all readily available to me in my local Canadian public library—qualities they share with many of the other books on the Goodreads list I mentioned earlier. The four Canadian books might well then also represent a different form of deculturation: the replacement of a concern with what’s distinctive about our lives as Canadians with a less specific but in fact more American vision of children and grandparents that mirrors the more immediate concern in these books with the need for cultural adaptation.

Things were different once. To my knowledge, neither of my grandmothers ever wore slacks or a baseball cap either at home or out in public—and the one grandfather I knew never made any effort to convey his traditions to me beyond complaining that I didn't know them. I doubt that it ever occurred to any of them, ensconced firmly inside a ghettoized Toronto neighbourhood of people like themselves, that they ought to adapt to the melting pot. But their children—my parents' generation—did. As a result, as far as my own family goes, my grandparents' values, their religion, and much of their culture died with them. While I feel its loss, I also worry about what it would have meant to have inherited a version of it diluted enough to survive in the context of an overall acceptance of contemporary mainstream values. Perhaps no cultural transmission is better than the transmission of a diluted misrepresentation of a once-vibrant and meaningful lifestyle.

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