



## Coolies

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## **Coolies** Yin , Chris K. Soentpiet (Illustrations)

Shek marvels at the new world as he and his brother, Little Wong, arrive in California. Along with hundreds of other workers, the brothers are going to build a great railroad across the West. They plan to save enough money so that their mother and little brothers can join them in America. But as days grow into months, they endure many hardships-exhausting work, discrimination, and treacherous avalanches. Inspired by actual events, this story reveals the harsh truth about life for the Chinese railroad workers in 1865, while celebrating their perseverance and bravery.

## **Coolies Details**

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Author : Yin , Chris K. Soentpiet (Illustrations)

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## From Reader Review Coolies for online ebook

### Lynn Davidson says

This is such a beautiful book. It's partly historical fiction, a story based on actual facts about the Chinese men who came across the ocean to America to work. The story focuses on two brothers who suffered injustices along with the many others, and yet managed to send money home to their parents and siblings. The illustrations are AMAZING!

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### Jessica says

A historical fiction book that leaves a bad taste in your mouth, but also leaves you impressed with the strength people endure. Not an easy read because of the emotion it stirs, but worth it.

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### Sarah Middlestead says

Chinese immigrants move to California to work on building the Transcontinental Railroad.

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### Robyn Schaefer says

Shek and his little brother Wong leave their country to join the hundreds of Chinese workers in America in building the great Transcontinental Railroad in the mid-1800s. "Coolies" was the derogatory name given to the laborers, meaning "lowly workers."

The story is actually told as a flashback. Shek's great-granddaughter is passing along the family history to her own grandson. It begins in impoverished and hunger-stricken China, where news of the need for laborers in America sends Shek and Wong overseas. Shek promises to save enough money to bring their mother and younger brothers to America. They board the "overcrowded ship" with "hundreds of other men frantic for work" en route for the land of opportunity.

Beginning in Sacramento, they work from dawn till dusk, month after month, through blistering hands, scorching sun, blizzards, unscrupulous bosses, and discriminatory pay. Shek survives both a risky detonation of explosives and an avalanche, in which he contracts frostbite. In an ultimate insult, the Coolies – the most vital component of the completion of the project -- weren't even invited to the celebration when the Central Pacific line from the west and Union Pacific line from the east finally meet up to form the Transcontinental Railroad.

The themes in this book are powerful ones. It depicts the value of protection (Shek looking after his little brother at every opportunity), optimism (the boys regularly send hopeful letters back to their mother in China promising they will never go hungry again) and perseverance (the boys endure harsh conditions day after day). The story is well told, and compassion for the main characters comes easily. The illustrations, a contrast of cool blue and warm gold hues, add an intensity to the text, beginning with the striking cover image of the boys standing tranquilly with sledge hammers over their shoulders, not really knowing if their faces reveal hope or disillusionment. Ultimately, it is the story of both.

## **Ms Threlkeld says**

Engrossing account of how Chinese immigrants helped build the railroads. Lots of text, so better for upper elementary and middle school readers.

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## **Wilhelmina Jenkins says**

This is a beautiful picture book that tells the story of two brothers who leave China to come to America to work on the transcontinental railroad. The illustrations by award-winning artist Chris Soentpiet are spectacular and filled with detail. Yin does not hesitate to show the discrimination and danger faced by these brothers, but the heart of the story is the commitment of the brothers to each other and to their family in China. This is a wonderful introduction to a neglected part of American history and the role that Chinese Americans played in the building of this country.

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## **Phil Jensen says**

Thrillingly told, beautifully illustrated, and historically important, Yin's picture book recounts the experiences of Chinese laborers on the transcontinental railroad.

The author's note is interesting. It explains that Yin made it into adulthood before learning of this part of history. It speaks to the importance of acknowledging the contributions of all ethnic groups in American history.

The word "coolie" is controversial. Yin uses it occasionally, but clearly prefers the term "Chinese laborers." In the author's note, she mentions that it was used derogatorily. In the text of the book, she implies that the most important thing is acknowledging the Chinese achievements, and that terminology is secondary.

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## **Jennifer says**

Coolies, written by Yin and illustrated by Chris Soentpiet, is the story of two Chinese brothers, Shek and Wong, who leave their family in China to work in America as laborers for the transcontinental railroad. The story, which highlights the struggles of these railroad laborers, as they fought physical exhaustion, demanding and unfair supervisors and the dangerous working conditions. The brothers manage to stay together to see the completion of the transcontinental railroad and eventually settle in San Francisco, CA and send for their family in China.

Yin brings the history of Chinese immigration and the building of the transcontinental railroad to students by focusing on one family's experience. This story is made more accessible to students from the 21st Century because it is told from the perspective of a family history story. Most students will be related to older relatives telling stories about ancestors. In fact, this very personal link to history can be the hook students need to engage in the historical studies.

Chris Soentpiet's pictures capture the reader's attention and convey the untold emotional mood of the book. We see the warmth of the grandmother as she talks of her grandson, we see the sadness of a mother sending her sons to a foreign land and we can see (and almost hear) the anger and intimidation in the railroad officials faces. The use of light in his paintings draw our attention to the faces and emotions of the stories. The bright sunlight bleaches out the faces of the workers and conveys the scorching work conditions. The soft firelight of the campfire softens the worker's faces and makes us feel that they are at home with each other in the firelight.

Historical fiction offers opportunities to widen student perspectives about the events and people of different time periods. The story of Chinese immigration in the early to mid-1800 is part of the westward expansion category. No unit about Chinese immigration to America would be complete without this award winner.

Coolies list of awards and honors includes, the Junior Library Guild Selection 2001, the Parent's Choice Gold Award 2001, the Children's Literature Choice Book, the American Library Association Notable Books 2002 and the International Reading Association Children's Book of the Year 2002.

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### **Cheryl says**

The title is an attempt to 'reclaim' the word, much as some people who are gay refer to themselves as Queer, or some Blacks use the "N" word. And in my opinion the book succeeds in discussing the word and the different attitudes behind it, in a story that it not only important but is also engaging and absolutely beautifully illustrated. Highly recommended for ages 7 up, especially families who homeschool.

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### **Hannah Park says**

A great book to share the story of Chinese laborers on the transcontinental railroad. Often, this a piece of history that is not shared, or it is briefly spoken about in classrooms. This book is a great tool to bring to classrooms and homes so that students can learn about the discrimination that hard-working Chinese men (and women) had to face.

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### **L12\_sarah says**

*Coolies* tells the story of two Chinese brothers who journey to the United States in the 1850s to seek out work, since rebellion and hard times in China have made it hard to find work. Once in the U.S., the two brothers, Shek and his younger brother Wong, find work working for the Central Pacific Railroad, who is in the process of building the transcontinental railroad. The story of the brothers shows what it is like to work on the railroad, doing backbreaking labor twelve hours a day in extreme heat and cold, laying dynamite and building trestles--all very dangerous work. Moreover, Shek, Wong and the other Chinese workers are discriminated against by the white railroad workers, who think that the Chinese are weak and do not deserve to be paid as much as other laborers. Although the story ends on a happy note for Shek and Wong, since they are able to bring the rest of their family over from China, their tale accurately describes the hardships of being a Chinese immigrant in the United States.

Chris Soentpiet's illustrations in this book are beautiful! Every page is like a painting that demonstrates an

exceptional understanding of lighting and composition. The emotions Soentpiet is able to capture in the faces of the characters is especially impressive. Each picture is detailed and has many things going on that the reader needs to take time to absorb properly.

This book is best suited for grades 3-5, but could be used in the lower middle school grades (6-7) if it were part of a unit focused on discrimination or immigration. In particular, *Coolies*, which is named for the racial slur directed at Chinese immigrants in the 1850s, would be a good addition to a unit focused on discrimination against Asian immigrants, or how much of America was built on the backs of immigrants without proper credit. A brief attempt at a labor strike in the book in order to achieve equal pay could be compared to the story of Cesar Chavez and his similar fight for equality for Latino immigrants working the fields of California.

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### **Haowei Zhu says**

This story is about two Chinese boys went to United States for working. At that time, there was a rebellion happened in China, lots of people died of hunger. That's why they wanted to find work. The illustration in this book is really good. I can see lots of people in each pictures, each person has different expression and details.

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### **Elaine says**

This picture book is a great introduction to the plight of Chinese immigrants who came to work on the transcontinental railroad in the 1800s.

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### **ABC says**

This is about two brothers who travel from China to America to build the railroad leading from the west. It does an excellent job of portraying the hardships they faced. I especially liked the illustrations.

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### **A\_Leticia says**

What an amazing piece of work!!! I particularly had not known much of the Chinese involvement in the construction of the transcontinental railroad nor the way that they had been treated during this era. In this picture book, appropriately geared for middle-school readers, a young Chinese boy learns of the experiences and successes of his great-great-great grandfather and brother who played a crucial role in the construction of the American railroad, along with other fellow Chinese laborers. Along the way, the young Chinese boy discovers that his family had endured mistreatment and suffering, yet through it all arrived at "the land of opportunity."

The setting of the story played an especially important role in the reader's view of life for the Chinese during the mid-1800s era. The plot of this story allows the reader to become familiar with the historical event of this era which may be less familiar to that of one outside of the Chinese culture. The characters were authentically created through cultural identity and illustration and were consistent with the time period. There are many significant themes explored throughout this picture book: oppression, the importance of

family, the importance of loyalty, faith, and honor, etc.  
Great read!

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