

Titles from Lee & Low Books tell the stories of colorful characters like Sammy Lee, Ray Charles and Ira Hayes.

Culture by the Book

Lee & Low Books is not the children's publishing house of your childhood. Among its award-winning titles, there are no stories about damsels in distress, green eggs and ham, or bunnies who lose their wool vests. Lee & Low books introduce young readers to characters such as Arun and Garang, kids with multi-hued skin tones and real-life experiences. The story lines — both real and fictional — are launch pads for learning about overarching historical and social themes.

"We identified a vacuum in children's books," according to co-founder Tom Low. "Most were targeted to Caucasians or contained animals or fairy tales. There was nothing dealing with contemporary issues and people of color. The few that did primarily focused on African-American titles." Resolved to inject America's vast diversity into a monochromatic industry, Chinese-American friends Philip Lee and Tom Low incorporated Lee & Low Books in 1991. Since then, the company's titles are acclaimed for their inclusion of African, Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern and American Indian cultures in both contemporary and historic settings.

Lee & Low's success has come despite an array of hurdles. "Our principal trouble when the company started was finding good stories," explains Jason Low, son of **retired founder Tom Low** and current publisher of the company. "This challenge affects publishers big and small, but we have been fortunate to find a number of great ones over the years." Calling the stories "great" might be an understatement. With more than 200 titles published in English and Spanish, Lee & Low's books have earned a roomful of major awards and honors, including a Coretta Scott King Book Award, a Pura Belpré Award, a Parents' Choice Award, a Jane Addams Children's Book Award, a Child Magazine's Best Book Award and many others.

To preserve this reputation for quality, the company initiated a novel practice that keeps the presses flowing with powerful stories. "Cultivating and nurturing minority authors and illustrators is a critical component of our mission," explains Jason. "So we created the annual New Voices contest." The contest encourages submissions from first-time writers with cash prizes and publishing contracts, and winners have gone on to win the Paterson Prize for Books for Young People and other prestigious industry awards. The contest is just one way that Lee & Low realizes its mission. *Bebop Books* is another. Headed by Jason's brother, Craig Low, *Bebop Books* is a Lee & Low imprint devoted to early readers. Its books introduce K-2 readers to new cultures while focusing on the five essential components of reading.

For Jason and Craig Low, publishing in this niche is a labor of love. "When I was growing up I certainly did not have the kind of books that my boys have today," recalls Jason. "I believe that my sons won't experience the same feelings of isolation and desire to assimilate that I once did." The company envisions a day when there will be no need for a word like multicultural. "We hope that referring to our stories just as stories will reinforce the belief that, despite one's background or the color of one's skin, we all have experiences in common," says Jason. (www.leeandlow.com)

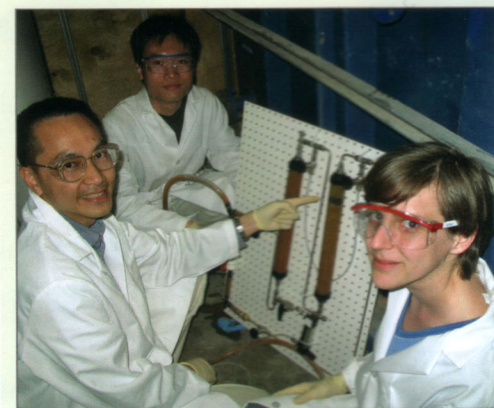
Jason, left, Craig and Tom Low.



Golden Idea May Save Our Groundwater

Despite a dearth of positive news about the environment our grandchildren will soon inherit, there are people who work night and day to solve difficult problems surrounding the earth's sustainable food, water and air supplies. Michael Wong, a professor of chemical engineering at Rice University in Houston, Texas, is one of those people. Wong is getting national attention for his application of nanotechnologies to clean up our underground water supplies.

First, a primer on TCE, or trichloroethylene. TCE is a nonflammable, colorless liquid with a somewhat sweet odor and a burning taste, but you really don't want to taste it, especially in your drinking water. TCE is used mainly as a solvent to remove grease from metal parts, but its industrial use is rather ubiquitous. To the point, TCE is frequently found in underground water sources as a result of pollution.



Michael Wong in the lab with Rice University students Yu-lun Fang and Kimberly Heck

And here is where Wong's research offers new hope for cleaning up the mess. "There are processes in place to remove TCE from many groundwater locations, but they are expensive to run," says Wong, "and not every contaminated groundwater location is being cleaned up." The eureka idea that has everyone excited is a process that is immeasurably faster, cheaper and far better for the environment in the long run.

And the catalyst for the new process is gold — more specifically, palladium nanoparticles encasing gold nanoparticles, interfaced with TCE molecules and groundwater to produce nothing but "happy byproducts," as Wong likes to describe it.

But Wong's discovery isn't one of those great ideas that are filed away under the heading "totally unrealistic." Wong and his team are talking to several Fortune 500 firms to build reactor units and put the research to field testing. The first reactor could be on line as early as this year, and positive results will be a major breakthrough in the tough fight to clean up our water supplies.

***correction: founder, Tom Low is not retired**