News Release

March 12, 2010
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Kao Kalia Yang Urges Century Students to Follow their Hearts

Kao Kalia Yang, author of **Century's 20009-2010 Common Book** selection "The Latehomecomer", never expected to become an award-winning writer.

When she first came to America at age 6, she thought every color was yellow and every English word ended with "s." She grew up in the McDonough housing projects and rarely spoke at school. When she attended Carlton College, she was a pre-med student because she wanted to provide for her family and make them proud.

Fast forward several years and Yang is standing behind a podium in the Century College theatre on March 3 talking to students and community members about making a living as a professional writer. And her family is very proud.

At age 29, Yang has won two prestigious Minnesota Book awards and is regularly asked to speak in public. With the language of a poet, she speaks quietly and directly. Students adore her.

“Century has been so much to me,” Yang said, winding up her year as a writer-in-residence at Century. “People are so welcoming. My father learned to be a machinist at Century to support the family, and some of my earliest memories are of my brother and I playing with the crab apples in the front of the building.”

Yang wrote “The Latehomecomer” as a tribute to her grandmother, who died in 2003 without ever learning to write. Orphaned in Laos, her grandmother took care of her younger siblings and endured grinding poverty during the Vietnam War. Yang once asked her grandmother if she had ever been hungry, and the response was, “You do not think about hunger if you have never been full.”

Yang wants to be her family’s happy ending. “This is the beating heart of me,” she said. “I take on strangers with my heart wide open.”

Yang said she has encountered racism and was once the target of fast-food trash thrown at her by someone in a car that she approached to offer help. She has been laughed at by high school students who did not want to hear her message. “I am a young writer,” she said, “but I will continue to speak, even when I am afraid. I will open my heart up one more time for people. It is education that has made my life possible. I believe in places like Century. We are in the business of furthering understanding and bringing people together.”

Yang’s family supports her decision to work as a writer, though they have little understanding of what that entails. “They know about doctors, lawyers and nurses, but not about writers,” said Yang. “But they are proud of their Hmong daughter. And I love the people who made me possible. The Hmong touch on my skin has always been a gentle one.”

Yang will be a writer-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire in the fall. Her message: “I want to show the heart of a young woman trying to make the world a better place. I am not tall and not smart. But my heart is a fighter’s heart…I think language is beautiful. Words travel to the heart of us.”

Photo: Kao Kalia Yang shares her story at Century College