



Above, a sumi-e brush painting entitled "Dragon Battle" by artist Yvonne Palka; right, the cover of Palka's recently published chapter book; and, below right, the author wearing her recently acquired dragon brooch.

Photos courtesy of Yvonne Palka



Jaxon and Allie climbed aboard the blue and magenta dragons. Together with Shoram and Shyla, they swam out a short distance, leaving a glowing phosphorescence in their wake.

From "Dragon Fire, Ocean Mist" by Yvonne Palka



Author blends fantasy, brush painting in award-winning book

BY PATRICIA DUFF
South Whidbey Record

Along the western coast of the Olympic Peninsula, a division of dragons stretch their jagged backs for a mile in the sand.

At least they are dragons in the minds of local author Yvonne Palka and her youngest grandchildren.

Palka and her family spent many years camping at Shi Shi Beach in Olympic National Park.

There, a mile-long cavalcade of sea stacks and natural arches called the Point of Arches provides a focal point for the natural wonders and imminent beauty of the peninsula's west coast, a place that has been called one of the most beautiful beaches on earth.

When Palka became a grandmother and brought the youngest of her brood to gaze upon these peculiar wind- and water-sculpted landforms at Shi Shi, she asked the children such questions as: "Do you think these are just rocks? Or are they dragons asleep in the sand?"

Thus began her affinity for creating dragon adventure stories and combining them with her talent as a sumi-e (Asian brush painting) artist.

"Dragon Fire, Ocean Mist," is a chapter book written and illustrated by Palka based on the stories she has been creating through the years as she watched her children and grandchildren grow.

The book was recently awarded a bronze

medal in the Best First Chapter Book category of the Moonbeam Children's Book Awards of the Jenkins Group publishing service.

Palka, a retired college professor and biologist, had not planned on becoming an author of children's literature, and had even almost given up the dream of becoming a painter.

As a young woman, Palka had been steered clear of a career in art so she could earn a sensible living. But she had an epiphany later in life and rediscovered her talent for painting in 1998.

"I suddenly realized that if I didn't do something with my art before I died, I'd be looking back from the other side really mad at myself for not doing it," Palka said.

Now Palka is an award-winning sumi-e painter and a member of the Greenbank Sumi-e Painters group.

Sumi-e means "ink picture" in Japanese and, if done well, captures the essence or "qi" (pronounced chi) of the subject of the painting.

It was in 2006 when Palka gathered together the stories she had been telling her grandchildren and showed them to an editor. The response was a resounding "yes," and Palka began the long process of tying the stories together, learning the nuances of good dialogue, building tension, developing the characters and generally learning the overall craft of writing

a good story.

She would also have to create 100 illustrations that would complete the book.

"With brush painting, once the ink is on the paper you can't go back and fix it," Palka said.

An arm injury set her back for awhile, but once that had healed, Palka continued to work on creating the illustrations.

However, many of the paintings were constricted; the "qi" wasn't there. Palka worked hard to find the necessary freedom of movement in her brush, a kind of sumi-e magic that would allow her dragons to move, to come alive on the page. As they say in China and Japan: "The brush dances and the ink sings."

It would take about 1,000 tries before she had what she needed.

"It took me about 10 paintings for each of the 100 that ended up in the book. But I did it. It was fantastic training, as I had to learn to work small. It was an amazing process," she said.

The result is a beautifully rendered chapter book for both young and adult readers centered around a trouble-making temperamental dragon named Zorg. The main characters, Allie and Jaxon (based on two of Palka's most dragon-loving grandchildren), use their ingenuity, along with the help of the young dragon Niji, to defeat the dark-winged Zorg and bring piece to Shi Shi beach.

There is even an epiphanic moment in

the book when the constellation Draco (the dragon) appears in the sky and all is right with the dragon world. It's a scene taken from the real-life moment when Palka and her family were contemplating the night sky and saw the northern lights for the first time, as if fire was breathing from the starry dragon's mouth.

Palka said inspiration was not the hard part for her. When you love a place and become deeply intimate with its sights and sounds, it comes back to you, she said.

"I would go out to the beach and think about it, the dragons. It gets in your bones. When we've been out there, our imaginations just go."

"Dragon Fire, Ocean Mist" is published by HeartRock Press and costs \$12.95 and is available at Act II Books and Puppets, the Moonraker Bookstore, Island Coffeehouse & Books, BookBay, the Island Framery and the Honey Bear.

Also an excellent teaching tool, the final chapter of the book includes several essays about the Pacific Northwest region, dragon lore of the world, sumi-e brush painting and a teacher's resource guide of activities to do from the book.

Visit Palka's Web site at www.nwdragons.com.

Patricia Duff can be reached at 221-5300 or pduff@southwhidbeyrecord.com.