



In conversation with **KATIE ZHAO** author of **ZODIAC RISING**



This is your YA fantasy debut. What inspired you to tell this story?

Back in 2018, I decided I wanted to write a YA contemporary fantasy, but I didn't have any solid ideas yet. I wrote a page of something vastly different from *Zodiac Rising* before setting it aside to focus on my other projects. Then, like kismet, *GQ* published an article that summer by writer Alex Palmer speculating about Chinese art heists happening across Western museums. I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd read and all the possibilities it presented. That article impacted me so much that it caused me to rethink my YA contemporary fantasy project entirely to center it around such an epic heist. For the NYC-based setting, I was inspired by my own experiences as well as the rich history of Chinese American influence in this city—it felt like the most natural backdrop for a Chinese American contemporary fantasy.

The Descendants' magic comes from the twelve statues of the Chinese zodiac.

What is your zodiac sign? Do you identify with the attributes assigned to that sign?

I'm a boar, and it's said that people born in the Year of the Boar are intelligent, generous, outgoing, and diligent. I identify most with intelligence, diligence, and generosity—I don't think I'm very outgoing most of the time, but I can be in the right situations.

At the center of the story is an elite squad of Descendants who come together to pull off an epic heist. Did you reference any classic heist stories in either books or pop culture when writing those scenes?

My favorite heist movie, *Ocean's Eight*, definitely helped me plot out the bones of my own heist story. Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and Roshani Chokshi's *The Gilded Wolves* are a couple of my favorite YA fantasy heist stories, and they inspired me, too. Lastly, though it's not a heist story, *Blood Heir* by Amélie Wen Zhao helped inspire one high-stakes scene in my book. (I won't say which one to avoid spoilers!).

The four characters with the power to save the Descendants include a vampire, a shapeshifter, a werewolf, and a mortal. Which character do you relate to the most and why?

This is a difficult question since each character possesses some traits or qualities that I see within myself, which made writing their points of view feel very natural. So I relate to all of them in some way. If I had to pick a character that I relate to the most, it's probably Alice. When I was her age, I was also shy (something that's changed over the years, in part thanks to all the public speaking and public events I do now), and I felt a bit lost trying to figure out my place in society. I think Alice is most like me in that she might appear to be a pushover because she's easygoing and shies away from the limelight, but she is no pushover and will firmly put her foot down if she's backed into a corner.



Visit [RHTeachersLibrarians.com](https://www.RHTeachersLibrarians.com), your
online destination for all the resources
you need for your school or library!

Art © 2024 by Deb JJ Lee; Author Photo © Yi Shang Qing

