

## *Swirls*

Somehow, without planning it, my illustration trademark has become "swirls in the sky." What began as a personal, patterned shorthand for wind and air has become a distinguishing element of my painting style. I mostly don't mind this, I enjoy painting the swirls as well as the effect they have on the overall painting. But, a small part of me has always cringed at the possible gimmicky nature of it.

However, during my research for *WHERE THE MOUNTAIN MEETS THE MOON*, I found that a right-turning swirl had symbolic meaning in Chinese culture. The swirl (like the endless knot) could be seen as symbol for the eternal circle, the continuity of life without a beginning or end and is always interconnected. And by spiraling to the right (clockwise), the swirl echoes the movement of the sun, moon and stars against the celestial sky. Supposedly, even the hairs on the Buddha's head as well as his belly-button swirl to the right.

This knowledge thrilled me. The eternal circle, the endless knot--these symbols correspond with the themes of *WHERE THE MOUNTAIN MEETS THE MOON*. In the book, small, seemingly unrelated stories are slowly revealed to be connected—the fates of a fruitless mountain, a dragon that can't fly, a lost paper revealing the secret to happiness and the fortune of a young girl are all intertwined in the circle of the novel. I immediately decided that I would paint all the swirls for the book right turning, to follow the movement of the moon.

So enthused was I about this, that I asked for the cover art to be returned so that I could "fix" it (for catalog purposes, the publisher had asked for the cover art to be done first--before the book was finished). I could change the art for the final cover they told me, but the old image-- the one with both left and right handed swirls, was already being used for the advanced reading copy and publicity. Still, I felt strongly that I wanted to change it.

However, after years of painting swirls haphazardly, the discipline of painting right-handed swirls turned out to be more difficult than I thought. I would get half way through painting the background swirls when my eyes would lose focus and suddenly I couldn't remember which way was the "right" way. Many, many, many times after I thought the painting was finished, I would suddenly see a left-turning swirl and have to correct it. Right-turning swirls suddenly did become an endless circle of life for me!

I think it was worth it, even though I know it'll be lucky if viewers even register the swirls much less the direction they are turning. For some reason, I believe these nuances make a difference--if only to let me feel that the purpose for the patterns I paint are a subtle visual message that I am communicating.

But, if you see a left-turning swirl anywhere in the book, don't tell me.