

*Backpack Adventures Series*

# *The Jade Dragon*

*by*

*Marguerite Swilling*

*Produced through the Partnership for  
Environmental Education and Rural Health,  
Texas A&M University*



**Marguerite Swilling**, author of the Backpack Adventure Series, has loved reading, writing and science all her life. From writing and directing an original play in sixth grade, she advanced to essay competitions in high school and published poetry at Texas A & M where she majored in English and minored in Earth Science. Although she is a certified secondary teacher, Mrs. Swilling has spent the past twenty-three years in the business world and has written and presented training seminars on a variety of topics. Mrs. Swilling lives in Georgetown, Texas with her husband and two daughters.

## **Backpack Adventure Series**

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1           Jace shook his head and croaked, “All gone.”  
2           “It’s time to go home.” K.T. punched in the  
3 return coordinates and took Jace’s arm. He stood  
4 silently clutching his other arm across his chest, The  
5 Jade Dragon snug against him. “I’ll hold onto you  
6 this time.”  
7           The storm of colors melted into a gray rain  
8 that beat upon the gazebo roof. K.T. was glad for  
9 the rain; it would hide the tears.  
10          “He was giving the statue to me, knowing I  
11 would not be able to return it to him. He wanted it to  
12 stay in our family,” reasoned Jace, taking the dragon  
13 from beneath his coat.  
14          “He wanted to save it for your family, for you.  
15 Maybe even for China.”  
16          K. T. could hear Jace’s mother calling him  
17 home.

1 parents decided to emigrate. If some local  
2 government official saw me take this treasure, he  
3 could make me give it back. We have to be  
4 careful,” Jace cautioned. “Let’s go.”

5 A whirlwind of colors transported the two  
6 adventurers in a millisecond. But the door to the  
7 apartment stood ajar. Jace startled a plump, short  
8 woman who was taking the bed linens off the low  
9 couch. Her face was streaked with tears.

10 “Where is he?” Jace ran into the room.

11 “He’s not here. He died a few hours ago.  
12 They have taken him to the morgue. I am his  
13 neighbor. I cooked for him when he became so ill  
14 last month. They say he has a son living in  
15 America. Do you know how to call him?”

16 Jace stood staring at the couch where his  
17 grandfather had lain. “He knew he was dying. ‘No  
18 need for that. Save the dragon,’ he said.”

19 K.T. stepped up to the woman, who looked  
20 puzzled by what Jace had said. “Jace, don’t you  
21 know the phone number this nice lady should call?  
22 She wants to help.” K.T. put her arms around the  
23 lady and gave her a hug. “I’m so sorry.”

24 Jace nodded and took a piece of paper from  
25 K.T.’s backpack. He wrote his own phone number  
26 down, gave it to the woman, then turned and walked  
27 down the hall. Clutching his arms across his chest,  
28 he was racked with a sudden, raspy coughing fit.

29 “Thank you for calling,” said K.T. as she  
30 backed out of the apartment. “Jace, can’t you take  
31 some more of that stuff?”

## **An Introduction to Backpack Adventures:**

Welcome to the coolest club in middle school! Of course, no one outside the club can know just what makes this group so different. The secret is in the backpack.

**Roman Castillo**, a young teenage technology whiz, developed a powerful mini-computer that can transport people through space and time. He controls the computer with a wireless keypad complete with a screen that displays the co-ordinates for the time and space travel destination. He shared his invention with his best friend, Travis, as well as four others.

**Travis Allen**, Roman’s best friend since kindergarten, is the son of a veterinarian and loves animals, the outdoors and math. He wears western jeans and boots that highlight his long, lanky profile. He has a short temper except with his stepsister, Summer. He’s very protective of Summer and doesn’t like having her travel with the BPC as the group has nicknamed their awesome device.

**Summer Martin**, Travis’ stepsister, is two years younger than Travis and Roman. Her bright blue eyes are as merry as her laugh and her blonde hair is cut short and sassy. She loves to read and has a great memory for history and geography. She uses a wheelchair due to a terrible, traffic accident when she was five. Travis and his aunt built a motorized chair for Summer, and she can participate in just about everything with her two best friends, Connie and K.T.

**Connie Castillo**, Roman’s sister and Summer’s best friend, has long, silky black hair and her dark brown eyes are framed by thick, black lashes. She loves her brother, but sometimes questions the use of the BPC. Quiet and reserved, she is a serious student. Science is her favorite subject and dance is

her favorite pastime. She and Summer have a mutual best friend named K.T.

**K.T. Watson**, is an only child who loves her best friends, Summer and Connie, like sisters. She wears her curly, jet-black hair in dozens of tiny, tight braids so she'll look more like her favorite athlete, Venus Williams. K.T. is full of energy and courageous. A natural leader, she often instigates the adventures with the BPC. She loves soccer and cheerleading. She helped form the Backpack Club and brought in its newest member: her neighbor, Jace.

**Jace Long**, classmate and neighbor to K.T., grew up in China and moved first to California and finally to Texas. He loves soccer like K.T., is a whiz at math like Travis, and is especially close to Summer. As the newest member to the Backpack Club, Jace is the most reluctant to use the BPC for travel, but he thinks it's a great tool for communicating between the members and is the first to try the device for help with homework.

1 Cautiously, K.T. ducked her head and went  
2 through the low opening. Most of the cave was  
3 dark, giving the impression it was bigger than it  
4 really was. Jace knelt before The Jade Dragon, his  
5 head bowed, his hands covering his face. The statue  
6 was more beautiful in real life than in the photo.  
7 Even in the dark, its exquisite details made it appear  
8 ready to spring to life. Hardly bigger than an in-line  
9 skate, it looked powerful even in miniature.

10 "Is it heavy?" K.T.'s voice punctured the  
11 silence.

12 "That depends. It's as light as the souls it  
13 guards and as heavy as the burden of centuries. It all  
14 depends on your point of view. But I can carry it if  
15 that's what you're asking."

16 "Let's go, Jace. This place makes you talk  
17 weird." said K.T., her eyebrows raised. "Ready to  
18 go back to your grandfather's? I added his  
19 apartment number so we could go straight there."

20 Jace placed the statue beneath his jacket,  
21 zipped it shut holding his arms around his chest.  
22 "Can you tell I have anything beneath my jacket?"

23 "Not really, but what difference would it  
24 make? The Jade Dragon is yours."

25 "K.T., this isn't the U.S. There are no  
26 individual freedoms and few property rights. The  
27 government owns everything, so you have to get  
28 permission for everything. That's why so many  
29 people are being forced to move where the  
30 government chooses. That's why my grandfather  
31 could never return to his rural home, why my

## *The Jade Dragon*

1 down the side of the hill,” suggested K.T. “At least,  
2 it would be faster.”

3 “We know it’s in Fengdu and the name is  
4 marked on the cave,” replied Jace. “Is that  
5 enough?”

6 “It’s worth a try,” K.T. stated bravely as she  
7 typed the coordinates into the “boxtok”. She  
8 swayed on the platform as the train slowed and Jace  
9 reached out to steady her.

10 “Here, you can press the activation keys, it’s  
11 your dragon.”

12 Jace smiled and took the boxtok in his palm.  
13 K.T. held on to his arm. He pressed the four keys  
14 together and closed his eyes. The platform shook as  
15 the train suddenly braked. But there was no one  
16 there to fall.

17 Jace and K.T. stood before the rocky entrance  
18 to a small cave. It looked like the cave in the photo;  
19 the symbols on the door were the same. Jace turned  
20 to K.T. and asked apologetically, “Do you mind if I  
21 go in alone?”

22 “Sure, sure, ancestors, I understand. No  
23 problem. Just come out when you’re ready. Or if  
24 any ghosts are in there.”

25 Jace rolled his eyes. “I’ll call you.”

26 K.T. ran her hand over the carvings in the  
27 limestone. They were worn from centuries of rain  
28 and wind. Would the flood erase them, she  
29 wondered? Jace called out, “It’s ok to come in now.  
30 No ghosts.”

1 K.T. pulled her jacket collar up higher on her  
2 neck as a cold, wet wind howled through the gazebo  
3 in her backyard. Her braided hair hung like icicles  
4 against her dark skin and she shivered even with her  
5 heavy jacket. The gazebo served as a “clubhouse”  
6 for a group of friends known as the Backpack Club.  
7 They shared a secret: their ordinary looking  
8 backpacks held powerful microcomputers with  
9 amazing capabilities. However, her backpack could  
10 not keep K.T. warm and she jogged in place while  
11 she waited for the newest member of their club, Jace  
12 Long.

13 Jace had moved to K.T.’s neighborhood last  
14 year as a fifth grader. His family was originally  
15 from China, but had emigrated when Jace was eight.  
16 K.T. liked Jace’s quick smile. Even though he was  
17 short, he was the fastest player in the Select Soccer  
18 League. It wasn’t difficult for K.T. to convince the  
19 other club members to let Jace join. A team member  
20 was building Jace’s computer in his father’s lab so  
21 Jace could communicate with all of them. I wish  
22 Roman would hurry up and finish Jace’s computer  
23 so I could call him right now. I’m freezing here  
24 waiting for him. I wonder why he wanted to meet  
25 out here, she thought.

26 “Sorry I’m late, but I had to stop at my house  
27 to get something,” called Jace as he jogged across  
28 the field that connected their backyards.

1 He pulled a letter from his coat, took a small  
2 photograph from the envelope and handed it to K.T.

3 "It's beautiful! What's it made of?" asked  
4 K.T., gazing at a picture of a dragon statue sitting on  
5 a pedestal inside what looked like a cave. Candles  
6 were set in front of the pedestal, throwing dragon  
7 shadows against the walls. Even in the photo, the  
8 effect was spooky.

9 "It's made of jade, you know, the green stone.  
10 It's ancient, my family's most precious heirloom,  
11 and it's about to be covered in 500 feet of water.  
12 My grandfather writes that when the Three Gorges  
13 Dam is complete, water will flood the shrine of The  
14 Jade Dragon where my ancestors have been honored  
15 for centuries. It's just a small cave near the base of  
16 the cliffs that tower over the Chang Jiang, Long  
17 River. That's what the Chinese call the Yangtze."

18 "That's terrible!" exclaimed K. T. "You're  
19 not going to let it be destroyed, are you?" K.T.  
20 frowned. She couldn't imagine having a family  
21 heirloom that old, much less losing it to a flood.

22 "No, I'm not, but I need your help to save it. I  
23 want to borrow your backpack so I can go to China  
24 and find The Jade Dragon. Just tell me how to use  
25 the BPC and I'll do the rest," demanded Jace, his  
26 shoulders squared and chin up. BPC was their code  
27 name for backpack computer. His face was serious  
28 and K.T. thought he must be the bravest person in  
29 the world. When they first told him all the things  
30 their BPCs could do, he had doubted they could

1 connecting two hilltops. It was wide enough only  
2 for foot traffic.

3 "That must be the bridge that leads to the City  
4 of Ghosts. We're almost there," uttered Jace, his  
5 breathing becoming easier.

6 "And that must be Chang Jiang, the Yangtze!"  
7 exclaimed K.T., pointing to a wide brown river  
8 snaking through the small city of Fengdu.

9 The haze that hid the tops of the cliffs floated  
10 like a spirit over the city and K.T. felt a chill run  
11 down her spine. This entire city would be flooded  
12 and even now, construction of the new city, higher  
13 up and across the Yangtze, was underway. But who  
14 would move the graves, the shrines, the ancient  
15 relics? Was it too late to save them?

16 "Uh-oh, we've got a problem," groaned Jace,  
17 looking at the cliffs beneath the suspension bridge.  
18 Dozens of caves dotted the face of the cliffs. "How  
19 do we know where to look?"

20 "Man, I don't ...wait...maybe that picture you  
21 have will help." The train was slowing as they  
22 neared the edge of the city.

23 Jace took the photo out of his coat pocket and  
24 looked for clues. Just on the edge of the photo, he  
25 could make out symbols carved into the limestone  
26 opening to the cave. Maybe they could find the  
27 right cave after all. He showed it to K.T. "See, it  
28 says 'The Jade Dragon Shrine.'"

29 "I wonder if the BPC could get us there. That  
30 way we wouldn't have to cross that bridge and climb



1 Jace shook his head and gasped. “No, it’s just  
2 the cigarettes.”

3 “Here, let me crack open this window,”  
4 suggested K.T. Cold air rushed into the car and K.T.  
5 changed seats with Jace. He gulped the icy air, but  
6 as soon as he stopped coughing, he began to wheeze.

7 “What is it? What’s wrong?” pleaded K.T.,  
8 genuinely scared. Jace seemed unable to catch his  
9 breath.

10 “I have asthma. I need my inhaler,” wheezed  
11 Jace.

12 “Well, where is it?”

13 “In my coat. I can’t reach it,” Jace whispered  
14 hoarsely.

15 K.T. hurriedly yanked his coat down from the  
16 shelf. She fumbled through all the pockets until she  
17 felt a small plastic mouthpiece with a canister  
18 attached.

19 Jace reached out to take the inhaler and K.T.  
20 shivered as she felt how cold his hand was. She  
21 grabbed her coat and slung her backpack over her  
22 shoulder. “Come on, we’ve got to get you out of  
23 here.”

24 Jace put the inhaler to his mouth and sucked  
25 in deeply. He nodded in agreement and followed  
26 K.T. as she went to the door that led to the next car.  
27 They stepped out of the smoke-filled space onto a  
28 narrow platform sheltered from the wind by a canvas  
29 tarp. They could see the tracks blinking at them  
30 from between the cars as the train sped along. In the  
31 distance, they could see a high suspension bridge

1 really time-travel. Now here he was asking to travel  
2 alone.

3 “No way!” exclaimed K.T. She added slyly,  
4 “No way...I’d let you go alone! I’ll take you there  
5 and help you save The Jade Dragon. Do you know  
6 exactly where to find it?”

7 “Not exactly, but my grandfather in  
8 Chongqing knows. He’s too frail to make the  
9 journey, but we could ask him. His address is on  
10 this letter.” Jace showed the letter to K.T. and she  
11 typed the coordinates into the keychain attached to  
12 her backpack. K.T.’s teeth were chattering and  
13 Jace’s face looked frozen, but neither of them heard  
14 the chill wind whistling through the gazebo.

15 “Whatever you do, don’t let go,” warned K. T.  
16 Jace grabbed her hand as she pressed “Control,”  
17 “Alt,” “Delete” and “Backspace”; a swirl of color  
18 surrounded them. Wind whipped through an empty  
19 gazebo.

20 “Ouch! You’re hurting my hand!” cried K.T.  
21 Jace was grasping her hand so hard she thought it  
22 would break.

23 Jace coughed and gasped as if to catch his  
24 breath. “Wow! I never imagined it like that! You  
25 could have warned me, K.T.”

26 “Sorry, I didn’t think of it,” said K.T.,  
27 wiggling her fingers.

28 K.T. and Jace gazed in awe at the hustle and  
29 bustle around them. They stood on a sidewalk jam-  
30 packed with people who spilled into a boulevard  
31 crowded with bicyclists, taxis, cars, trucks and

1 double-decker buses. A river of traffic crawled by  
2 while vendors pushed carts with food and drinks  
3 against the current, further slowing the flow.

4 Tall buildings surrounded them and a thick  
5 brown haze hung above them like a threatening  
6 thunderstorm. But the only rumble they heard was  
7 the traffic and the fumes from the vehicles left a  
8 sharp taste in the back of their throats. Jace's body  
9 shook as he coughed deep and long. He took  
10 something from his pocket and, cupping it in both  
11 hands, held it to his mouth. He sucked slowly then  
12 coughed twice more, slipping the little bottle into his  
13 pocket before K.T. could see it.

14 "How many people live in Chongqing?" asked  
15 K.T.

16 "There are over 30 million people in an area  
17 the size of Maine. It's China's biggest city, bigger  
18 even than Beijing. It's also the dirtiest. All of the  
19 cities in China are crowded. I guess when you've  
20 got the world's oldest continuous civilization, you  
21 get generation after generation calling the same  
22 place home. It's not as crowded in the countryside  
23 where our ancestral home is."

24 "Why doesn't your grandfather live there  
25 then?" asked K.T., looking at the high-rise  
26 apartments that towered before them.

27 "Money. As a young man, he moved to the  
28 city to work. He never had the chance to go back.  
29 Let's go inside."

30 Jace and K.T. took a creaking elevator to the  
31 35th floor, the top floor of the building. Jace gently

1 "That train is from the Zhengshou coal mine.  
2 They say the dam will end our use of coal. Ha! The  
3 fools. True, the mine is a scar on the land and a  
4 curse to the air, but the dam is not the answer. They  
5 flood good farmland to make a filthy reservoir that  
6 still will not provide electricity because of all the  
7 silt," growled the farmer.

8 "Yes, it seems ironic that the government  
9 finally tries to provide clean energy to save the air  
10 and ends up destroying the water. Either way, it is  
11 the earth that suffers. Farms, coalmines, runoff,  
12 floods. Who knows the answer? But look, it is  
13 raining. Now they will close all the windows. Even  
14 the rain is not clean," the old man mused. "It's like  
15 the ancient horoscope with its five elements: air,  
16 water, earth, metal, fire. Only the fire remains  
17 undamaged by man."

18 As the train picked up speed, K.T. felt herself  
19 rocking gently, nodding off to sleep. She closed her  
20 eyes and heard Jace order hot tea to go with the  
21 bowl of rice the porters were serving. The stale air  
22 in the car reeked of leftover dinners and cigarette  
23 smoke. It took her appetite away. Maybe if she  
24 slept...

25 K.T. awoke to the sound of loud and constant  
26 coughing. Jace's body shook with each breath he  
27 took.

28 "Are you ok?" she asked nervously. "No  
29 wonder you're coughing. There's smoke every-  
30 where! Are we on fire?"

1 K.T. turned her head to see the person who  
2 thought Three Gorges Dam was a good thing. He  
3 was a young man in a business suit. Beside him sat  
4 another young man, nodding in agreement. Jace  
5 leaned back in the seat beside K.T. and closed his  
6 eyes. "He looks tired," K.T. thought. "I'll let him  
7 rest." She was too excited to sleep. K.T. could  
8 make out the towers of factories rising like totems  
9 across the cityscape. Thin plumes of smoke  
10 billowed from their chimneys and spread like mud  
11 puddles in the air.

12 As the train wound through mountain passes  
13 and deep valleys, the city gave way to villages,  
14 fields and farms. They passed a freight train loaded  
15 with hundreds of cars heaped with black, glistening  
16 coal. Clackety-clackety-clackety. Jace jumped in  
17 his seat as his eyes popped open.

18 "I must have fallen asleep. Man, my throat is  
19 dry," croaked Jace with a cough. "Where are we?"

20 "I think we just passed a city called Fuling.  
21 You've been sleeping for a couple of hours. They  
22 said it would take four hours to reach Fengdu, so we  
23 must be about half way. Look at all the coal cars."

24 Jace leaned forward to look out the window.  
25 He could hear the whispered conversation of the two  
26 passengers seated in front of them. One was an old  
27 man dressed in a faded blue uniform. The other was  
28 a middle-aged man wearing a ragged farmer's shirt  
29 and dirt-stained pants. They kept their voices low  
30 and Jace strained to hear.

1 rapped on the door to his grandfather's apartment.  
2 A hoarse voice called from within for them to enter.

3 "He said to come in," translated Jace.

4 "I know," answered K.T. "The BPC has a  
5 translator built into it."

6 "Cool," whispered Jace hoarsely. Something  
7 about the quiet, cigarette smoke- filled room made  
8 them walk softly and cautiously into the one-room  
9 apartment. They could hear someone breathing in  
10 ragged, shallow breaths.

11 "Who is it? Come closer," murmured a tiny,  
12 thin man lying on a low couch. His labored breaths  
13 shook his frail body like dry grass before a cold  
14 front.

15 "Grandfather, it's me, Jace. I've come to see  
16 you and to save The Jade Dragon."

17 The old man frowned in confusion, then his  
18 face relaxed into a smile as he recognized his  
19 grandson. "My letter, did you get my letter?"

20 "Yes, it came yesterday and I, er, I flew  
21 straight here," Jace mumbled. His eyes met K.T.'s  
22 and he winked. "Can you tell me where to find The  
23 Jade Dragon? I will bring it back to you."

24 "It may be too late for that, but I will tell you  
25 where to look," said the old man, struggling to get  
26 up. He fell back against the couch and coughed  
27 deeply, sucking air like a fish out of water. His eyes  
28 were round and large and he did not seem to see  
29 K.T. at all. All of his energy was focused on his  
30 grandson.

1       “Take the sub-express train to Fengdu, The  
2 City of Ghosts, our ancestral home. There is a  
3 suspension bridge there that leads to the hilltop.  
4 Directly below the bridge near the base of the cliffs  
5 is a small cave. There lies The Jade Dragon, the  
6 guardian of our ancestors. You honor them, Jace, in  
7 protecting their guardian.”

8       “Grandfather, you’re sick. Why didn’t you  
9 tell me? I’ll get help for you,” Jace said, kneeling  
10 beside his grandfather and holding his bony hand.

11       “No need of that, my child, no need. Save  
12 The Jade Dragon.”

13       K.T. and Jace made their way through the city  
14 to the train station, keeping to the crowded streets  
15 and staying together. They had less than ten dollars  
16 between them, but found that the train tickets only  
17 cost \$1.75 and included a meal.

18       “I guess I’ll have to learn to use chopsticks,”  
19 joked K.T. “I’m starting to get hungry.”

20       The Chongqing station was a madhouse of  
21 people, sounds and smells. The big locomotive that  
22 ran the Fengdu line was powered by steam and K.T.  
23 was excited to ride a real steam train. Jace’s  
24 enthusiasm was dampened by his concern for this  
25 grandfather.

26       “It’ll be OK, Jace. In a few hours, we’ll have  
27 the dragon back to your grandfather and we’ll be on  
28 our way home,” offered K.T. cheerily.

29       “K.T., are you never afraid?” Jace wondered  
30 aloud.

1       “Well, to be honest with you, that stuff about  
2 the City of Ghosts sounds a little spooky.” She was  
3 remembering the photo of the cave too. Those  
4 shadows! K.T. shivered as she boarded the train.

5       “It’s packed, but there are two seats together  
6 near the back,” said Jace leading the way through  
7 the cluttered aisle, stepping over wooden boxes and  
8 crates with live chickens to reach the open seats.  
9 They sank down in the hard seats, glad for a chance  
10 to relax. The passenger car did not have heat, but it  
11 was warm and stuffy inside with all the people.  
12 K.T. and Jace took off their heavy coats and put  
13 them in the wire shelves above the seats. K.T. held  
14 on to her backpack, afraid to lose it in the clutter.  
15 Most of the windows were closed because of the  
16 cold, but K.T. wiped a clean spot on the inside of her  
17 window and peered through the outside grime.

18       “Would you look at all the trains?” exclaimed  
19 K.T. She gazed upon rows of electric trains, diesel  
20 engines and steam locomotives belching their hot  
21 energy into the frosty air. Clouds of exhaust filled  
22 the sky. The man seated behind K.T. began to talk  
23 to the person behind Jace.

24       “China has many railways and still uses the  
25 steam locomotives because we have so much coal.  
26 Coal produces most of the electricity. But it is very  
27 bad for the air to burn coal like we do. That is why  
28 the Three Gorges Dam means so much to our  
29 country. Clean hydroelectric power is better for the  
30 environment.”