

Discussion Guide

Immigration and Activism: Sparking Reader Engagement with the Front Desk Novels by Kelly Yang

Ages 8–12
Grades 3–7





Front Desk

About the Book: Mia Tang thought life would be awesome once her family moved from China to the United States: Disneyland, hamburgers, and a house! But actually, life in the United States isn't that great. However hard her parents work, they struggle to find and keep jobs. They can't afford hamburgers every day. But their luck seems to change when Mr. Yao hires them to work at the Calivista Motel. And the job even comes with a place to live! But it turns out life at the Calivista isn't easy. Mr. Yao is mean, greedy, and racist; the work is hard; and Mia is ashamed that her family doesn't live in a house. But on the bright side, Mia loves working the front desk and gets along well with the long-term motel residents. She also makes a new friend, Lupe. And when Mr. Yao announces his plan to sell the Calivista, Mia, her parents, and all the people they've befriended work together to figure out how to keep their home and newfound family together.

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of *Front Desk*, Mia's mom says their family came from China to America "[b]ecause it's freer here." (p. 4) What examples from the book support this statement? What examples from the book suggest otherwise?
2. Mr. Yao says his son "speaks good English" because he was born in the United States. (p. 6) What does it mean to speak "good English" and why is it important to Mr. Yao? Why might being born in a country impact someone's ability to speak that country's language? What are ways someone could learn a language? What are some benefits of understanding multiple languages? How would you interact with someone whose level of fluency was different from yours?
3. Mr. Yao tells Mia's parents that they could tell who were "bad guys" by "how they look." (p. 10) How would you respond to someone who judged you based on your appearance?
4. Mia's parents celebrate their first day at the motel by brewing tea they had brought from China. What are some special foods from your culture that your family enjoys? What foods do you enjoy for celebrations and on holidays? What makes these foods and traditions important?
5. Mr. Yao says good employees "know their place." (p. 62) What does he mean? What does Mia think about this? What are some characteristics that make a good employee? In what ways are Mia and her parents good employees?
6. Mia, her parents, their fellow immigrant friends, and Hank experience a lot of unfair treatment. At one point Mia's mom says "we're immigrants . . . Our lives are never fair." (p. 68) In what ways are Hank, Mia's family, and other immigrants treated differently, and why? What does Mia think about this? What do you think? How should people who receive—or see other people receive—unfair treatment respond?
7. Mia and her dad discuss the value of a penny that was printed with a mistake. He says, "A mistake isn't always a mistake . . . Sometimes a mistake is actually an opportunity." (p. 76) What does this mean? Can you think of any of your own experiences that you thought were mistakes but were actually opportunities?
8. Mia and Lupe discuss how some people are mean to them because they are both "poor" and "brown." (p. 81) Being both "brown" and "poor" is an example of intersectionality, which is when different social categories intersect to impact someone's experiences, often in a negative way. What are other examples of how race, gender, economic status, or other characteristics intersect to negatively impact someone's life in *Front Desk*?
9. Lupe explains to Mia that Americans are riding two different roller coasters, "one for rich people and one for poor people." (p. 81) What are some examples from the text that illustrate Lupe's statement? What would need to change in order for all Americans to "ride" the same "roller coaster"?
10. After Mr. Lorenz reports that his car was stolen, the police officers who visit the Calivista take Hank aside to ask him additional questions. Hank later tells Mia, "This kind of thing happens to me . . . To all black people in this country." (p. 100) What are some other examples of discriminatory treatment of Black people in *Front Desk*?
11. Mia's parents and some of the other immigrant Chinese characters had more professional jobs that demonstrated their education when they were in China, but they work very different jobs upon moving to the United States. What examples from the book show why they continued to live in the United States despite their significant career shifts?
12. Mia wants to become a writer, but her mother thinks it's more practical to be good at math. Why does Mia's mother think it's important for Mia to be good at math? How does Mia react to her mother's comments? How would you react?
13. Mia writes a lot of letters to different people. Why does she write to each person? What does she accomplish with each letter?
14. Jason and Mia do not get along the first few months they know each other. How do they change throughout the book? What is their relationship like by the end of the book?

Research Questions

1. Think of something important happening in your life and write a letter to someone who has the power to impact it. For example, you might write to a school board member or your congressperson.
2. Today, many people are protesting discriminatory treatment as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. What connections can you make between what happens in *Front Desk*, which takes place in 1993 (p. 5), and what is happening in the United States now?



Three Keys

About the Book: Having purchased the Calivista Motel from Mr. Yao, Mia and her friends seem to be doing great. But then Mia learns that Proposition 187, which would deny essential social services to undocumented immigrants, will be on the ballot in the upcoming election. As the Calivista Motel takes a public stance supporting immigration, the motel's income takes a dip and investors begin to worry. Meanwhile, Mia's teacher Mrs. Welch makes hurtful statements about immigration and tells Mia that she isn't a very strong writer. And on top of all that, Lupe and Jason still aren't getting along! When Lupe confesses to Mia that her family is undocumented, Mia finally understands the reality of Proposition 187's harm. And when Lupe's father is detained and threatened with deportation, Mia and her community must once again work together to keep their families safe.

Discussion Questions

1. Mia and her Calivista family work together to solve some pretty big problems. What are some of the challenges they are facing, and how do they solve them? What are some ways you can help other people with problems they're facing? What are ways that you would want other people to help you?
2. What are some of the arguments that people made for and against Proposition 187? What are people saying about immigration today?
3. Mia's dad says, "We immigrants are all in the same boat." (p. 31) However, as evidenced by Mia's and Lupe's different immigration stories, some immigrants end up having very different experiences once they are in the United States. What are some of the ways in which immigrants' experiences differ? What are the ways in which they are "in the same boat"?
4. Hank tells Mia, "Race might be a social construct, but racism's as real as the clouds." (p. 77) He also says that "there are racist people everywhere. You can't avoid them, and you certainly can't let them stop you." (p. 78) What does Hank mean? How can we work to end racism, and how do we make sure racism doesn't stop us from living out our dreams?
5. Mia's classmate Kareña shares a story about being discriminated against in a laundromat, while bystanders did not intervene. (p. 80) How does Mia intervene when she sees discrimination? What can you do when you see someone being discriminated against?
6. Mia says she and Lupe were "both girls with big hopes and dreams" but "because of one piece of paper, we were on two different sides of the law" (p. 171) meant they live different lives. What are some of the similarities and differences in their lives?
7. Mia and her lawyer correct people when they say "illegal" instead of "undocumented." (p. 187) What distinguishes the two terms? Why is "undocumented" the correct word to use?
8. Mia, Lupe, and Hank attend a march protesting Proposition 187. What is the purpose of a protest? What do Mia and Lupe see, feel, and experience at the march? What are people around you protesting today?
9. The day after the march, one newspaper headline read, "Sea of Brown Faces Marching Through Los Angeles Antagonize Voters" (p. 204), but this is not the headline Mia expected to see. Why does this headline surprise her? What do the word choices "Brown Faces" and "Antagonize" and "Voters" indicate about the perspective of the person who wrote the headline? Based on that wording alone, would you think that the people marching are voters or not? What might be the reason that someone would want to write the headline that way? Think of alternative headlines, based on Lupe and Mia's experience.
10. Mia, Lupe, and Jason's relationships with one another change throughout both *Front Desk* and *Three Keys*. What causes these changes? What do Mia, Lupe, and Jason realize about themselves, each other, and their friendship?
11. How do you see Mia's teacher Mrs. Welch changing throughout the book? What does this make you think about people's potential to change?
12. Mia says she didn't know of any Asian American writers, but that didn't stop her from believing she could be a writer. Do your role models look like you or have experiences in common with you? How do you want to be a role model for younger children as you grow up?

Research Questions

1. *Three Keys* addresses several specific immigrant experiences—Mia's and Lupe's—at a particular moment in time, but the migration of people and cultures has been happening all over the world for centuries. How has immigration impacted the country we now call the United States over time? How did it impact this land's original inhabitants?
2. Though Proposition 187 passes, it does not go into immediate effect. How does an idea become a law? What can voters do if they disagree with a law even after it passes? Are there any laws that you know of today that you think should not have passed? What can you do to change them?
3. Housing insecurity is an issue for many of the characters in both *Front Desk* and *Three Keys*. Why and how do some people become housing insecure? What suggestions do you have for making sure people in your community are housed?



Room to Dream

About the Book: Mia Tang is going for her dreams! After years of hard work, Mia Tang finally gets to go on vacation with her family—to China! A total dream come true! Mia can't wait to see all her cousins and grandparents again, especially her cousin Shen. As she roams around Beijing, witnessing some of the big changes China's going through, Mia thinks about the changes in her own life: Lupe's taking classes at the high school, while Mia's own plans to be a big writer are . . . stuck. Something happened with Jason, and Mia has no idea what to do about it. And new buildings are popping up all around the motel, and small businesses are disappearing. Can the Calivista Motel survive? Buckle up! Mia is more determined than ever to get through the turbulence, now that she finally has . . . room to dream!

Discussion Questions

1. Mia has fond memories of people and places in China. However, a lot has changed since she and her parents moved to the United States. What are some of the changes Mia notices when she returns to visit her extended family in China? How do the changes make Mia feel? How does Mia handle these changes and her feelings? Think of people or places that have changed over time during your life. How do you feel about those changes? How have you adjusted to those changes?
2. Popsicle Grandpa tells Mia, “Stay close with your family, little one. In the end, the only thing that matters . . . is family.” (p. 79) Mia and her parents are very close, and they are also close with all the weeklies, whom we might call “chosen family.” Look through the book (and *Front Desk* and *Three Keys*, if you have them!) to find instances where Mia, her parents, and the weeklies support one another. What do you notice about those instances? How do the characters respond? How can you apply these examples to relationships in your own life?
3. Ms. Swann gives Mia a journal to document her six-week trip to China. Inspired by Mia's journal entries, write a journal entry of your own about a passage or scene in *Room to Dream* that you strongly connected with, and why.
4. Immigrants often leave their home country for a different one due to both push and pull factors—factors that cause them to leave, and factors that attract them to a different place. What are some of the push and pull factors that Mia's parents considered when they left China? What do they and Mia think of those factors now? Cite passages in the book that support your answer.
5. Hank joins Mia's family and friends on their trip to China. What is his first visit to China like? Using examples from the text, write a letter in Hank's voice to José, Lupe's dad, sharing about his experiences.
6. When Mia watches *Monkey King* with her cousins, she says “It felt just like old times.” (p. 82) What “old times” is Mia referring to, and how does she feel about the present moment? If you are not familiar with the Monkey King figure in Chinese mythology, do some research to learn more. Do you notice any similarities between the Monkey King's story and Mia's life?
7. Throughout both *Front Desk* and *Three Keys*, Mia's relationship with Jason changed. How does their relationship evolve more in *Room to Dream*?
8. When Mia returns to California, she is upset that Lupe is taking different, harder classes, which means they can't spend as much time together. Why is Lupe taking those classes? How do Mia and Lupe use writing to express their thoughts and reconcile with each other?
9. Mia's dad says, “Sometimes a loss isn't really a loss . . . It's an opportunity. You just can't see it yet.” (p. 91) He made a similar comment, about mistakes being opportunities, in *Front Desk* (p. 76). What is the difference between a mistake and a loss? In what ways might they be similar? What examples can you find of Mia turning losses or mistakes into new opportunities in *Room to Dream*?
10. After having her writing rejected by many publications in the United States, Mia accepts an opportunity to write a newspaper column about her life in the United States for children in China. Why do you think Chinese children enjoy her articles so much? Write Mia a fan letter, responding with your own thoughts about one of her columns.
11. Mia thinks a lot about consent throughout *Room to Dream*. What is consent and why is it important? What did you learn from what happened between Jason and Mia, and from their conversation on page 270? Cite evidence from the novel where Mia shares how she feels about what happened.

Extension Activities

1. Popsicle Grandpa tells Mia that his daughter had to stop attending school because of the Cultural Revolution. After reading *Room to Dream* and the Britannica Kids article about the Cultural Revolution (see Resources) write a letter to a friend explaining what happened during the Cultural Revolution. Share what you learned about the ways in which it impacted the lives of young people and the trajectory of China's development.
2. Popsicle Grandpa asks Mia to write to him and tell him everything she is learning in school in the United States. Write a letter to an elder in your life (a grandparent, neighbor, friend, or anyone older than you) and tell them about something interesting you recently learned in school, and why you think it's important.
3. According to Merriam Webster, “gentrification” is “a process of renewal and rebuilding that accompanies the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas (such as urban neighborhoods) and that often results in the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents.” Do you see gentrification happening in your neighborhood or areas around you? Write an article about gentrification for your school or local newspaper. If you write about a historical instance of gentrification, write about the impact of gentrification on a specific community. If you write about a contemporary, ongoing situation, write about your concerns for the future. What can you, or a community you are part of, do to help address the situation?
4. Mia writes an article about the struggles facing many local businesses in her city. Make a list of your favorite small businesses in your area. Visit those businesses and/or research the history of some of those businesses. Write a human interest story and consider submitting it to your school or local newspaper.

RESOURCES

Articles and Websites

- Anti-Racism Resources for All Ages compiled by Nicole A. Cooke: padlet.com/nicolethebrarian/nbasekqoazt336co
- “Chinese Immigrants in the United States” by Carlos Echeverria-Estrada and Jeanne Batalova: migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states-2018
- “Cultural Revolution” from Britannica Kids: kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Cultural-Revolution/353025
- Japanese American Citizens League Asian American History Overview & Resources: jacl.org/resources
- PBS History Detectives: Chinese Immigration: pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/chinese-immigration
- “Prop. 187 Timeline: The rise and fall of California’s anti-immigrant law” by Arellano Gustavo: latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-06/proposition-187-timeline
- UPenn Asian American History: sas.upenn.edu/~rle/History.html
- UCLA Asian American Studies Library Guide: guides.library.ucla.edu/c.php?g=180439&p=1185603
- Scholastic’s Power of Story Speaker Series: “Beyond Borders: Immigrant Experiences in Kidlit”: youtube.com/watch?v=n_ifkxq6Db0
- “She Coined the Term ‘Intersectionality’ Over 30 Years Ago. Here’s What It Means to Her Today” by Katy Steinmetz: time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality

Organizations

- American Civil Liberties Union: aclu.org
- Black Lives Matter: blacklivesmatter.com
- Define American: defineamerican.com
- Families Belong Together: familiesbelongtogether.org
- Green Card Voices: greencardvoices.org
- Showing Up for Racial Justice: showingupforracialjustice.org

Books

- *Girl Under a Red Moon: Growing Up During China’s Cultural Revolution* by Da Chen
- *New Kid* by Jerry Craft
- *Unidentified Suburban Object* by Mike Jung
- *Stand Up, Yumi Chung!* by Jessica Kim
- *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhà Lai
- *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* by Erika Lee
- *The Making of Asian America: A History* by Erika Lee
- *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* by Bette Bao Lord
- *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* by Mae M. Ngai
- *Dear America: The Story of an Undocumented Citizen: Young Readers’ Edition* by Jose Antonio Vargas
- *Good Enough* by Paula Yoo
- All books by Lisa Yee, Paul Yee, and Laurence Yep

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kelly Yang is the author of *Front Desk*, which won the 2019 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature and was chosen a Best Book of the Year by multiple publications, including NPR, the *Washington Post*, and the New York Public Library. Kelly’s family immigrated to the United States from China when she was a young girl, and she grew up in California, in circumstances very similar to those of Mia Tang. She eventually left the motels and went to college at the age of thirteen, and is a graduate of UC Berkeley and Harvard Law School. She is the founder of the Kelly Yang Project, a leading writing and debating program for children in Asia and the United States. Her writing has been published in the *South China Morning Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Atlantic*. To learn more about her and the Front Desk books, visit frontdeskthebook.com.

Discussion guide written by Sarah Park Dahlen, associate professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research is on Asian American youth literature and transracial Korean adoption. She co-created the Diversity in Children’s Books infographics and administered Lee & Low’s 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey. She co-edits *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature* and co-edited *Diversity in Youth Literature: Opening Doors through Reading*. Find her online at sarahpark.com and on Twitter @readingspark.

Praise for Kelly Yang's New York Times Bestselling Series



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APALA Award for Children's Literature

★ “Many readers will recognize themselves or their neighbors in these pages.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “A swiftly moving plot and a winsome protagonist . . .”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ “This book will help foster empathy for the immigrant experience for young readers, while for immigrant children, it is a much-needed and validating mirror.”
—*Booklist*, starred review

★ “Powerful and heart-wrenching.”
—*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, starred review



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A Bank Street Best Children's Book
Fall 2020 Kids' Indie Next List Pick
Fall 2020 Kirkus Most Anticipated Book

★ “Mia is the compassionate, action-driven heroine today's readers deserve.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ “Don't miss this brave hero as she confronts anti-immigrant hatred in a timely historical novel.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “[Yang] has a remarkable talent for relating serious—even traumatic—issues in a way that won't trigger readers, grounding the well-paced story in the struggles, doubts, and deep love between Mia's friends and family.”
—*Booklist*, starred review



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★ “Tackling complex issues of gentrification, corporate power, racism, and even an unwanted kiss, Chinese American seventh grader Mia Tang matures, exhibiting endearing resilience and advocating for herself and small businesses . . . The complex and realistic relationships Mia has with Lupe and Jason show these friends developing into an interesting and talented trio. The author's note, including writing and photos from Yang's youth, shares the remarkable autobiographical details. Fans of this series that keeps going strong will devour this latest entry.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Chinese American Mia Tang returns in this entertaining, well-paced third installment in the beloved Front Desk serie . . . Flawed, strong, and brave, Mia is a believable and relatable heroine. Yang sensitively presents issues like racism, consent, and gentrification in an accessible and engaging manner. An author's note, pointing out autobiographical aspects of the book and showcasing a sampling of early stories, add even more richness. While this is enjoyable on its own, the adventures of Mia and her family and friends are best treasured in series order. Highly recommended for all middle-grade collections.”
—*Booklist*, starred review

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