

## Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

# The Other Side of Paradise

## Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

## Author Bio

Poet, actor and performing artist Staceyann Chin is the author of multiple works, including the new poetry collection, *Crossfire: A Litany For Survival* and the critically acclaimed memoir, *The Other Side of Paradise*. She is also the cowriter and original performer in the Tony Award–winning Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway, and author of the one-woman shows *Hands Afire*, *Unspeakable Things*, *Border/Clash*, and *MotherStruck*. She has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show and 60 Minutes, and her poetry has been featured in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. She proudly identifies as Caribbean, Black, Asian, lesbian, a woman and a resident of New York City, as well as a Jamaican national.

## Summary

*The Other Side of Paradise* is a memoir by poet and activist Staceyann Chin that traces her childhood and early adulthood in Jamaica. Much of the book is set in and around Paradise, Jamaica, where Chin grows up under conditions shaped by abandonment, poverty, instability and the imposed hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, class and religion. Her mother leaves for Canada shortly after her birth, her father refuses to claim her and Chin moves between relatives, boarding situations and unsafe homes. As she makes her way through high school and university, she comes out as a lesbian in a homophobic culture. Throughout the memoir, Chin explores and

questions her sense of belonging, family and the shame young girls and queer people are taught to carry.

The memoir documents a girl who is repeatedly told to make herself smaller, quieter, prettier and less threatening. She recalls the preferential treatment afforded to boys and men, the pressure to perform femininity properly, the shame attached to periods, sexuality and poverty, and the violence used to discipline girls who speak too loudly or ask too many questions. At the same time, the book follows Chin's growing insistence on telling the truth about her life, claiming her identity and imagining a future beyond the limits others have placed on her.

## Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Equality, dignity and freedom from discrimination are foundational human rights principles. In British Columbia, these protections are affirmed through the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and B.C.'s *Human Rights Code*. *The Other Side of Paradise* brings these principles into sharp relief by documenting how gender, race, class, family status and sexuality shape a child's access to safety, education, belonging and bodily autonomy. Chin's memoir reminds readers that inequality is expressed not only through law and formal policy, but also through everyday experiences about who matters, whose future is worth investing in and how we value young girls.

The book also raises questions about children's rights and gender-based violence. Chin recounts emotional neglect, sexual harassment and assault, unstable housing and the repeated silencing of girls' pain. Internationally, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's rights to protection, dignity and development, and the state responsibility to protect children from sexual assault.

Finally, the memoir invites reflection on how shame and exclusion function as social controls. Chin writes about exclusion based on colourism, linguistic policing, religious fear and hostility toward queer identity. Human rights protections related to race, sex, gender expression and sexual orientation are meant to challenge these forms of exclusion.



# Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not definitive answers, but are meant to offer some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

## 1. Gendered shame, religion and control

What does the memoir suggest about how shame is used to control girls and women? How do religion, family and culture reinforce those messages? How does shame still show up in our communities, around sexual health, sexuality, menstruation, gender roles and responses to sexual violence?

Staceyann grows up in a world where girls are watched, corrected, blamed and shamed. Girls are told to be quiet, modest and ashamed of sexual desire. Periods are framed as dirty. When Staceyann experiences sexual harassment and assault as a child, adults often respond as though her reaction is the problem. She is even told multiple times that “the devil lives inside you.” In a particular horrifying scene of sexual assault in a university dormitory bathroom, the perpetrators believe Staceyann deserves this because she is an out-lesbian.

The book shows that shame is a tool that teaches girls and queer people how to police themselves before anyone else has to. Shame can make people doubt their instincts, stay silent about harm or accept treatment that they know is wrong. Shame can show up in schools, families and communities in subtle and direct ways: from using indirect or unclear language to talk about sexuality and body parts, to menstruation being treated as something embarrassing or ‘gross,’ to victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault and harassment.

Staceyann, in the face of shame, keeps asking questions, speaking up and pushing back. In our own communities, we’ve seen increased access to menstrual care products in public washrooms, sexual health clinics that specialize in serving equity-denied communities and greater research dollars committed to understanding health and community needs. Many of these advancements are the result of advocacy efforts by women, LGBTQ2SAI+ communities and communities of colour.

## 2. Abandonment and belonging

Staceyann’s mother leaves for Canada. Her father refuses paternity. She is moved from house to house, separated from her brother and repeatedly made to feel like a burden rather than a child with a right to love and stability. Gifts are given, but often as performance rather than connection. At several points, Staceyann writes, “we don’t belong to no one.” What does the memoir suggest about the importance of



secure belonging in childhood? What happens when a child is fed, housed, or supervised but does not feel wanted?

The book makes clear that children need consistent affection, protection and the sense that their lives matter to someone. When those things are missing, children may feel required to hide or conceal themselves, stay quiet, or be grateful for whatever care they do receive.

For many children, a sense of belonging is built through reliability, safety, being seen and the experience of being in community—including with trusted adults who listen, and systems that do not treat children’s wellbeing as conditional.

In British Columbia, this concern is reflected in the work of the [Representative for Children and Youth, an Independent Office of the Legislative Assembly](#) mandated to advocate for children, youth and young adults, monitor government services and conduct independent reviews and investigations into critical injuries and deaths of children in B.C.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the notion of ‘belonging’ within the human rights context, by protecting a child’s right to stay with their parents and family wherever possible, to practice their culture and religion, to participate in their community and to speak their own language. The Convention recognizes the importance of a child growing up in “an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”. These are all important elements of belonging.

### **3. Education and the right to a future**

What does Staceyann’s story tell us about the power and potential of education? How do reading and writing provide Staceyann with tools and skills to help her navigate her life? Can you think of a transformative learning experience in your own lives and the impact it had on you?

Again and again, education creates openings in Staceyann’s life. Her grandmother insists on homework because she herself could not read or write. A teacher enrolls Staceyann in school early, making room for learning and enrichment. Later, writing in a journal for English class becomes one of the first places Staceyann can tell the truth about what she feels, wants and sees in the world. She is beaten for some of that writing, but she does not stop.

Staceyann’s story shows that education is not only an opportunity. It is also a right that can shape a person’s dignity, confidence and future. Reading and writing gave her language and an outlet for experiences that others wanted her to keep quiet.



School was not always safe or kind, but it offered an escape, the possibility of a different future and meaningful relationships with friends and teachers.

A transformative learning experience can change how you see yourself, your possibilities or the world around you. It might be the first time someone encouraged your curiosity, believed in your abilities or gave you language for something you had felt but could not yet name.

#### **4. Respectability, language and performance**

Aunt June insists on “proper English,” controlled hair, clean clothes and the performance of a certain kind of respectability. Staceyann, by contrast, is rambunctious, outspoken and resistant to being told what to do or how to behave. What do these moments tell us about who gets to fit in more easily and who is expected to change themselves in order to belong? Staceyann later shaves her head and says, “I finally look like myself.” Why does that moment feel so powerful?

Respectability is not only about appearance or manners, but about silencing the parts of ourselves that don’t fit easily into the status quo or norm. For some people, fitting those expectations comes more comfortably and with less personal sacrifice or compromise.

Staceyann becomes increasingly aware of how her race, class and poverty seemingly makes others and herself uncomfortable. So, she learns to hide certain parts of her life, by not getting dropped off directly at her house or lying about her relationship with her mother, for example. The barber scene is powerful because it’s not really about hair—but about the sense of relief of choosing not to hide or censor oneself.

#### **5. “The stone the builders rejected”**

At one point, Staceyann’s grandmother shares the Bible verse Matthew 21:42: “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” That image feels especially resonant for a child who is repeatedly cast away, underestimated or treated as a problem because she is outspoken, intelligent and unwilling to conform. Why do you think this verse matters in the book? What does it offer Staceyann?

The verse gives Staceyann another way to understand rejection. Instead of seeing herself as unwanted or wrong, Staceyann’s grandmother offers her the possibility that the qualities others reject in her may one day become her strength. Staceyann’s honesty, directness and penchant for asking questions, especially and including from authority, are not her flaws, but her ways of surviving and thriving in this world. This



doesn't make rejection acceptable or the harm Staceyann experienced worthwhile. But it does offer a way to make meaning from it and move towards healing.

## **6. Queerness, visibility and safety**

In the later chapters, Staceyann begins to claim her lesbian identity more openly, even as she faces ostracism, shame and brutal violence. She is invited to discreet queer parties where everyone is there for the same reason, yet even inside that space people remain guarded, careful and distant with strict social norms around eye contact, initiating conversation and who you can be seen associating with.

What might be different ways queer people try to survive in hostile environments? Why might openness feel necessary for one person and discretion feel essential for another? What tensions arise within queer communities when people do not share the same experiences of safety, visibility or risk?

The memoir does not present queer life in Jamaica as simple silence on one side and loud and public liberation on the other. For Staceyann, continuing to hide herself had become its own form of harm. For others, secrecy and 'respectability' may have felt necessary to protect family relationships, housing, employment or physical safety.

Queer communities can hold very different ideas about what it means to live honestly. "Coming out of the closet" is often treated as a defining act of self-making, while for others preserving family ties, community relations or personal safety may feel more urgent than public declaration.

## **7. Welcoming and supporting LGBTQ2SAI+ refugees**

Staceyann's story is rooted in Jamaica in the 1970s, 80s and 90s, but the risks faced by queer and trans people in hostile environments remain very real today. In Canada, some LGBTQ2SAI+ refugees arrive after fleeing criminalization, family violence, public harassment or the threat of sexual violence. What actions can we take to preserve or improve the safety, well-being and success for LGBTQ2SAI+ newcomers and refugees?

Some people volunteer with settlement agencies, immigration welcome centres or community organizations that help newcomers find housing, community, employment and other services. Others might donate clothing or household goods to agencies supporting refugee resettlement.

Some Canadians also take part in private sponsorship. In B.C., [Rainbow Refugee](#) remains one of the best-known organizations supporting LGBTQ2SAI+ refugees and refugee claimants, and it continues to run a Private Sponsorship Program.



And still for others, taking action may mean learning about the realities queer refugees face by reading relevant news and stories. Any of these small and large actions can help make a place feel less isolating and more welcoming.

