

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

Front Desk

by Kelly Yang

Introduction

The B.C. Human Rights Commissioner's Book Club offers monthly book selections that use stories to help readers connect with human rights issues and with the characters they encounter. We hope to bring together a province-wide community of readers to deepen their understanding of human rights and those who are most affected by human rights issues.

This guide has been prepared to assist parents, teachers, librarians and other trusted adults explore themes in *Front Desk* by Kelly Yang. These questions are designed to encourage students to connect the novel to topics such as housing, workers' rights, discrimination, poverty, belonging and the importance of community support.

The story follows Mia Tang a 10-year-old recent immigrant to the US from China who now lives in the Calavista Motel with her parents. Mia's story revolves around the motel and school and her relationships with motel guests, fellow students and friends, her family and other immigrants. Mia experiences and witnesses injustices like racism, discrimination and economic exploitation of immigrants. These experiences strengthen Mia's resolve to stand up for herself and others, which she does in many ways—some more successful than others—throughout the book.

Discussion questions

1. What did you think of the story? Did it teach you anything new or help you see something differently?
2. What was your favourite moment or scene in the book? Why? Compare your answer with others in the group.
3. Which character did you connect with most and why?

4. Why did Mia's family move to the United States? What hopes and dreams did they have for their new life?
5. People often move to a new country despite the possibility of facing challenges such as racism, discrimination or exploitation. Why might they make that choice? Do people always have a choice?
6. What were Mia's family's first experiences in the United States? Were they what they had hoped for?
7. What barriers does Mia face at school as a newcomer? How does she respond to these challenges?
8. Mia often speaks up when she sees something unfair, even when it is risky. What are some examples of this from the story? Do you think it is important to speak up against injustice? Why or why not?
9. Mia's friend Lupe says that rich people and poor people are on different "roller coasters". What does she mean by this? Does it reflect the experiences of Lupe and Mia's families?
10. Mia and Lupe talk about how being both "poor" and "brown" affects how others treat them and their families. How are the main characters treated badly or differently because of their race? Or because of the amount of money their parents make, their age, their gender or the fact that they are immigrants?
11. When Mia's parents begin working at the Calavista Motel, they discover that Mr. Yao misled them about the job and pay. Mia's parents continue working for Mr. Yao despite the unfair treatment. Why do you think they might have done this instead of leaving?
12. Mia's family works very hard but still struggles to make enough money to live. This is true for other characters in the book. Do you think Mr. Yao is responsible for paying people fairly for their work?
13. Mia's parents allow other Chinese immigrants to stay at the motel when they are experiencing difficult times. Why do they choose to help? What does Mia learn from these experiences about the importance of community and caring for others?
14. After a scary experience with a guest, Mia asks Mr. Yao for some safety improvements to the front desk but he refuses. What responsibilities do employers have to ensure workers are safe at work?
15. When Mia starts school, she tells her classmates things about her life that are not true. Later, Lupe admits that she has also invented stories about her life.

Why do both girls do this? How do Mia and Lupe discover the truth about one another? How does this affect their friendship?

16. Although the story includes experiences of racism, poverty and exclusion, it also contains moments of belonging and joy. When does Mia feel that she belongs, and why are those moments important?

Activities

The invisible backpack

An invisible backpack is something we carry that other people may not be able to see. Everyone's backpack is different. Inside we carry our experiences, skills, values and attitudes. Some things in our backpack can help us. Some things can make life harder.

Ask students to think about advantages, disadvantages and challenges characters in Front Desk might carry with them in their invisible backpacks. To help students, create a list of challenges and advantages that characters may have in their invisible backpacks. This list could include, for example:

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| • Leadership skills | • Access to health care | • Stable place to live |
| • Problem-solving skills | • No access to health care | • Physical health challenges |
| • Poverty | • Stress | • Community support |
| • Financial stability | • Self confidence | • Access to education |
| • Mental health challenges | • Supportive family | • No access to education |
| • Experiences of discrimination like racism or sexism | • Friends | • Mental health challenges |
| • No experiences of discrimination | • Sense of humour | • Experiences of belonging |
| • Anxiety | • Access to education | • Experiences of exclusion |
| • Loneliness | • Language barriers | |
| | • No language barriers | |

Divide students into groups and assign each group a character (Mia, Mia's parents, Jason, Hank, Lupe, Mr. Yao)

Invite students to compare how different characters' backpacks influence their opportunities.

Have each group draw a backpack and fill it with items representing what that character carries. Have groups share their backpacks with the class and discuss:

- Which characters carry the heaviest backpacks? Why?
- Which items provide the greatest advantages?
- Which challenges create the biggest barriers?
- How do racism, poverty, immigration status, language or housing affect opportunities?
- How do different challenges overlap with one another?
- Which characters have access to protections or support systems?
- What could help lighten a character's backpack?