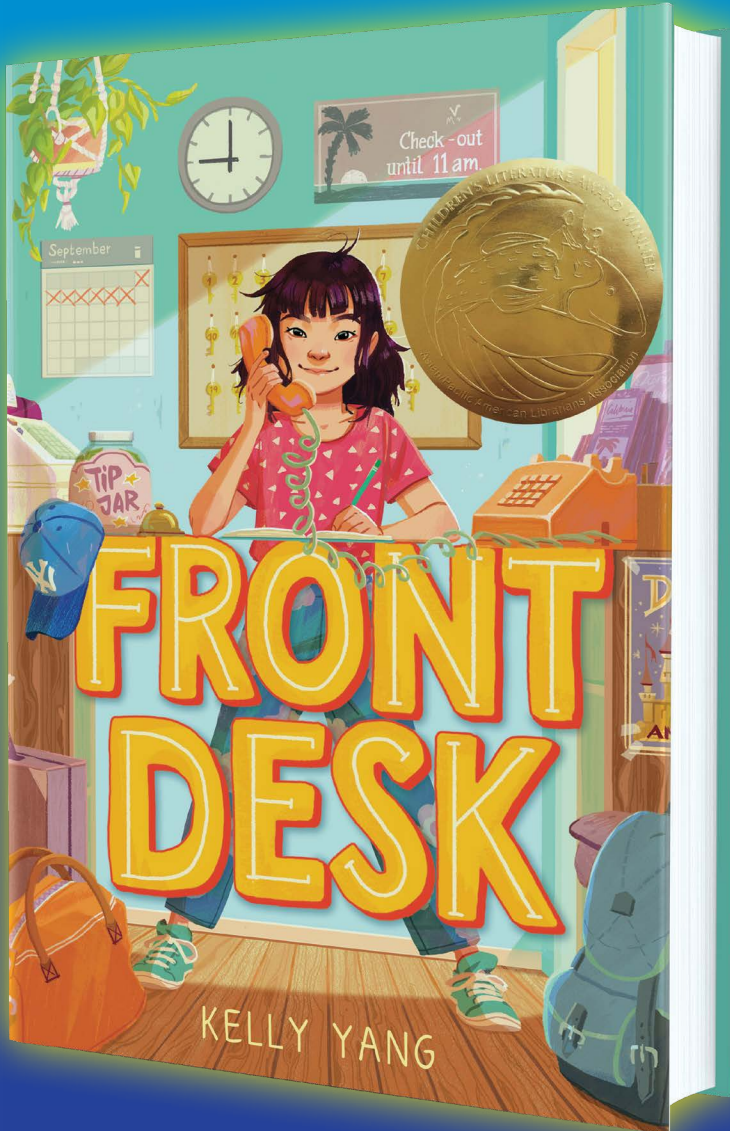


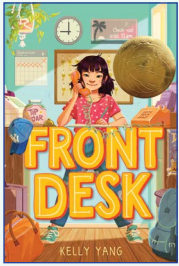
Discussion Guide

Immigration and Activism: Sparking Reader Engagement

with the Front Desk Novels by Kelly Yang

Ages 8—12
Grades 3—7





Front Desk

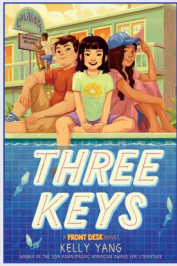
About the Book: Mia Tang thought life would be awesome once her family moved from China to the United States: Disneyland, hamburgers, and a house! But actually, life in the United States isn't that great. However hard her parents work, they struggle to find and keep jobs. They can't afford hamburgers 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 "because 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 other 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 stewing 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 a good employee "knows 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 "brown" and "poor." (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 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 held 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—the investors—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 are all immigrants 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 “one piece of paper.” (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 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?

RESOURCES

Articles and Websites

- Arellano, Gustavo. "Prop. 187 Timeline: The Rise and Fall of California's Anti-immigrant Law." latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-06/proposition-187-timeline
- JACL Asian American History Overview. jacl.org/asian-american-history
- 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
- PBS History Detectives: Chinese Immigration. pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/chinese-immigration
- Echeverria-Estrada, Carlos and Jeanne Batalova. "Chinese Immigrants in the United States." migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states-2018
- Cooke, Nicole A. "Anti-Racism Resources for All Ages." padlet.com/nicolethe librarian/nbasekqoazt336co

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

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

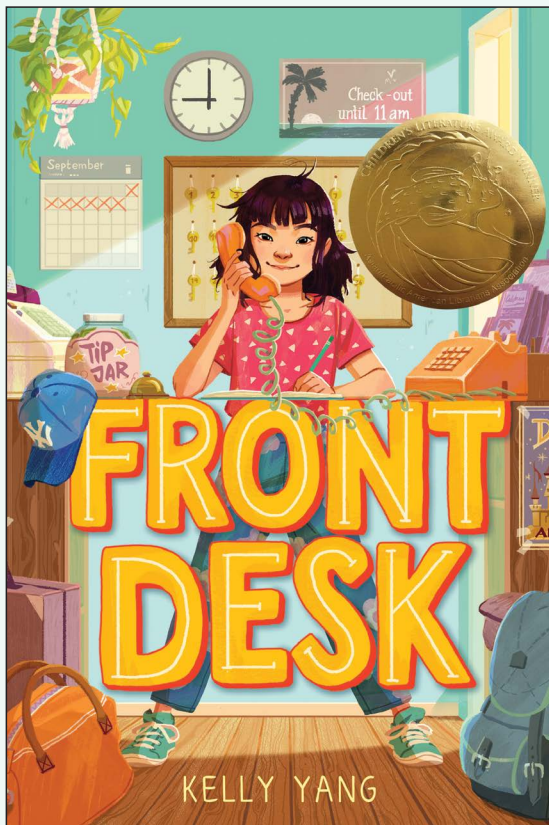


Photo: Harold de Puymorin

Kelly Yang is the author of *Front Desk*, which won the 2019 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature and was chosen as 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 managing the front desks of three different motels when she was 8-12 years old while her parents cleaned the room. She eventually left the motels and went to college at the age of 13, 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*. She is also the author of the young adult novel *Parachutes*. To learn more about her and the Front Desk books, visit frontdeskthebook.com.

Discussion guide written by Sarah Park Dahlen, an Associate Professor in the MLIS Program at St. Catherine University. 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. Find her online at sarahpark.com and on Twitter @readingspark.

Praise for *FRONT DESK*



Hardcover: 9781338157796 • \$16.99
Paperback: 9781338157826 • \$7.99
Also available as an ebook

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

Praise for *THREE KEYS*



Hardcover: 9781338591385 • \$17.99
Also available as an ebook and audiobook

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