# Erin Entrada Kelly

# TEACHING GUIDE










Includes discussion questions, classroom activities, and lesson ideas



Photo by Laurence Kesterson

## About the Author

Erin Entrada Kelly is the author of *Hello, Universe*; *Blackbird Fly*; and *The Land of Forgotten Girls*. Her mother was the first in her family to immigrate to the United States from the Philippines. Erin grew up in south Louisiana and now lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

## Common Themes in Erin Entrada Kelly's Work

It's painful to feel like a misfit at school and worse to feel like one at home, as the Filipino-American middle-schoolers do in these contemporary novels. Yet each one of them finds strength in friendship and support from a caring adult. For Virgil in *Hello, Universe*, his understanding grandmother makes life with an oblivious family tolerable. His classmate Valencia turns to a stray dog and her study of animals when she feels alone due to deafness. In *Blackbird Fly*, Apple lives with her strict mother in a small town where she's taunted for looking different. But the eighth-grader gleans great joy from music, encouraged by a teacher and in harmony with a new friend. Sol and her sister in *The Land of Forgotten Girls* have to deal with a hard-hearted stepmother and almost no money. Kindness from a neighbor, an unlikely friendship, and Sol's vivid storytelling help the sisters look past their problems. In all three novels, even someone who isn't there—a dead relative, a saint, a character from a story—can supply inspiration when things get bad. All the protagonists change their lives, at least a little, and start thinking about themselves in a better way. With their diverse characters and realistic situations, these compelling novels will give hope to any reader who has ever felt like an outsider.



Art © by Isabel Roxas




# HELLO, UNIVERSE

## About the Book

In one day, four lives weave together in unexpected ways. Virgil Salinas is shy and kindhearted and feels out of place in his crazy-about-sports family. Valencia Somerset, who is deaf, is smart, brave, and secretly lonely, and she loves everything about nature. Kaori Tanaka is a self-proclaimed psychic, whose little sister, Gen, is always following her around. And Chet Bullens wishes the weird kids would just stop being so different so that he can concentrate on basketball. They aren't friends, at least not until Chet pulls a prank that traps Virgil and his pet guinea pig at the bottom of a well. This disaster leads Kaori, Gen, and Valencia on an epic quest to find the missing Virgil. Sometimes four can do what one cannot. Through luck, smarts, bravery, and a little help from the universe, a rescue is performed, a bully is put in his place, and friendship blooms.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is Virgil like as a person? When he describes the rest of his family, he says he feels "like unbuttered toast standing next to them" (p. 4). What does he mean by that simile? How does he think he compares to his brothers? How does his experience in the well affect him? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 4*

2. How does Lola's arrival help Virgil? What is she like, and what's her role in the family? Describe Lola's exchange with Valencia. What do Valencia and Kaori think of her? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3*

3. In more than one instance, Virgil wishes he could act as the "Alternate Virgil" (p. 39). How would he change himself if he could? How does the book's title relate to Virgil's hopes about changing? What changes does he actually make by the end of the book? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-7.1, 2*

4. Describe Valencia's personality and her interests. What is her nightmare, and why can't she ask her mother for help? How do people, including her parents, treat her differently because she's deaf? Give specific examples. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1*

5. Valencia explains that she prays to Saint Rene. Who is he and why does she pray to him? In the well, Virgil talks to Ruby San Salvador. Who is she and how is she helpful to him? What does this tell you about Valencia and Virgil and how they are alike? What else do they have in common? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL. 4-7.1, 3*

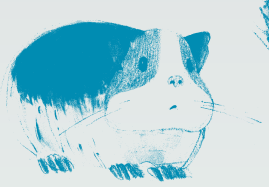
6. Discuss Chet's character and how he treats other kids. Why do you think he's so unkind? What messages does he get from his father? How do you think those affect his actions? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 3*

7. Kaori likes to tell people that "her parents were born in the high, misty mountains of a samurai village" (p. 26). What does this reveal about her character? Describe her interest in psychic matters and how that interest is important to the novel's plot. Talk about her relationship to Gen, how they interact, and how their personalities compare. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RL.4-7.1, 3*

8. Talk about the main characters' names and nicknames in the novel. Why does Valencia call herself Renee? Discuss Kaori's observation that Valencia seems proud of her real name, and the fact that "Kaori was fond of her name as well" (p. 265). What does Lola say about Valencia's name? How does Virgil feel about his name and nickname? How does Chet's last name lead to a nickname and relate to his character? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 4*

9. Identify the different points of view that the author uses throughout the novel. How do the points of view differ by chapter? Why do you think the author chose to focus different chapters on different characters and use different points of view? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.6; 5-6.5*

10. The author uses similes and metaphors to create a vivid narrative. For example, Virgil's crying is compared to a faucet, starting on p. 243 and picking up again on p. 245. Discuss the effect of the metaphor and why the author extends it. On p. 244, Virgil thinks of his family as speaking "in exclamation points." What images does that create in your mind? Find other figures of speech and discuss their impact on the reader. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.1, 4*





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# Blackbird Fly

## About the Book

Apple has always felt a little different from her classmates. She and her mother moved to Louisiana from the Philippines when she was little, and her mother still cooks Filipino foods and chastises Apple for becoming "too American." When Apple's friends turn on her and everything about her life starts to seem weird and embarrassing, Apple turns to music. If she can just save enough to buy a guitar and learn to play, maybe she can change herself. It might be the music that saves her . . . or it might be her two new friends, who show her how special she really is. Erin Entrada Kelly deftly brings Apple's conflicted emotions to the page in her debut novel about family, friendship, popularity, and going your own way.

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe Apple, her personality, and her interests. What are her strengths? What does she want most in life? Using examples from the story, talk about how she grows throughout the novel and what causes her to change. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

2. Apple and her mother have a complicated relationship. Describe Apple's mother. Why did Apple and her mother leave the Philippines? Discuss the positive aspects of their relationship and the parts that are hard for Apple. How does their relationship change throughout the course of the book? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5.3*

3. Describe Alyssa and Gretchen, who are Apple's main friends when the book opens. How has their friendship changed since they first met? In what ways does Apple grow apart from Alyssa and Gretchen, and why? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5.3*

4. Discuss the Dog Log and its impact on Apple. What do you think motivates Jake and the other boys to create the list? Why do you think Jake is so mean to Apple? Discuss what a school could do to prevent such hurtful actions by students. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1, 2*

5. Why is it hard for Apple to be Filipino-American in her small Louisiana town? Point to specific places in the story where her fellow students show racial bias towards her. How does that treatment make her feel about her heritage? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1, 2*

6. Describe Evan and his background. List some adjectives that you would apply to him. What makes Apple think that Evan is so different from the other kids at school? Discuss their feelings about each other and how their relationship grows. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5.3*

7. Apple's father is important to her and part of the reason why she cares about music, especially the Beatles. Sum up what you learn about her father. What are her feelings about him? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

8. Describe Heleena and how the other kids treat her. What does Apple know about Heleena early in the book, and what does she learn about her as the book progresses? Discuss what brings the two of them together and why the friendship seems stronger than Apple's friendships with Alyssa and Gretchen. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

9. Apple's class will be going on a field trip to New Orleans. Why does she want to stay there and what does she expect to do? Describe her specific plans for running away and why they change. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5-6.5*

10. Music is central to Apple's life. Describe why that's true and why the Beatles matter so much to her. What role does music play in the plot? How does it help Apple cope with the hardships in her life? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1, 2; 5-6.5*





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# The Land of Forgotten Girls

## About the Book

Soledad has always been able to escape into the stories she creates. And she has needed that escape more than ever since her mother and sister died and her father moved Sol and her youngest sister from the Philippines to Louisiana. Then he left, and all Sol and Ming have now is their evil stepmother, Vea. Erin Entrada Kelly writes with grace, imagination, and deepest heart about the meaning of family and about finding hope in the hardest circumstances.

## Discussion Questions

1. Sol and Ming are more important to each other than anyone else in their lives. Describe the personality of each girl. How are they similar and how are they different? Talk about how they interact and what changes between them in the course of the novel. What do you think their lives will be like in the future? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5.3*

2. Describe Tita Vea, including her positive and negative qualities, and her relationship with Sol and Ming. Why doesn't she abandon them? How does she treat them? How does each of the girls feel about her? Describe the incident with Mr. Elephant and what it shows. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5-6.6*

3. Manny is Sol's longtime friend, but his feelings for her are changing. Discuss their relationship and what they like to do together. What do they have in common? How are they different and how are their lives different? Analyze their feelings for each other, drawing on evidence in the text. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5.3*

4. Ming puts her faith in Auntie Jove. Who is Auntie Jove, what is she like, and where does the information about her come from? What are Ming's hopes about Auntie Jove? How does Sol treat Ming's hopes? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

5. Sol and Caroline become friends. Why is this unexpected? Describe their early encounters in the book and what changes between the two of them. What is Caroline like as a person? Talk about Caroline's family and her place in it. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

6. Compare the neighborhood and apartment where Sol lives with the neighborhood and house where Caroline lives. In what ways is setting important to the story? Talk about the junkyard and what it's like. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

7. Blackbeard makes an agreement with Sol on p. 181. Describe what he asks for and how Sol fulfills her end of the bargain. What is Blackbeard like? What makes him so much friendlier to Sol than she expects, and how does he show his friendliness? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

8. Mrs. Yeung is another unpredictable character. What does Sol think of her early on in the book? Describe their relationship and how it comes about. How does Mrs. Yeung help make life better for Sol and Ming, and why does she do it? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1*

9. Sol and Ming's parents aren't present in the story. Describe each of them and what happened to them. How are they still important in the girls' lives? What happened to Sol's younger sister, Amelia, and how does Sol feel about that memory? In what way is Amelia still part of Sol's life? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1, 2*

10. Sol often makes up stories for Ming. For example, on p. 151, Sol makes up the Land of Forgotten Girls, which she also mentions later. What do you think Sol's imaginary place means to Ming? Find a few other places in the novel where Sol makes up stories. Summarize the stories and analyze their effect on Ming. Why had Sol's father told her to ignore made-up stories (p. 5)? *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1, 2*



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# Classroom Activities

## Hello, Universe

1. **What's Your Sign?** Kaori has a zodiac circle rug and asks for everyone's zodiac sign. Have students identify their own zodiac sign and learn more about it. What characteristics are associated with their signs? What's the relationship of their sign to a constellation? Have students informally interview friends and family to see who reads their horoscopes and if they believe in them. Hold a class discussion about their findings and why people do or don't believe in horoscopes. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4-7.1*

2. **Snakes, Squirrels, and Stray Dogs.** Animals come up a lot in this novel. Valencia keeps a zoological diary, Virgil cares about guinea pigs, and Chet focuses on snakes in the woods. As a class, make a list of all the animals mentioned. Then have students work in pairs to research one of the animals using print and digital sources. Have them create a multimedia presentation to share their findings. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4-7.7; SL.4-7.5*

3. **The Next Chapter.** Virgil finally says hello to Valencia in his own way. When will they meet and talk in person? Have students write the next chapter for the book about Virgil and Valencia's new friendship. Before they start, have them consider the point of view and narrative voice they want to use. They should base the behavior and dialogue of the characters on the rest of the book. Share the chapters in small groups. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4-7.3*

## Blackbird Fly

1. **Connect the Dots.** Apple lists a Beatles song just below the chapter titles. Have each student choose one, find a copy of the lyrics online, and listen to the song. Then the student should write an essay which draws connections between the song and what happens in that chapter. The connections can be about the song's mood as well as its words. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5-8.1; 5.7*

2. **Welcome to the Philippines.** Have students research the Philippines with print and digital resources and create a trifold travel pamphlet about the country. It should include a map and an overview plus information on weather, major cities, food, arts and culture, and other topics of interest. Have students illustrate their pamphlets with drawings or photographs. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5-8.2, 7*

3. **Let's Put on a Show!** As a class, discuss how the members of Apple's class view Apple and Heleena differently after they played guitar and sang. Then have your students organize a low-key talent show with singing, dancing, magic tricks, humorous skits, and so on. Students who don't perform can be involved in sets, props, stage managing, and promoting the show. After rehearsing, invite younger classes to be the audience. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5-8.1, 6*

## The Land of Forgotten Girls

1. **Diagram the Duo.** Have students create a large Venn diagram to compare and contrast Sol and Caroline. It should incorporate their personalities, families, and their relationships to their sisters, homes, neighborhoods, schools, and other friends. Have students gather in small groups to share the diagrams and discuss what they included and why. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3; W.5-8.2*

2. **Louisiana's Fascinating Facts.** Have each student use print and digital resources to find ten interesting facts about Louisiana. They should list the facts and their sources for them on a poster, illustrating the poster with drawings or photographs. Mount the posters on a bulletin board and have students report on the facts they found. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5-8.5; W.5-8.7*

3. **Visit the Land of Forgotten Girls.** Have students discuss the places in the novel where Sol describes the Land of Forgotten Girls. Then each student will write a story in which Sol and Ming visit the Land. The story should expand on the Land of Forgotten Girls, who lives there, and what it's like. It should show why the sisters are visiting and what happens to them there. *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5-8.3*



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