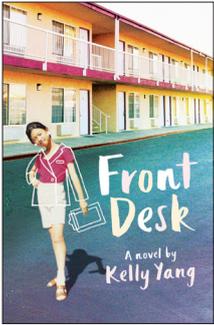




Walker Books Classroom Ideas



Front Desk

Kelly Yang
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*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

Walker Books Australia
Locked Bag 22
Newtown, N.S.W., 2042

Ph +61 2 9517 9577
Fax +61 2 9517 9997

These notes were created by Steve Spargo.
For enquiries please contact:
educationwba@walkerbooks.com.au

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Outline:

Ten-year-old Mia Tang moved to the US for a better life, a freer life, but so far, it's a life where she runs the front desk of a motel while her parents clean rooms. And she's not even allowed to use the swimming pool.

Based on author Kelly Yang's real-life experience immigrating to America from China and running a motel with her parents, this novel explores how one little girl overcomes language barriers, discrimination and her own lack of confidence to find her voice – and use it to make a difference.

This is a sensitive story of tolerance and diversity that will resonate with readers of all cultures who have experienced the challenges of feeling like an outsider.

Author Information:

Kelly Yang is an American citizen living and working in Hong Kong. She went to University of California at Berkeley at age 13, graduated at 17, and completed Harvard Law by age 20. She's now a columnist for the *South China Morning Post* and has been published in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and CNN.com. She is also the founder and director of The Kelly Yang Project, a leading writing and debate center in Asia. She's been on the BBC, CNN, Huffington Post, and more, to discuss education and learning. Her YouTube channel hosts an extraordinary global issues show for teens. Launched in January 2017, the episodes have been hitting upwards of 25,000 views each on Facebook.

How to Use These Notes:

This story works on many levels. The suggested activities are therefore for a wide age and ability range. Please select accordingly.

These notes are for:

- Primary years 4-6
- Ages 8+

Key Learning Areas:

- English

Example of:

- Novel

Themes/Ideas:

- Empathy
- Racism
- Courage
- Discrimination
- Tolerance



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Discussion Questions and Activities:

Before Reading

Before reading *Front Desk*, view the cover of the book.

Identify the following:

- The title of the book
- The author
- The tagline
- The publisher
- The blurb

Based on the cover, what do you think this story is about? How do you think it will begin/end? Revisit your answer after reading the book – how close were your predictions to the actual novel?

Exploring the Text

What are the themes in this novel? As a class or in small groups identify and list the themes. Individually write a statement of belief about each theme.

Kelly Yang has based elements of this story on her own life, so while the story is a work of fiction, it is grounded in the real-life experience of a working-class immigrant family in the USA. Why do you think Kelly Yang chose to fictionalise her life story rather than writing a straight autobiography? Conversely, why do you think she chose to include elements of her life story rather than writing a completely fictional book?

Mia and her mum argue when Mia gets a math question wrong at school. The argument ends when Mia's mum says "You know what you are in English? You're a bicycle, and the other kids are cars." (p. 157) What do you think Mia's mum meant by this? Mia then likens their relationship to a broken bowl: the pieces could be stuck back together, but you would always see the cracks.

Discuss the ups and downs of Mia's relationship with her parents. Discuss the idea that the adults in this story and in your own life don't always say the right thing and are just as affected by emotions and stress as you are. What should you do if you realise you've said something hurtful to another person?

Keep a "Vocab Journal" while reading the novel. Make a note of any words you come across that are unfamiliar and look up their meaning. Also keep track of any words or phrases that you particularly like and write a note next to each explaining why you like that word/phrase.

Mia has a keen sense of social justice. Find examples in the text of when she witnessed an injustice and decided to do something about it.

Mia and Lupe develop a strong friendship. How does their relationship start? What problems do they experience in the story? How does her friendship with Lupe affect Mia?

In Chapter 35 Mia makes a list of American phrases and customs. Write a similar list for your country or local area that might help someone understand the local language or slang for the first time.

Why does Mia want to enter the essay writing contest? How does she think winning will help her family? Saving the money for the entry fee poses another set of problems for Mia, such as the guilt she feels holding on to money when her parents are struggling financially. How do these issues affect Mia?

How does Hank demonstrate bravery and selflessness when Mia's mum is attacked in Chapter 42?

The characters in this story demonstrate a range of traits that could be considered positive, such as Mia's sense of justice and Hank's selflessness; and negative, such as Mr. Yao's racist beliefs and Jason's bullying behavior. Take a sheet of paper and divide it into two columns, label one column 'Positive character traits' and the other 'Negative character traits'. Write examples of characters traits in the columns where you believe they belong, including evidence from the text.

Several times in the story Mia writes letters to express her feelings and to help others (such as Hank and Uncle Zhang). Discuss the power of a well-written letter and how Mia's carefully edited letters are good examples of persuasive texts.

When Mia and Lupe crack the case of the missing Thunderbird and Hank is able to confront Officer Phillips, Hank tells him "Don't be sorry. Be better." (p. 229). What does Hank mean by this? How can readers apply this idea to their own lives?

How does Mia help her family and friends get a chance to escape the poverty cycle?



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Themes

Racism and prejudice

What is your understanding of prejudice? What are the dangers of making judgements about people based on race, gender, age, sexuality, etc. rather than understanding that every person is different and influenced by a unique combination of factors?

What policies does your school have in place regarding racism and prejudice? Can you add to or improve these policies? What should you do if you witness a student or teacher demonstrating racist or prejudiced behavior?

When Mr. Lorenz's car goes missing in Chapter 21, Mia sees Mr. Yao and the policemen demonstrating their racist and prejudiced beliefs when discussing who might have stolen the car. Why do you think Mr. Yao and the policemen suspect Mrs. Robinson and Hank? What is your opinion on their beliefs and behavior?

In Chapter 32 Mia's classmates say to her "You're Chinese. You're supposed to be good at math!" Do you think it was appropriate for the classmates to say this to Mia? Why or why not?

Privilege

Privilege is the idea that certain people have more opportunity than others based on race, gender, sexuality, financial situation and other factors. Have a class discussion on how privilege is explored in *Front Desk*, using the following points as conversation starters:

- Mia and her family are treated poorly by Mr. Yao because he is in a financial position of power over them.
- Mia and Lupe lie to their class and each other about their home life because they fear being judged for not living in a house with a pet like many of the other students.
- Mr. Yao berates Jason saying "Your math isn't even as good as the girl's" (p. 103).
- Hank is unfazed at being interrogated by the police about Mr. Lorenz's missing car because he says "This kind of thing happens to me all the time" (p. 111).

Immigration

What are some reasons that people might move to a new country, even though they may experience adversity (such as racism and prejudice)? Consider a wide range of modern and historical reasons, such as escaping a dangerous situation, being displaced, economic reasons, exploring new opportunities (such as employment, relationships, etc.) and so on.

Interview a family member or friend who immigrated to your country. Keep in mind that reasons for immigration can sometimes be sensitive or difficult for the person to talk about, so remember to be respectful. Ask your interviewee why he/she immigrated, what changed for the better or worse, did he/she learn a new language, and other questions about their experience as an immigrant.

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