

# A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO THE WORKS OF

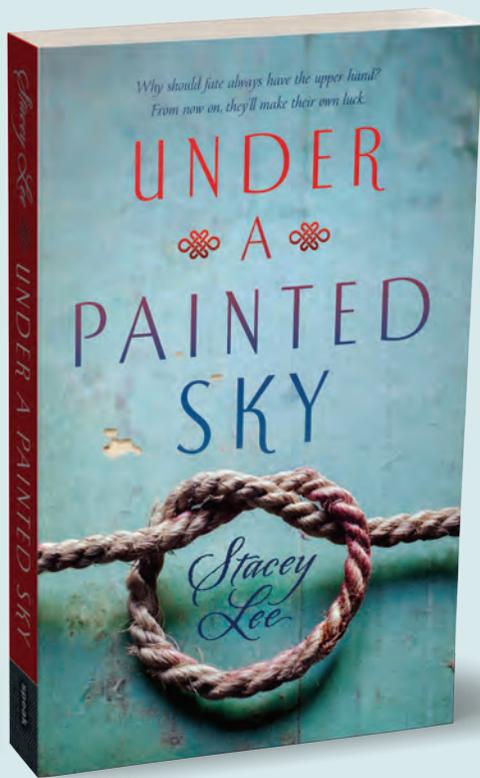
Stacey  
Lee



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★ “EMOTIONALLY RESONANT and not without humor, this impressive debut about survival and connection, resourcefulness and perseverance **WILL KEEP READERS ON THE VERY EDGES OF THEIR SEATS.**” —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review



After a tragic accident where Samantha, a Chinese girl living in Missouri in 1849, must use fatal force in self-defense, she must run away from everything she knows. With help from Annamae, a runaway slave she meets at the scene of her crime, the two flee town for the unknown frontier.

However, life on the Oregon Trail is unsafe for two girls. Disguised as Sammy and Andy, two boys headed for the California gold rush, each searches for a link to her past and struggles to avoid any unwanted attention. Then the two girls merge paths with a band of cowboys-turned-allies, and face dangers they never expected on the open trail.

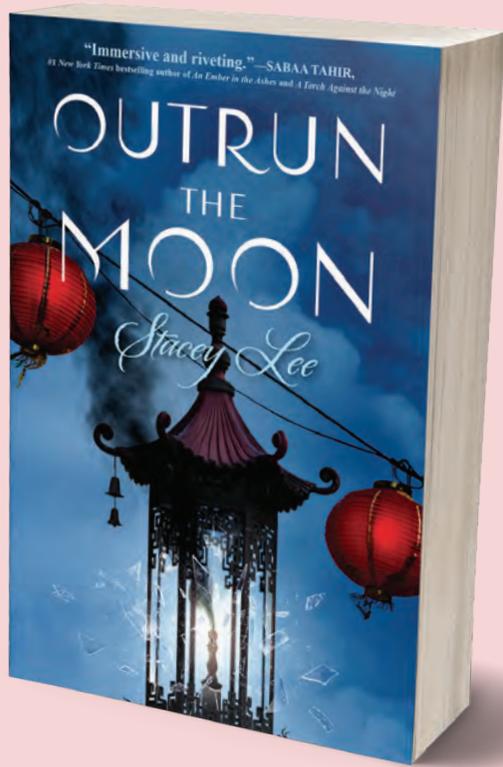
Winner of the SCBWI Crystal Kite Award  
An ALA Best Fiction for Young Adults Pick  
An Amelia Bloomer Book

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Andy says, “God makes our bodies want to live, no matter what our minds want to do” (pp. 13 and 368). In what ways do Sammy and Andy fight to survive even when surrounded by tragedy and hopelessness?
2. Sammy often reflects on luck and fate. Is Sammy responsible for the things that happen on her journey? In what ways are things out of her hands? How do she and her friends respond to unlucky situations, and what does that say about their characters?
3. Sammy begins to consider her companions to be like family. What characteristics determine family for her? What do you think makes up a family in general?
4. Because of her talents for languages and music, Sammy has a gift for communicating with many different people in many different ways. How does this help her throughout her journey? How do these abilities connect her to both her past and her future?
5. Sammy, Andy, and the Broken Hand Gang are considered to be in legal trouble, even if they had strong or necessary reasons for their actions and running away. How do societal expectations and prejudices influence the perceived morality or immorality of their actions? What should justice look like in these situations? Some examples to consider:
  - Andy escaping slavery
  - Sammy killing Ty Yorkshire in self-defense
  - The Broken Hand Gang scaring people in order to get supplies
  - Isaac feeling responsible for the death of a baby
6. In disguising themselves, Sammy and Andy are able to conceal themselves from prejudice based on their gender, but they are unable to escape prejudice based on their race. Compare and contrast their experiences at the beginning of the book to their experiences later on—in what ways are their marginalizations as a Chinese American woman and an African American woman similar and different to their marginalizations as a perceived Chinese American man and African American man?
7. Chinese lunar signs play a large role in the story, and Sammy often discusses them when analyzing someone’s personality and behavior, including her own. Discuss how Sammy’s approach to understanding people informs her approach to understanding her own fate. For example, what role does her interpretation of her Snake luck play in how she approaches difficult situations? What kinds of patterns does she see in the way different characters act, and how does that affect how she interacts with them?
8. Throughout much of the book, Sammy struggles with whether she should follow the path her father had planned or join her companions down a new path. The ending is ambiguous; it is not stated which way Sammy travels next. Based on their thoughts and comments throughout the story, what choices might Sammy and her friends make next?

★ “Propelled by a feisty and fabulous heroine, Lee’s sophomore novel is **POWERFUL, EVOCATIVE,** and **THOUGHT-PROVOKING.**”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review



Fifteen-year-old Mercy Wong is determined to break from the poverty of Chinatown, San Francisco, in 1906, and an education at St. Clare’s School for Girls is her best hope. Despite St. Clare’s only accepting the wealthiest of white girls, with a show of cunning and a little bribery, Mercy gains admittance, only to discover that getting in was the easy part.

When the historic San Francisco earthquake rocks the city weeks later, both Mercy’s home and school are destroyed, and Mercy must use that same cunning to help her classmates, find her remaining family, and do what she can to lessen the suffering of a broken city.

“Immersive and riveting.”—Sabaa Tahir, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *An Ember in the Ashes*

Winner of the PEN Center USA Literary Award for Young Readers

Winner of the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature

An ALA Best Fiction for Young Adults Pick

An Amelia Bloomer Book

A New York Public Library Best Book of the Year

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Similar to Jo in *The Downstairs Girl*, Mercy Wong is criticized for having bossy cheeks—“high cheekbones indicate an assertive, ambitious nature” (p. 12). Why do you think Stacey Lee writes characters with this attribute? What other similarities between her characters can you pinpoint? What differences?
2. *Outrun the Moon* delves into the issue of what it means to be an American. Which characters other than Mercy are dealing with this question? How does race play into the subtleties of who is deemed “American” or not? How does class play into this issue?
3. On p. 132, Mercy says, “we can measure our lives by our pain.” Identify the instances of pain throughout the novel and create a timeline of these moments, involving all characters. Is there a common underlying theme to these occurrences?
4. Elodie tells Mercy that “Class is not something you can connive your way into” (p. 135). Take a look at this argument and discuss the ways that the characters are either immovable or movable. How do race, gender, and class intersect when looking at these distinctions?
5. On p. 28, Lee writes, “if opportunity didn’t come knocking, then Mrs. Lowery says you must build your own door.” How do the characters in *Outrun the Moon* create their own opportunities, instead of waiting for it to come knocking?
6. Read the paragraph on p. 176 about the *yam* tiger and *yeung* dragon to your students. How could the power struggles described in this passage reflect the power struggles present between the different characters and ethnic groups in the novel?
7. Mercy is primarily motivated by her strong connection to her family, particularly to her younger brother, Jack. Discuss the ways in which love for family members affects the decisions that Mercy makes.
8. Consider the interaction between Minnie Mae and the deaf black man in chapter 26. Use Mercy’s thought of “the poor man, whose intentions were so quickly imagined for him because of the way the light hits his skin” (p. 226) as a jumping-off point for discussions on current events in America.
9. The idea of “passing” is pervasive throughout Lee’s writing, and shows itself in *Outrun the Moon* primarily through issues of class. Which characters are “passing” for something other than what they are, and what are the repercussions of these subterfuges?

“IMMERSIVE, IMPORTANT, and thoroughly ENTERTAINING, *The Downstairs Girl* sparkles with all of Stacey Lee’s signature humor, charm, warmth, and wisdom.” —Kelly Loy Gilbert, Morris Award Finalist for *Conviction*



By day, seventeen-year-old Jo Kuan works as a lady’s maid for the cruel daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Atlanta. But by night, Jo moonlights as the pseudonymous author of a newspaper advice column for the genteel Southern lady, “Dear Miss Sweetie.”

When her column becomes wildly popular—and wildly criticized—Jo finds a mysterious letter that sets her off on a search for her own past and the parents who abandoned her. But when her efforts put her in the crosshairs of Atlanta’s most notorious criminal, Jo must decide whether she’s ready to come out of hiding in plain sight and step into the light.

“A bold portrait of this country’s past, brilliantly painted with wit, heartbreak, and unflinching honesty. Everyone needs to read this book.”  
—Stephanie Garber, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Caraval*

“By shining a light on the lives of those whom history usually ignores, Stacey Lee gives us a marvelous gift: An entirely new and riveting look at our past.”  
—Candace Fleming, award-winning author of *The Family Romanov*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Stacey Lee says in her author’s note that she’s “always trying to tell the stories of people who’ve fallen through the cracks.” Why are these important stories to tell? In what ways both literal and metaphorical is Jo Kuan someone who has fallen through the cracks?
2. Part of Jo’s identity is informed by the racial dichotomy of black vs. white. As a Chinese person, Jo doesn’t fall into either side of this divide, providing her with both privileges as a non-black person and marginalizations as a non-white person. What are the different ways both Jo’s privilege and lack thereof are exemplified throughout the story? What does that mean for someone who experiences intersectional identities?
3. Jo often shrouds herself in shadows, whether it’s literally in the basement of the Bells’ home, or figuratively under the pseudonym of Miss Sweetie. How else do shadows appear throughout *The Downstairs Girl*? What characters also spend time in the shadows? How do the intersections of race and gender play into their hidden selves?
4. Jo is criticized for being opinionated at Mrs. English’s millinery, but subscribers love Miss Sweetie’s saucebox comments—think about what distinguishes Jo from Miss Sweetie and compare.
5. Characters in the book are both encouraged to and discouraged from sharing their opinions based on their race and gender. What does this say about the society that dictates these unspoken rules?
6. Words and language are very important in *The Downstairs Girl*, whether it is Old Gin’s sayings, Miss Sweetie’s clever turns of phrase, or the ways different characters address one another, depending on their station. Discuss the use of language in the novel and identify ways, both large and small, that the words used define the situation.
7. On p. 39, Jo states that “Someone needs to blow the trumpets of change. Someone who has viewed society both from the top branch and the bottom, from the inside of the tree and from the outside.” How do different characters’ actions match this description? What kinds of change are they trying to effect, both big and small?
8. Miss Sweetie tackles many issues of the day in her columns and uses her platform to shed light on injustice. Discuss the changes Miss Sweetie is able to make through her writing, and how that impacts her life both directly and indirectly throughout the story.
9. Naomi says, “We got to jump in and make the rules . . . Or someone else will make them for us” (p. 115). In what ways do Jo and other characters attempt to make the rules? What role do rules—and their breaking, expanding, and reimagining—play in the story?
10. Jo and Noemi witness the statue of a Confederate officer being erected. Use their discussion on p. 114 as a jumping-off point to address the current events around the removal of these statues throughout the South.

# ABOUT STACEY LEE



Stacey Lee is the critically acclaimed author of the novels *Under a Painted Sky*, *Outrun the Moon*, and *The Downstairs Girl*. She is a fourth-generation Chinese American and a founding member of We Need Diverse Books. Born in Southern California, she graduated from UCLA and then got her law degree at UC Davis King Hall. She lives with her family outside San Francisco. You can visit Stacey at [staceylee.com](http://staceylee.com) or follow her on Twitter [@staceyleeauthor](https://twitter.com/staceyleeauthor).

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