

A Reading Group Guide to *A Glasshouse of Stars*
By Shirley Marr

About the Book

When Meixing Lim's First Uncle dies, she and her family move across the ocean to live in his big, strange house in the New Land. Far away from their homeland, things are really hard for Meixing and her parents. They struggle to understand the language and culture of the New Land. At school, the other children take advantage of Meixing and laugh at her hand-me-down clothes and lunchbox full of foods from her homeland. When tragedy strikes, things get even worse. Meixing is scared and confused, but help turns up in unexpected places, including the old run-down backyard greenhouse that First Uncle called his glasshouse, where First Uncle used to grow oranges. Will the magic Meixing finds there and elsewhere help her find her place in the New Land?

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the ways that Meixing's life changes and challenges her in the New Land? Have you ever moved to a new place? How did your life change? How did you adjust?
2. Why do you think the author chooses not to specifically name the New Land or the Old Land where Meixing came from?
3. Why does Meixing call her new house "Big Scary"? Do you think this is an accurate name? Explain your answer.
4. What are some of the ways that people share food with one another in the novel? Why do they share their food? What can someone's food tell us about their background and culture? Are there particular foods that are important in your family or culture?
5. Meixing says of her father's work clothes, "The overalls tell a story—with paint stains, engine grease, dried cement, and fabric burns—of all the jobs Ba Ba has ever had a go at." Do you or someone you know have clothing that tells a story? What is the story?
6. Ma Ma tells Meixing, "You don't want to grow up and do a hard job. You want a good job where you work in a clean office as someone important, like a doctor." Why do you think this is so important to Ma Ma? How do these expectations make Meixing feel? What expectations do the adults in your life have for you? How do they make you feel?
7. Meixing often wishes that she wasn't so different from the other children around her in the New Land. Have you ever felt like you didn't fit in? How did you cope with that feeling? What advice would you have for Meixing?
8. How is Meixing's Auntie Ailing different from the rest of Meixing's family? How does the family treat her? Why do you think that is? What do you think of their relationship?
9. Ailing tells Meixing that "It's not so bad to be a misfit." What do you think she means by this? What might be great about being a misfit?

10. Meixing becomes friends with Kevin and Josh, two boys who have also come to the New Land from far away. How do Meixing and her friends help one another through the challenges they face at school and at home? Who are your good friends? How do they help you?

11. Meixing calls the drawings she does “a bit of her heart.” What do you think she means by this? What do you have in your life that you would call a bit of your heart?

12. In Ms. Jardine’s class, Meixing, Kevin, and Josh spend a lot of time drawing picture books and comics. Why do you think Ms. Jardine encourages them to do this? What do they like about drawing?

13. When Meixing, Josh, and Kevin plant seeds in the glasshouse, it shows them scenes from their pasts. What do we learn about each of them from these scenes? Were you surprised to learn what they and their families had been through? Do you know anyone who has had to face challenges in order to immigrate to a new country? What would you do to welcome someone to your school or neighborhood?

14. Meixing’s mother changes when they move to the New Land. She is tense and sad and does not want to be close to Meixing. Why do you think the move to the New Land is so hard for Ma Ma? How does this make Meixing feel? Why can it be tough to talk about these kinds of feelings?

15. When she eats lunch with the other girls, Meixing doesn’t want to open her lunchbox because she “know[s] it’s not going to contain anything like the white-bread sandwiches the other girls are eating.” What would you say to Meixing if you were eating lunch with her? Have you ever felt this way? Why do you think it can be hard for people to accept things that are different from what they are used to?

16. Things constantly change in Meixing’s new house, Big Scary: rooms appear and disappear, for example, and the walls glow. How do those changes relate to what Meixing and her family are feeling? How does the house help Meixing cope with the challenges she faces in the New Land?

17. Meixing says, “When Big Scary is feeling sad, she shrinks. When she is happy, there is no limit to how big she can get. I have realized she is only a reflection of ourselves.” What does Meixing mean by this? How is the house a reflection of the people in it? How does your home reflect the people who live there?

18. When Ma Ma and Meixing go to the grocery store, they are confronted by a gang of boys who call them terrible names and tell them they should “go home.” How does this experience affect them? What are some other examples of racism that Meixing and her friends and family encounter in the book? Have you ever witnessed or heard about someone being treated poorly because of the color of their skin? What can you do to support racial equality in your community or classroom?

19. When Meixing finds the bag of groceries Mrs. Huynh leaves after the encounter with the gang, she says that her “heart is aching. But in the best way.” What does it mean for your heart to ache in the best way? Have you ever felt like this?

20. Ma Ma tells Meixing that her name means “beautiful star.” She tells Meixing, “To me, you will always shine the brightest in the dark.” What do you think she means by this? Can you find other examples in the novel of Meixing shining in the dark? Do you know anyone who shines the brightest in the dark?

21. Meixing watches a pink cocoon form on her window and is convinced that her father will emerge. When the butterfly emerges instead, Meixing realizes, “It is not your father. It is you.” What does she mean by this? In what ways has Meixing emerged from her own cocoon over the course of the story? Explain your answer by giving examples from the book.
22. Compare how Meixing feels about her new home at the beginning of the book to how she feels at the end. How have her feelings about the New Land changed? What has gotten easier for her? What or who has contributed to this change?
23. The novel is written in second person, where the narrator is referred to as “you.” Why do you think the author made this choice?

Extension Activities

1. An immigrant is a person who moves to a new country, like Meixing and her family do. Interview someone who has immigrated to a new land from their original home country. Write a list of questions to ask them, such as: Why did they decide to immigrate? What was the experience like for them? What did they find challenging? What do they like about their new home? What do they still miss about their old one? Did their family come with them, or are they still in their home country? If you aren’t able to interview someone, you can use the internet to read children’s immigration stories, such as <https://migrantchildstorytelling.org/the-stories/>.
2. Throughout *A Glasshouse of Stars*, the characters share food that’s important in their families and cultures. Meixing’s Ma Ma teaches her aunt to make a kind of small cake called *kueh*. Mrs. Huynh brings noodles, spring rolls, and rice dishes to Meixing’s family. Meixing’s friend Josh brings her olives from his mother. Ask an adult in your life about the food that is important to their family heritage. Perhaps they will teach you how to make one of those foods or tell you a good story about a memorable time they cooked or ate the dish. If you’d like, you could also find a recipe for *kueh* or spring rolls, like the characters in this book cook, and try making it yourself!
3. Ms. Jardine encourages Meixing, Kevin, and Josh to draw picture books and comics that tell the stories of their own lives and of the things they wish for. The hero in Josh’s story can read any book ever written. Draw your own picture book or comic that tells a story about your life or something you wish for. Think about what you’re revealing in the art as well as the text. For example, Meixing uses mostly blue for her picture book. What colors best express the emotions you want to express in your drawings?
4. Imagine you are Meixing at the end of the book. Write a letter to a girl who has just moved to the New Land, giving her advice about how to handle the challenges she will face. What should she do to help herself adjust to her new home and make friends? What else would you want her to know?
5. *A Glasshouse of Stars* is part of a genre of literature called *magical realism*. Create a poster explaining what magical realism means. What unique features do magical realism books have? What elements does it add to the story? What are some other examples of books or stories in this genre?

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