



Reading Group Guide

Finally Seen

by Kelly Yang

About the Book

Ten-year-old Lina Gao is ready to leave Beijing, China, to join her mom, dad, and little sister in the United States. Ready to shed her identity as the “left-behind girl,” Lina prepares for the American dream and a life that looks like *The Simpsons*, only more Asian. But when she arrives in Los Angeles, Lina finds that life isn’t as she imagined. Instead of a two-story house with a white fence, there is a cramped apartment on which her family owes six months of back rent accrued during the pandemic. Reality looks more like endless nights and weekends on a farm for her exhausted dad and a living room full of homemade bath bombs that her mom is trying to sell online. But they are *together* again and that’s what matters.

As Lina acclimates to a new home, school, and country, she works to learn English and excavate the complicated feelings she has buried in her heart for so long. As others remind her, in America she is free to say and write what she believes. But can Lina loosen the invisible threads that keep the hard-to-say feelings safe inside? It will take the power of books and the help of friends and allies for Lina to acknowledge her experiences and find her voice so she is finally seen.

Discussion Questions

1. Lina is only five years old when her parents and baby sister leave China. After waiting for years, Lina holds very strong, complicated emotions at the prospect of leaving China to join her family in the United States. Describe how Lina feels about her decision to move. How do her feelings change around different people, including Lao Lao, Millie, and her parents?
2. At an ice cream shop, Lina's mom tells her, "Sometimes you have to do the hard thing and remove yourself from a bad situation. Even if it means parting with what you want most." (Chapter eleven) How was this true in the ice cream shop? What else might she have been referring to? Can you think of a time in which you also had to walk away from something you desperately wanted?
3. For much of the story, Lina can't, or won't, tell others what she is really thinking. She says, "I imagine an invisible thread running along my mouth, my lips stitched like a sock." (Chapter one) What were the feelings that Lina couldn't express, and why? Consider what different reasons she might have had for not speaking up in front of different people, including her parents, Lao Lao, Finn, and her classmates.
4. An important source of worry and stress in the story revolves around the Gao family's need for a green card. A green card, or permanent resident card, allows non-U.S. citizens to legally live and work in the United States. Lina's parents do not seek out an immigration lawyer for assistance, choosing instead to rely on Pete for help. Mr. Gao says, "We just gotta wait, and

not rock the boat. Even a single misstep can get us denied.” (Chapter thirteen) What does he mean by “rock the boat”? How does the worry over a green card affect the Gaos’ daily lives?

5. Lina is humiliated when she struggles to read aloud in her class on the first day of school. She says, “Being ‘bad at English’ seems like the worst kind of apple you can be here.” (Chapter seventeen) What do you think she meant? How are non-English speakers or English language learners treated in the United States? Why?
6. Lina is introduced to the idea that books are mirrors or sliding glass doors, first from a school library banner and then by her teachers. This analogy was created by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, who explained that books can also be windows. What do you think it means to say that books are mirrors, sliding glass doors, or windows? Which books act as a mirror for Lina? A sliding glass door? A window? Extend this analogy to your own reading of *Finally Seen*. Was this book a mirror, window, or sliding glass door for you? How?
7. When Lina’s idea to freeze the bath bombs to speed up the process results in the loss of money, time, and resources, Lina feels awful. However, her dad encourages her, saying, “A mistake is progress you can’t see. Every time you make a mistake, you’re learning. You’re growing. And if you want to find a *new* path, you’ve got to be willing to make lots of mistakes.” (Chapter twenty-nine) Think back on your own experiences and try to reframe a past mistake as invisible progress. Describe the mistake and how you learned or grew from it.
8. The Gao family are first-generation immigrants, which means they are foreign-born but have permanently resettled in a new country. Lina’s mother tells her that being a first-generation immigrant means “your blood is made of iron will and determination. Your backbone is built from the sacrifices and impossible decisions of all those who walked before you.” (Chapter eleven) What do you think Lina’s mom means by this statement? What are some of the “sacrifices and impossible decisions” that are made by the Gaos, and more generally, by first-generation immigrants?

9. A critical perspective in this story is that of a language learner. The story tells how a language learner might feel or be treated in different contexts. How does Lina's level of English proficiency affect her life? Her relationships? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were unable to communicate well with the people around you?

10. Even though Millie has spent most of her life in the United States, Lina realizes that both she and Millie still carry the same worry after Pete tells them not to speak Chinese. They ask themselves, "Will I ever be American enough?" (Chapter forty-seven) What do they mean by this? What makes someone American enough? How can we challenge the idea that being American means you only look, act, or talk a certain way?

11. Mrs. Ortiz says, "As immigrants, we are burdened with a lot of guilt. For leaving our loved ones. Leaving our home. Sacrificing so much, or watching our parents sacrifice so much." (Chapter forty-nine) What does Lina feel guilty about? What about her parents? Why is it so meaningful for Lina to hear a reminder that there is an "i in guilt" and that her dreams matter?

12. As Lina considers why she and her family moved to the United States, she is able to confront some of the differences between China and the United States. What are the differences Lina describes between the two places? Why did Lina's parents decide to immigrate to the United States?

13. Lina decides to write a graphic novel for Lao Lao about her new life and experiences in the United States. After much consideration, Lina decides to tell the truth about the incident involving Jessica and the bathroom stall graffiti. Lina thinks, "There is freedom in truth. Yes, there is pain. But there is also joy." (Chapter fifty-eight) Do you agree with her? How can telling the truth about a painful memory bring joy?

14. After Lina joins her class in their reading of *Flea Shop*, she finds the class engaging in a debate about lived experiences versus interpretations. Her teacher, Mrs. Carter, explains, “Sometimes an experience that seems impossible to us is actually the lived experience of many other people.” (Chapter sixty-seven) Have you ever learned about someone else’s experience and felt it was unfamiliar to you? How did learning about someone who was different from you help you grow in empathy?
15. Lina’s teacher, Mrs. Carter, describes books as powerful tools in a toolbox for the future. What books were tools for Lina? How did they help prepare and equip her for the future? Consider your own reading. What books can you add to your own toolbox so that you are well-equipped for growing up?
16. Lina’s dad describes Pete as both a brilliant farmer and a terrible employer, saying, “He can be both. People are complicated.” (Chapter seventy-eight) What other characters showed different, or even conflicting, qualities? Do you think this made Pete, and others, harder or easier to like and/or understand?
17. The title of the book is *Finally Seen*. When does Lina feel finally seen? Who is she seen by? Another character who is revealed to others is Pete. How is he perceived by others throughout the story, and how is he finally seen by the Gaos?
18. What do you think it means to be truly “seen”? When have you felt seen by a family member, teacher, or friend? Or by a book? Explain what happened that made you feel seen by another person.

Extension Activities

Immigration Exploration

Finally Seen is first and foremost an immigration story. The narrative provides a glimpse into what the immigration experience may look like and how it might affect families and individuals. It is also a story uniquely about the United States, where immigration is wrapped up in notions of the American dream, generational progress, and mobility.

Continue this important exploration into immigration in the United States with your students. This can be done through literature circles or book studies, using immigration-themed picture books or novels, in conversations and discussions about current events, and through simple graphic organizers such as word clouds, webs, and KWL (Know, Wonder, Learned) charts. Another excellent resource for students and teachers is the organization Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance). Numerous resources, including lesson plans, video links, and activities, may be found at <https://www.learningforjustice.org/moment/supporting-students-immigrant-families>.

Create Your Own Graphic Novel

Lina is introduced to graphic novels by her language teacher, Mrs. Ortiz. For Lina, these books are mirrors, reflecting her own experiences, and windows, giving her glimpses into a new world. In addition, she finds the format of the books help her as a language learner. She thinks, “It’s like watching a movie in a book! Now when I get stuck on a word, the picture clues me in!”

Direct students to make their own graphic novels. This is best done as a unit that includes lessons on narrative writing, organization, dialogue, and adding both verbal and visual elements. Students can draw their own panels or use an online template. This multimodal activity may be particularly engaging and helpful for language learners.

Organize a Class Book Tasting

Mrs. Carter, Lina’s new teacher, holds a Book Tasting to kick off a new language arts unit. The Book Tasting is a literacy activity that allows students to “taste,” or sample, a variety of texts. Students can take notes on different “entrees,” or titles, listed on a menu to help them select a book to read. Set up a Book Tasting for your students to introduce them to new titles, genres, or authors, by fanning out small, curated selections of books at various tables and passing out menus that include titles and brief snippets about the storylines.

Book Tastings are meant to be a playful way to engage readers. Consequently, consider adding thematic elements such as tablecloths, place settings, flowers, and light background music. Encourage students to sit at a table and expand their (reading) palates by trying out a new book. They can also circle around the room to taste-test other menu items as well. Not only will students have fun learning about new authors, series, and genres, but they will also walk away with a more voracious appetite for reading.

Thematic Graphic Organizer: Grief

Another central theme in the novel is grief. Various characters deal with loss or separation, and Mr. Gao explains that “everyone grieves in their own way.” (Chapter sixty-two) Create a table with seven columns and five rows, with headings for Characters (including Lina, Lao Lao, Jane, Carla, Mrs. Munoz, and Pete), Reason for Grief, and How They Grieve. Have students fill out the graphic organizer and engage students in a class discussion to compare and contrast the characters’ actions.

	Lina	Lao Lao	Jane	Clara	Mrs. Munoz	Pete
Reason for Grief						
How they Grieve						
Compare						
Contrast						

Make Your Own Bath Bomb

Lina is surprised when she wakes up to find every inch of the family apartment covered with sparkling, crumbly bath bombs, buckets of Epsom salt, and tissue paper. Students can indulge their creative spirit by making their own bath bombs just like Lina and Millie. [Best for children aged six and older]

Materials needed:

- plastic molds (small cups or containers will also work)
- 1 cup baking soda
- ½ cup citric acid
- ½ cup cornstarch
- ½ cup Epsom salt
- 2 ½ tbsp coconut oil
- 2 tbsp water

Instructions:

1. In a large bowl, whisk together 1 cup of baking soda with a ½ cup each of the following: citric acid, cornstarch, and Epsom salt.
2. Mix 2 ½ tablespoons of coconut oil with 2 tablespoons of water.
3. Slowly add the liquid to the dry ingredients and gently whisk the mixture. It should look like wet sand.
4. (Optional: add food coloring or scents to the mixture at this point).
5. Firmly pack the mixture down into small molds or cups.
6. Use a spoon to gently tap the bath bomb out of the mold and let it dry on a plate overnight.
7. To use, just drop the bath bomb into a warm bath and enjoy the fizzing bubbles.

Researching Current Events: Pandemic Problems

As the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the world in 2020, cities, states, and entire countries went into lockdown. With government orders in place to stay at home, countless people found themselves unable to go to work. Major consequences included people's loss of income and the inability to pay housing costs. As Lina learned when she arrived at her family's apartment, this

crisis was partly addressed through eviction moratoriums, which legally prohibited landlords from evicting tenants due to nonpayment caused by the pandemic. But with time, many such moratoriums have expired, and people are finding themselves stuck in situations where they owe months of back rent. The Gaos and the other apartment tenants provide a glimpse into this housing and financial struggle.

Discuss these current events with students and encourage them to engage further through a research project on housing problems caused by the pandemic. Students can create an artifact that explains their learning, for example, a brochure, newspaper front page, or recorded video segment.

This guide was written by Dr. Joanne Yi, an adjunct assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at Indiana University.

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