

A Reading Group Guide to

New from Here

By Kelly Yang

About the Book

Ten-year-old Knox Wei-Evans doesn't want to move to California without his dad and dog, but his parents decide that leaving Hong Kong will keep him and his siblings safe from the new virus that is spreading like wildfire across China and Europe. Almost overnight, Knox, his mom, and his two siblings are living in a small house in San Francisco. At school, he feels the impact of being the new kid. In addition to worrying about his dad and learning he has ADHD, Knox experiences the hostility directed toward Asians and Asian Americans that is skyrocketing during the pandemic. Can Knox keep his family together during a pandemic *and* find the sense of belonging in his new country?

Discussion Questions

1. The first line of *New from Here* by Kelly Yang reads: *My name is Knox and sometimes I just blurt words out.* Knox has ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), a common condition including attention difficulty, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. When he hears his mother tell the school assistant that he has ADHD, Knox is shocked. How does the knowledge of his condition help him to better understand himself? How does learning that Christopher also has ADHD help Knox feel less alone? Knox's father suggests that Knox think of his ADHD as a "superpower." How does his condition work in positive ways?
2. At the start of the story, cases of the coronavirus have begun to appear in Hong Kong, and Knox, his siblings, and his mother prepare to relocate temporarily to San Francisco, in an attempt to escape the virus. The family lived through the SARS epidemic and they are afraid that this new virus could be worse. Discuss specific examples of how fear is one of the story's dominant themes. When the family arrives in the US, their Uber driver makes the family get out of the car because he assumes, as Asians, they could be infected with the virus. How is this a fear-based example of discrimination? Discuss other examples of how fear drives people's decisions. When Knox notices a homeless woman pushing a shopping cart, he asks Bowen, "You think that's ever going to happen to us? If Mom doesn't get a job . . ." Afterward he compares the thought to a "big and terrifying boa constrictor." How is this simile a powerful one to describe Knox's fear, given his mother's struggle with finding work?
3. Describe the siblings' relationship in the book. How are their tensions and bonds common among siblings? How does each sibling cope with the pandemic and the experience of being "the new kid"? Why do you think that no one invited Lea to play while she was sitting on the friendship bench at school? Why is Knox so thrilled when Ms. Turner gives him a Trader Joe's bag of valentines? How do you think Bowen was feeling when he saw the bag after school that day? Bowen confesses to Knox that he misses "not being the only Asian kid" in his class. In what ways were the siblings there for each other? Identify and discuss a scene in the book where you wished they'd said something to one another to help ease the pain? Why do you think it's so difficult sometimes for siblings to say they're thinking of each other?
4. Almost immediately after Knox, his siblings, and their mom leave Hong Kong for the United States, they confront the anti-Asian discrimination and racism that would quickly grow and spread alongside the virus. How did you feel as the family approached the customs agent at the airport? How did you feel after they were allowed entry into the country? Discuss why Bowen wonders if the family should tell people they are from Asia, and his mother's response: *If you want, you can tell them you're new from here. I mean we sort of are.* Do you think this was an appropriate thing for her to say? Why might she worry about her children just saying they come from Hong Kong? Some of the kids at Knox's school have created a game called coronavirus tag, and they make Knox and Christopher be "it" because they are Asian. How is this game basically comparing

the boys to a disease? If you could, what would you say to those kids if you saw this happening during recess? Discuss some of the most extreme examples of anti-Asian hate that appear in the story. Also, discuss some of the examples that reflect the best in people who stand up for those being targeted because of their race. After the scene in the grocery store, Knox is left with the feeling that they are “not alone.” In your own words, describe what you think Knox is feeling. What does Knox’s mother mean by: *You know what the vaccine for racism is? Love.*

5. Above all else, *New from Here* is the story of a family that loves and supports one another even when faced with serious challenges: discrimination, separation, loss, and financial, food, and health insecurity. Even though Bowen is tough on Knox at times, Knox does small acts of kindness for his big brother. Discuss ways in which Knox is there for Bowen. Discuss ways the family bonds. How did your family bond during the pandemic? Discuss examples from the story that illustrate Bowen’s reply to Knox: “Family beats virus, any day.”

6. Knox has never been great at making friends, and as he begins his new school in America, he hopes that he can make at least one. Discuss how Knox and Christopher bond after the coronavirus tag game. Knox worries that Christopher won’t want to be his friend once he learns that Knox came from Hong Kong. “Instead, he walks over, takes a seat, and squeezes my green apple squishy toy. His eyes smile back at me.” If Christopher’s eyes could talk, what do you think they would say to Knox? How does the knowledge that Knox and Christopher both have ADHD further bond their friendship? Discuss examples from the story that illustrate how these two friends truly care for and support each other.

7. What is an *assumption*? [An assumption is a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen without proof – source: Oxford Languages.] People make all kinds of assumptions about Asians and Asian Americans in the story, most of them ethnicity-based. Discuss an assumption that you can recall from the book that felt particularly unfair or mean. In chapter 13, Knox and his mom discover some family photographs from the period of the 1918 flu pandemic. Knox points out that it killed 50 million people, to which his mother replies, “It’s okay. This time it’s different. We’ve evolved. We learned. And now we take these things very, very seriously. You’ll see, this virus is going to be over superfast.” How is this statement an example of an assumption? Why do you think that early in the pandemic so many people assumed that the virus wouldn’t affect the United States as much as it did Asian and European countries? Why does Bowen assume that the homeless lady will want all the money if offered only a part of it in chapter 49? Why are so many people in the book willing to assume that Asians or Asian Americans either caused or have COVID-19? Imagine if you were targeted and blamed for being the cause of an infectious disease that has caused millions of deaths. How do you think it would affect your life and sense of well-being? How can assumptions be dangerous?

8. Knox worries about a lot of things, and for good reason: he is starting a new school, his family has just moved to the United States at the start of a pandemic, his father and dog are back in Hong Kong and he doesn’t know when or if they will be reunited, his mother has lost her job and is having a difficult time finding a new one, and Bowen seems to hate him. As the cases of COVID-19 rise across the world, so does Knox’s anxiety. How does his mom withholding information from Knox and his siblings make him more tense? What aspects of Knox’s experience relate to your own worries over the pandemic and the future?

9. There are many examples in the story of people behaving in horrible, ugly ways as the pandemic begins to take root: from the Taradippin brothers taking advantage of a desperate situation for profit to people selfishly overbuying items like toilet paper, to implicit and explicit hostility against Asian Americans and other people of color. But the opposite is also evident in the story. Discuss examples of how Knox and his siblings bring kindness and generosity into the community, despite experiencing discrimination and scapegoating. What does Knox mean when he realizes: “If we’ve learned one thing this year, it’s that we’re all connected to each other. We all breathe the same air into our lungs. None of us is immune to each other’s problems” (chapter 92)?

10. All three siblings demonstrate empathy, kindness, and compassion to their parents, their friends, their neighbors, and to each other. Discuss examples of how Knox, Bowen, and Lea show their capacity for caring.

How does Knox’s reaction to the hateful man in the dog park show empathy for his brother’s pain? Reread chapter 31. How do the siblings show compassion and kindness for their lonely neighbor, Mr. Brady? Share examples of compassion, kindness, and empathy that you have given or experienced during the pandemic.

11. Throughout the book, you probably made connections to Knox, Bowen, and Lea as children who are living through a pandemic. How does the decision to move to San Francisco without Dad bring about unforeseen changes to the Evans family? In chapter 68, Knox and his classmates help Mrs. Turner move the classroom desks to create social distancing, losing areas of the room that Knox loved, such as the Calm Down corner. How is this scene symbolic of the changes you’ve had to make at home and at school? Discuss how the characters’ experiences, such as online school and practicing protocols (such as maskwearing, hand sanitizing, and social distancing), as well as the many changes they had to make in their daily lives, compare to what you experienced and may still be experiencing during this time. How has the pandemic affected your family, friendships, and daily lives?

12. Discuss what health insurance is and why it is so important to have. In chapter 17, after the IKEA shelving unit arrives, Lea nearly drops one of the heavy wood shelves on her foot, to which Mom exclaims, “Careful! We don’t have any health insurance here yet!” Why is Mom so worried that the children might need to see a doctor or go to a hospital? For the many people who lost their jobs during the pandemic, the stress of worrying about buying food, paying rent and bills, and covering the cost of health care (especially for people without insurance) created stress and anxiety. Discuss how the financial insecurity the family experiences affects their daily lives and relationships.

13. Knox displays remarkable fortitude over the course of the story. Discuss examples of how Knox demonstrates “consistent courage.” Share examples of how you have had to be brave during the pandemic.

Suggestions for Classroom Activities

1. **1918 Flu to COVID-19.** In 1918, the world was seized by a pandemic caused by a virus that became known as the Great Influenza epidemic or the 1918 Influenza pandemic. In late 2019, the world first began to hear of a novel (new) virus that originated in China and began to rapidly spread across the world. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Guide students in learning about the 1918 pandemic that killed an estimated fifty million people, and how it compares to the current pandemic. Encourage students to focus their research on the similarities and differences between the two outbreaks, particularly around public health and discrimination, and what lessons we have applied and also ignored.

2. **Poetry of a Pandemic.** Perhaps no people have been more affected by the changes brought about by the pandemic than children. Millions of children stopped going to in-person school because of lockdowns. Students without access to computer technology didn’t go to school at all. After the Wei-Evans family moves to San Francisco, the kids have to continue going to school online before starting in-person school. Knox is supposed to write a haiku, but is confused on how to proceed and writes this instead:

I want to learn,

From a human, not a box.

Because a human cares,

And a box stares.

Begin a series of brainstorming sessions encouraging students to share their personal experiences with online school and/or in-person school during the pandemic. As a culminating activity, guide students to write haikus or quatrain poems about their experiences.

3. **Survivors.** Knox’s mom’s favorite song is *Survivor* by Destiny’s Child. Lea asks her mother why she likes the song so much, to which she replies, “‘Because it’s all about the ups and downs of life. And how there are challenges, but if you work hard, you can survive anything!’” Place students into pairs or small groups. Have students select a popular song to which they will write original lyrics about facing life’s challenges head-on. Give each group an opportunity to perform the song for the class.

4. **A Note to Future Me.** In chapter 27, Knox describes how Christopher has a habit of writing things down on Post-its: “I got the idea of writing notes to myself from Christopher. . .It’s kind of cool. Like Old Me talking to Future Me.” Give each student five Post-it notes. After reading *New from Here*, have each student write down one thing they learned from the story; something that they want to remember in the future. (Students should write only one item per note). Have students place all their notes onto a sheet of paper, fold it, and mail it to themselves in a self-addressed stamped envelope. Encourage students to put the notes in a safe place for future reference.

5. **ICEE in Action.** After the ugly scene at the track where Bowen is scapegoated for his coach’s cough, Knox googles *How to respond to racist comments*. What he discovers is the acronym ICEE: interrupt, correct, educate, echo. Reread chapter 37. Discuss the components of this strategy. Place students in pairs or groups of three. Give each group time to write a short script based on some of the scenes in *New from Here* that involve racism, discrimination, or scapegoating, or students can create original scenarios. Direct students to incorporate ICEE into their scripts. Give each group an opportunity to perform their piece for the class.

6. **Your Message to the Future.** The lessons from those who lived through the 1918 pandemic have informed how people today are navigating life with the COVID-19 pandemic. Reading first-person accounts of people who experienced the last great pandemic can be comforting to those living through similar circumstances today. Imagine the world in one hundred years. A child your age discovers a buried time capsule. Inside the time capsule the child discovers a bound book, a journal written by a student living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Imagine you are the writer of that journal. Create a series of reflections about how you have coped during this difficult and frightening time. Share your thoughts, fears, and advice for those who will endure the next great pandemic.

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