**Front Desk Study Guide**

**Front Desk by Kelly Yang**

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**Plot Summary**

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Yang, Kelly. Front Desk. Arthur A. Levine Books, June 25, 2019.

In the young adult novel Front Desk by Kelly Yang, ten-year-old Chinese immigrant Mia Tang did not understand when her mother told her they moved to America because it was “freer” (4). Mia only saw how expensive things were and the poverty of her own family. As Mia experienced example after example of the way immigrants and Blacks were mistreated, she decided it was time for all of them to work together.

When Mia’s parents were hired to work as managers of a motel in California, they believed they had finally found a job that would put them on the road to success. They soon realized their tightfisted boss, Michael Yao, was just as unfair as their previous bosses. Yao made them pay for the broken washing machine. He also docked their wages when a weekly customer lost his job and could not pay.

During this turmoil, Mia was shocked when a guest’s car was stolen and Hank Caleb, a Black man who had lived at the motel for six months was fingered by Yao and the police as the main suspect. Yao told Mia that all Blacks were bad. When Hank’s employer learned that Hank was a suspect in the theft, Hank was fired from his job. Hank later told Mia that all Blacks experienced that sort of unjust treatment at some point in their lives. Mia could not understand why Hank was not more upset about what had happened.

Later, it was discovered that the owner of the car had staged the theft to get money from insurance. The officer who had questioned Hank as a suspect apologized to Hank when Mia insisted. Hank told the officer he had lost his job. He asked the officer to think the next time he was suspicious of a man just because he was Black. Mia’s parents told her that apology was why they had moved to America. Even though Hank was accused of a crime, the police did not have the power to put him in jail with no evidence. They explained there was a time in China that people were arrested and taken away with no proof. They moved to America because they did not want Mia to experience that sort of injustice.

Mia also saw the way immigrants were treated unjustly and preyed upon by loan sharks and unfair bosses. One immigrant who stayed at their motel said his boss had taken his identification and passport. He was forced to work 18 hours a day and sleep in his boss’ basement. He said he felt like a slave. Another had been beaten by loan sharks when he was unable to repay the money he had borrowed when he lost his job. When Mia learned about an elderly couple in Vermont looking to give their motel away to the winner of an essay contest, she believed that was her family’s way out of their situation.

Unfortunately, Mia did not win the contest. Things got even worse when Yao announced he was selling the motel where Mia’s parents were working. Mia set her sights on raising the $300,000 needed to purchase the motel. She contacted local business managers, immigrants who had recently visited the motel, the weekly residents of the motel, and the other people who had entered the essay contest. All of them invested in the motel. Even though Yao tried to trick Mia and her family into thinking he had another buyer willing to pay more for the hotel, he eventually agreed to sell to them.

**Chapters 1 - 8**

**Summary**

In Chapter 1, Mia Tang’s parents told her that in America they could live in a house, have a dog, and eat hamburgers. She and her parents did eat a hamburger at the Houston Space Center when they visited to enjoy the free air-conditioning while they were living in their car. The hamburger was so expensive they could afford only one.

Mia and her family moved into a one-bedroom apartment when her parents were hired to work in a Chinese restaurant. The boss offered Mia a job as a waitress even though Mia was only nine. Both she and her mother, Ying, were fired when Mia dropped meals because she was unable to carry more than one dish at a time.

Mia thought of her cousins back home. Because families were only allowed to have one child in China, she and her cousins were like siblings. Leaving them was the hardest part of leaving China. Mia asked her mother why they moved to America. Her mother told her it was because it was “freer” (4). Mia did not understand because everything was so expensive.

Mia’s parents believed they had found an opportunity for success when they interviewed for a position as hotel managers. During the interview, Michael Yao, the owner, introduced his son, Jason. Ying commented on Jason’s good English. Yao noted Jason was born in America. Michael told Mia’s parents that as managers, they would live at the hotel for free and would make five dollars per customer, $150 a day if they rented all of the rooms.

In Chapter 2, inside the Calivista Motel, Yao showed Mia’s family the living quarters behind the front desk. Mia’s parents were to sleep in the living room so they could hear if a customer came in the middle of the night. He warned them not to let any bad people into the office and showed them how to unlock the door from the button at the desk. When Mia asked, Yao explained they should be able to tell by looking at a person if he was bad.

Mia stayed in the office while her parents were given a tour. An African American man stopped by the office and introduced himself as Hank. He explained he rented a room there by the week. He said he liked living there, but he added that Yao was “anything but all right” (11).

In Chapter 3, Yao informed Mia’s parents it was their responsibility to pay for repairs to anything that got broken. He also said they could never leave the hotel unattended. Mia was most disturbed when Yao told her that she was not allowed to use the pool.

That night, Mia’s parents brewed the jasmine tea they kept for celebrations. Mia took Hank a cup. He shared it with the other weeklies and commented that the previous manager had treated them badly. When Mia asked what Hank had meant about Yao, he said Yao had “coal for a heart” (16).

In Chapter 4, the next day Mia and her mother went to tour Mia’s new school, Dale Elementary School. The White principal started to speak slowly and loudly when Ying told her they had just moved from China. Mia answered her in quick English.

In Chapter 5, because Mia’s father needed help cleaning the rooms, Mia insisted she could cover the front desk. Mia promised herself she would not fail as she had as a waitress. Mia put out a sign that read “Mia Tang, Manager” that she pointed to when people saw she was a child and asked for the manager. When Mr. Stein from Room 6 asked for a 5 a.m. wake up call, Mia read the manual for the phone and figured how to program the call.

In Chapter 6, in the morning, Mrs. Clifton from Room 5 received a wake-up call at 6 a.m. Mia ran to Mr. Stein’s room to discover the wake-up calls had been mixed up. Mia’s parents had to give refunds to both Mrs. Clifton and Mr. Stein. Mia compared the disappointment she felt to the time when her teacher had announced Mia had gotten the highest score in the class on a spelling quiz. The teacher had just given Mia her reward when she realized the mistake she made and took the reward back.

Later, Mia and Jason sat in the front office while Yao talked to her parents. They heard Ying say that Yao never told them they did not get paid for the first ten customers or the weeklies. Jason claimed he had heard his father say that, but Mia argued he had not. Yao told them if they wanted to quit, there were more immigrants who would be happy to take their jobs.

In Chapter 7, Yao was angry again when Mia discovered that one of their customers had failed to return his key. Yao criticized them for not charging a deposit for the key and instructed them to use the key machine to make a new key. Even though Ying told Mia not to try to make the key, Mia figured out how to file down the blank and make a key.

Mia gave the key to the next customer who came in. He was already angry because the key did not work and then even angrier when he saw the room was small. Mia pacified him with the promise of a free soda, but he became mad again when he found what looked like a piece of dental floss in the trash can. He insisted on a new, bigger room. Angry, Mia informed him all their rooms were the same size, but he wanted to look for himself. He demanded a refund when she refused.

The man relented when he realized Mia was only a child. He asked her why she was not out playing. Mia wondered why Americans were so obsessed with children playing. Children in China did not play. Mia informed him that she liked her job. He replied that room would be fine if he could have some extra pillows.

In Chapter 8, Mia was impressed the following morning when the man who asked for extra pillows wrote on a feedback card that the hotel had helpful staff.

That day was Mia’s first day of school. She was excited to tell her peers she was running a motel. That excitement faded when Jason walked into the room. At recess, Jason ordered Mia to pretend that they did not know each other. Guadalupe “Lupe” Garcia, a girl from Mia’s class, asked if Jason was bothering her. Lupe claimed she lived in a house with a trampoline and pet dogs. Mia claimed she had a pool. She did not mention she could not use it.

Later, on her way to the library, Mia happened upon two older boys bullying Jason. Mia yelled at them to stop. When a teacher heard the commotion, the older boys left. Mia wanted to ask if Jason was okay, but she did not because of the way his father had treated her family.

**Analysis**

Mia Tang, an intelligent and hard-working ten-year-old Chinese girl who has just immigrated to America with her parents, defines the main theme of the novel Front Desk when she asks her mother why they decided to move to America. Even though Mia had been promised a house, a dog, and nice vacations, so far all she has experienced in America is extreme poverty and unfair conditions. Ying, Mia’s mother, tells Mia that America is “freer” (4). Mia misunderstands her mother’s explanation as a measure of how much things cost: “Nothing was free in America. Everything was so expensive” (4). So far, Mia and her family have spent some time living in their car. Hamburgers are so expensive they are only able to buy one and split it between the three of them. They were able to move into a one-bedroom apartment when Mia’s parents’ got jobs in a Chinese restaurant. The owner of the restaurant was unfair when he gave Mia a job as a waitress when she was only nine. Mia tried, but when she dropped plates because she tried to carry more than one at a time like all the other waitresses did, he fired Mia and her mother. Even though Mia’s parents believe they finally have a chance for success as managers of a hotel, Hank tells Mia that Yao has coal for a heart. She does not fully understand how terrible Yao is until he changes the terms of the employment agreement in his favor. Mia’s parents had understood they would receive five dollars from every customer. Yao lies a day later and tells them they do not get money from the weekly residents or the first ten customers.

Yao identifies himself as a racist when he tells Mia that she should be able to recognize a bad person by the way he looked. Yao warns Mia’s parents that it is their responsibility to not rent a room to any bad people. He also tells them to be careful what sort of people they let into the front office. Mia asks the obvious question about how they are supposed to be able to tell if a person is bad or not. Mia relates Yao's response and her thoughts about his logic: "‘Based on how they look, of course,’ he said, which made me wonder, because it’s not like bad people walked around with a sticker on their heads saying I’m bad” (10). Mia does not understand what characteristics Yao believes makes a person look bad. Since Yao judges people based on outward appearance, it appears that he is a racist.

The pool at the motel is a symbol of privilege. Among Yao’s requirements for Mia and her parents to serve as managers for his hotel is his rule that Mia is not allowed to use the pool. He explains: “If you use the pool, then all the customers will want to use the pool … think of all the water and towels they’ll be wasting … It’s not good for the environment” (13). Mia did not think that Yao was all that concerned about the environment, but she agreed to comply with his rule. Hamburgers are symbols of success. Mia’s parents told her that when they were in America they would be able to eat hamburgers regularly. Mia notes they have eaten only one hamburger. That one was so expensive that she and her parents had to share it.

The jasmine tea that Mia’s parents make is a symbol of celebration, while the cup of tea that Mia takes to Hank is a symbol of kindness. When Mia’s parents are hired as managers of the Calivista Motel, they believed they had finally gotten the break they needed to be successful in America. To celebrate their success, they brew tea from some of the jasmine leaves that they brought with them from China. Mia shares a cup of this tea with Hank, who lets the other weeklies at the motel have a taste as well. The cup of tea symbolizes kindness, a personality trait that is demonstrated to be much more valuable for Mia than wealth. Hank explains to Mia that the previous manager treated the weeklies “like second-class citizens” (15). The reader learns later that Yao refuses to pay Mia’s parents the five dollars they are owed from the weekly residents of the hotel. This suggests that the previous manager might have been hateful to the weeklies because he wanted the weeklies out so he could rent those rooms to people who would earn him money.

Mia notes a few differences between the cultures in China and America in this first section of chapters. One of the first differences is that families in China are allowed to have only one child. The freedom to have as many children as a family wants is one of the freedoms to which Ying was referring when she told Mia that they moved to America because it was “freer” (4). As a child, Mia sees only the expense associated with living in America and their poverty. Mia believes that everything in America is dependent on money. For instance, she can calm a man who is angry about the size of his room only by offering him a free soda. She wonders to herself: “As I walked back to the front desk, I shook my head. Why was it that everything in America had to do with money?” (33). Mia also does not understand when Yao criticizes her for not charging a deposit on the room keys. She does not try to explain to Yao, but she thinks to herself: “For the record, I didn’t charge a deposit on the keys because, well, who charges a deposit on keys? Deposits were for renting bikes and cars. Why would anyone want to steal a key?” (31). Even as a nine-year-old, Mia sees that requiring a deposit for an object as simple and inexpensive as a key does not make sense.

Yang uses examples in her novel to help young readers understand Mia’s emotions in situations they might not have experienced, such as the instance in which Mia has to give refunds for two rooms. Since middle school readers will not have been in Mia’s situation of working and having to give refunds, Yang describes an incident at school that made Mia feels the same way. Mia tells how the teacher told her she had made the highest grade on the spelling quiz. Just after Mia had been given her reward for her accomplishment, the teacher realized she had made a mistake and took that reward away. This set of circumstances is one a young reader can relate to and transfer to the situation in which Mia had to give back the money for which she had worked hard to earn.

**Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Mia’s inability to understand her mother’s reasoning for the family coming to America. How does Mia translate the word “free”? What was her mother’s intention when she said that America was “freer” (4) than China?

**Discussion Question 2**

Consider Yao’s warning to Mia’s parents that if they do not want to accept his changes in payment terms, there are more immigrants waiting in line to take the job. What does this say about Yao’s attitude toward immigrants? What does this say about equal treatment for immigrants?

**Discussion Question 3**

Discuss Mia’s personality. What characteristics define her?

**Vocabulary**

module, native, hierarchy, revision, literally, concurred

**Chapters 9 - 19**

**Summary**

In Chapter 9, while Mia was at school, the washing machine at the motel broke down. Yao accused Mia’s father of breaking the machine and said Mia’s parents would have to pay for the new machine. Because it would take a few days for a replacement machine to come, Mia’s parents had to wash towels by hand.

When Mia visited Hank to request he and the weeklies limit their towel use, he shared a hamburger with her. Mia was surprised how good the burgers tasted because Hank and the weeklies were adding crushed up saltines to the patties because they did not have enough meat.

Even though the weeklies used only one towel a day, the dirty towels still stacked up. Mia’s father washed the towels in buckets, but Mia had a better idea. She put the towels in the bathtub in an empty motel room along with water and detergent. She and her parents had fun washing the towels by jumping and stomping on them with their bare feet.

In Chapter 10, Uncle Ming, who was not Mia’s biological uncle, came to visit them. He had a black eye and bruises on his face and neck. Mia overheard Ming saying he owed loan sharks $5,000. He borrowed money from them because he had lost his job. The loan sharks threatened to kill him if he did not pay what he owed. Later, Hank told Mia that loan sharks loaned people money at very high interest rates. They generally loaned to people like Ming, who were in positions in which they were desperate for money.

In Chapter 11, in school that week, Mia’s teacher asked the students to write a short story. Mia wanted to write about loan sharks. Instead, she wrote about houses and puppies. At lunch, Lupe said she wrote about how sad she was when she and her parents stood in line to see a movie. When they arrived at the window, the tickets were sold out. Mia wished that was one of the saddest moments of her life. At recess, both Mia and Lupe stood way out in left field while the rest of the students played softball. Mia’s parents told her to stay there so she would not get hurt because they did not have medical insurance.

In Chapter 12, Mia realized too late she should not have buzzed in the disheveled-looking White man when she smelled alcohol on his breath. He demanded that she give him a room. She told him she needed to get her parents, but she realized that if she left him alone in the office, he could steal their money. When she asked the man to wait outside, he grabbed her by the shirt and screamed in her face. Mia saw Hank running across the parking lot. When Mia buzzed Hank in, Hank made the man leave. The experience made Mia realize the dangers of working on the front desk.

In Chapter 13, Mia did not wash that shirt as a reminder of what could happen if she buzzed the wrong person into the office. She made a list of things that could be done to make the motel safer, like installing security cameras, but Yao refused to take any of her suggestions because they were expensive. After Yao left the room, Jason told Mia he thought the idea of getting a security camera was a good idea. Mia knew he had not said anything to his father because he was too afraid to stand up to his father.

In Chapter 14, the next day at school, Lupe asked Mia what was wrong, but Mia did not feel like Lupe would understand because her life was so perfect. Mia told Lupe she needed to be alone. She went into the auditorium and sat down at the piano there. She had taken lessons in China and was carried away as she played. As she thought about all of the unfair things she had experienced, she began crying. She stopped suddenly when she heard someone in the room with her. It was Jason. He was surprised Mia had learned to play piano in China because his father told him there was nothing there except piles of trash.

In Chapter 15, Mia insisted on continuing to watch the front desk even though her parents wanted her to stop because it was dangerous. Mia complained it was unfair that they could not insist their boss make their jobs safe. Her mother told her that because they were immigrants, they would always suffer unfair situations.

In Chapter 16, Mia and her father took the soda cans from the hotel to the recycling center. They exchanged the money they received for pennies. They were looking for a particularly valuable copper alloy penny that had been made by mistake. There were only 40 of them made. They were worth at least $40,000. Mia asked why the mistakes were worth more. Her father explained that a mistake sometimes turned into an opportunity. He admitted he thought that coming to America was going to be very different. He said he would still have come, even if he had known how things would turn out because he believed it was best for Mia.

In Chapter 17, when Mia and her father returned to the motel, the cable television was out. When José, the repairman, arrived, Mia was surprised to see Lupe with him. Mia confessed to Lupe that she did not really have a dog. Lupe said that she did not either. Lupe told Mia that her father had been working for Yao for years. He was as terrible to them as he was to Mia and her family. They discussed the way rich people were often hateful to people like them. Mia believed it was because they were poor, but Lupe said it was because their skin was brown.

In Chapter 18, Mia declared they would not become hateful when they were rich. Lupe said they would have to get off the “roller coaster” (81) first. She said that her father told her there was a poor roller coaster and a rich roller coaster. The rich people sent their children to good schools so they could get good jobs and get rich. The poor people, however, could not send their children to good schools so they could not get good jobs.

In Chapter 19, Mia calculated that she and her parents made $12,000 for Yao in the last month based on room rentals. Their portion of that was $750. When Mia researched hotels in the school library, the librarian said some motels sold for as much as a million dollars. The librarian also mentioned to Mia that an elderly couple in Vermont was holding an essay contest to give away their motel. Even though the entry fee was $300, Mia believed that might be her ticket onto the rich roller coaster.

**Analysis**

Yang introduces the idea of societal racism with Lupe’s description of the rich roller coaster and the poor roller coaster. Lupe shares with Mia her father’s interpretation of the reasons why poor people stay poor, and rich people stay rich: “On the rich roller coaster, people have money, so their kids get to go to great schools. Then they grow up and make a lot of money, so their kids get to go to great schools” (82). Lupe explained that the conditions are opposite for poor families. Because poor families did not have money, their children did not get to go to the best schools and get the best job opportunities. Mia reasoned that Jason’s family was rich, but he was attending the same grade school as Mia and Lupe, a seeming contradiction to Lupe’s roller coaster analogy. Lupe replied that Jason was at their school “For now … But just wait. Come high school, he’s going to go to a private school—for sure” (82).

The girls had been discussing the way financially successful people, like Yao, treated people like them so badly. After Mia was attacked by the drunk man, she is upset that Yao will not even invest in a security camera or protective glass in the front office. Mia believes she and others like her are treated badly because they are poor. Lupe points out it is not necessarily just poverty, it was also “‘because we’re brown,’ she (Lupe) said quietly. I looked down at our two arms, mine golden like the desert sand, and hers warm like cinnamon” (81). Lupe and Mia make a promise to one another to find some way to get off the poor roller coaster and onto the rich one.

The willingness to help shown by Hank and the other weeklies demonstrates the value of kindness. Hank and the weeklies agree to help while the washing machine is broken by using only one towel a day. Additionally, Hank comes to Mia’s rescue when she is attacked by the drunk man. Remember that Hank had commented when Mia brought him a cup of tea that the previous managers had all treated the weeklies badly. Mia’s kindness pays off because the weeklies are willing to help out when the clothes washer breaks. They sympathize with Mia and her parents because Yao is making them pay for the new machine. Hank hears Mia’s scream and runs for the office when he sees the drunk man holding Mia by the shirt.

The hotel in Vermont represents hope. Mia considers how much it might cost to buy a motel that her parents could run on their own terms. The librarian mentions an essay contest an elderly couple in Vermont is holding to give away their hotel. Mia believes that she has a shot winning the contest based on the topic for the essay: “What would you do if you owned a motel?” (86). Mia is worried about how to get together the $300 needed for the entry fee, but she thinks that it might be her family’s chance to get off the poor roller coaster.

Hank’s hamburgers are symbols of poverty in contrast to the hamburgers that Mia and her family dreamed of and the one they shared at the space center. The hamburgers that Hank is making for himself and the other weeklies are not made with pure hamburger meat. Mia describes: “They didn’t have enough ground beef, so Hank was taking a bunch of saltines and mushing them up. Then he added the ground-up cracker crumbs to his ground beef” (46). Mia notes that these lower-cost burgers taste just as good as the real thing.

Mia’s shirt is a symbol of danger. Mia had not taken seriously the danger associated with her job. She had not been paying attention and had allowed a drunk man into the front office. Mia tried to handle the situation by herself, but was unable to reason with the man because he was so inebriated. After Hank has run the man away by threatening to call the police, Mia thinks “I thought I could make the front desk better with all my spare keys and comments cards. But no card in the world could protect me from what I’d been avoiding since day one: One wrong buzz and it was all over. / This was not just fun and games” (59). Mia does not wash the shirt she was wearing after she was attacked so that she will remember the danger associated with what she is doing.

Yang incorporates the idea that loan sharks are a danger to poor people, particularly those who are desperate, as part of the societal influences that keeps poor people poor. Without Yao’s knowledge, Mia’s parents are providing motel rooms at no cost to immigrants who need a place to stay. A man who Mia calls Uncle Ming comes to request a room. Ming is not Mia’s biological uncle, calling an adult male “uncle” is a sign of respect. Ming has bruises on his face and neck. He tells Mia’s father that he borrowed money from loan sharks when he lost his job. Hank later tells Mia that loan sharks prey on “Desperate people … People who can’t get loans anywhere else” (51). They charge huge amounts of interest that the people can never hope to pay back. In Ming’s case, he owes $5,000. He says that the loan sharks are threatening to kill him if he does not repay them.

Mia and her parents’ washing towels in the tub is an example of comic relief. When Mia and her father are not able to wash towels quickly enough in the buckets, Mia gets the idea to put them in a bathtub. When Ying hears her husband and daughter splashing and laughing in one of the hotel rooms, she joins them. Mia narrates: “My mom started rolling up her pants. That afternoon, my parents and I hopped and hopped and hopped, laughing so hard, we soon forgot we were washing towels” (48). Even though she and her parents are having to wash towels by hand and having to buy a washing machine they did not break, they demonstrate they are not willing to let injustice break their spirit.

**Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the poor roller coaster/rich roller coaster that Lupe describes to Mia. Does her reasoning make sense? Why or why not?

**Discussion Question 2**

Consider the danger that Mia faces as she works the front desk at the motel. Why does Yao not want to invest in the office to make it more safe? What does this say to Mia about her worth?

**Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the things that Mia does to help her parents with their towel issues when the washing machine breaks down. What does Mia’s determination and inventiveness say about her?

**Vocabulary**

usage, reminisced, keen, disheveled, rancid, infuriated, animated, alloy, criteria, meticulous, reprimand

**Chapters 20 - 31**

**Summary**

In Chapter 20, Mia wanted to tell her mother about the essay contest, but Ying wanted Mia to concentrate on math. Math was a subject in which Ying believed Mia could excel. When Mia told Ying she wanted to write, her mother argued Mia would never be good at English because she was not native, that English was the White people’s language. Mia was determined to show Ying she was wrong by winning the essay contest.

Later, Mia was surprised when Yao brought Jason to the hotel to teach him how to check-in customers. Mia noted that Jason did not have good customer relations skills. He also was not good at math. After Jason checked in the first customer, his father told him he was a disgrace, especially since he had to use his fingers to calculate the math. Mia tried to defend Jason and reminded Yao it was his first attempt.

In Chapter 21, Mia and her parents were awakened early when Mr. Lorenz pounded on the office door because his neon-green Ford Thunderbird had been stolen. Mia’s father called Yao who called the police. Five customers had checked out in the middle of the night, one of whom, Mrs. Robinson, was Black. Yao reminded Mia was not supposed to rent to bad people. He told her Blacks were bad people. Mia’s father, Tang, reminded Yao that they were in America. They were not supposed to judge a person by the color of his skin. Yao told Tang he did not know how America worked.

When the police officers arrived, they interviewed all of the weekly customers. They let the White ones go back to their rooms, but they asked Hank to stay with them. Mia tried to defend Hank. She saw frustration and anger in Hank’s eyes as he said he did not steal the car. The police finally left because they did not have enough evidence to arrest Hank. Mia went to talk to Hank afterward. She asked why he was not more upset. He said he was used to it because things like that happened to him all the time.

In Chapter 22, the next day at school, Mia was still nauseated because of what had happened. Jason asked to meet her in the auditorium at recess. When she arrived, he was holding a bunch of flowers that he said was for her. He said the he planned to tell his father how much he liked Mia. Mia exploded that she did not like Jason, and that his father was a racist. Jason argued that he was not. She felt mean, but told Jason she could never like him.

In Chapter 23, Hank was already at the motel when Mia arrived home from school. He said that because the police asked his employer about him, Hank’s employer had fired him. Hank gave Mia his last paycheck to pay for his room.

A short while later, the security guard from the Topaz Hotel knocked for Mia to let him in the office. The security guard said that he had come to offer a truce. He gave Mia a list of the bad people who had checked into his motel that month. He asked Mia to add the names of her bad customers. He said he would share it with other business owners so they could all boycott those people. When the security guard asked for the names of all their black customers, Mia slammed the ledger shut and ordered him to leave.

In Chapter 24, when Lupe arrived, she suggested that Mia call the police and give them the phone numbers for the people who had left the motel early. The officer, Officer Phillips, told Mia that he already had a suspect. Phillips would not talk to Mia any further. Lupe suggested that perhaps someone would see the car and report it.

In Chapter 25, that evening, Mia and her family were visited by Aunt Ling, a friend of Uncle Li’s. She worked at a nail salon where she had to listen to American women complain about their Chinese housekeepers. They assumed all Chinese people stole. When Aunt Ling said she was going to Sacramento to look for a new job, Mia gave her the address of one of the customers who had left early and asked if she would look for the Thunderbird. Aunt Ling asked if she could tell other immigrants who needed a place to stay about the motel. Mia’s parents agreed they would put out a Yankee baseball cap to let immigrants know when Yao was there and they could not stay.

In Chapter 26, the next day Hank asked Mia for Yao’s phone number. He wanted to ask Yao if he needed a handyman. As much as Mia knew about Hank and Yao, she knew that Hank was desperate for work. Yao refused Hank’s offer.

In Chapter 27, Mia was upset when she received a C-minus on her story. The teacher made multiple references to how bad Mia’s grammar was. Mia heard her mother telling her that she had trouble with tenses in English because there were no tenses in Chinese. When Mia told Lupe about her concerns that she could not win the essay contest because her English was so bad, Lupe wrote on one of the feedback cards from the hotel: “You can’t win if you don’t play” (123).

In Chapter 28, a customer left an eight-dollar tip for Mia. Mia decided to write the customer a thank-you note and borrowed a dictionary/thesaurus to make sure her grammar was correct. Mia decided to put out a tip jar and use his tips for the essay entry fee.

In Chapter 29, in school, Jason and the popular kids made fun of Mia because her family could not afford jeans. She wore cheap cotton pants her mother bought at a second-hand store.

In Chapter 30, Hank stopped paying rent. He discovered a law that stated he could not be evicted for not paying rent because he had lived there for more than 30 days. Yao told Mia’s parents that they were responsible for paying Hank’s rent if he did not pay.

In Chapter 31, because more and more students were making fun of Mia’s clothes, Mia wrote a letter to the mean girls, telling them that cotton pants were more comfortable than jeans. It made her feel better even though she did not send it.

At the hotel, Mia suggested they hide Hank like they hid the immigrants so they would not have to pay for him. Mia’s father said it was too risky.

**Analysis**

The author describes a variety of examples of overt racism in this section of the novel both as Yao and the police focus on Hank and Mrs. Robinson as suspects in the car theft and as the security guard from the Topaz presents Mia with his list of bad people. Mia gives Yao a list of five people who checked out early. Of those people, Yao picks out Mrs. Robinson, a Black lady, as his suspect. Yang points out the trouble with Yao’s suspect: “Sir, we can’t judge someone based on their skin color. It isn’t right. This is America” (96). Yao responds that “Any idiot knows—black people are dangerous” (96). The police seem to agree with Yao’s thinking because they choose to focus their investigation on Hank. They question all of the weekly customers, but pull Hank aside for extra questioning. Tang points out the Mia that the police are questioning Hank more closely than they question others about the crime. Yao reasons this means that the police believe his theory, but Mia has another explanation: “The only thing it proved was that the police were just like him” (99). The injustice that Hank suffers as a result of his skin color goes a step further than just the extra questioning. When Hank’s boss learns that the police suspect him of a crime, even though he has not been charged, Hank is fired.

The list that the security guard presents Mia with is a symbol of racism. Mia is at first interested in his proposal to put together a list of bad people with whom they should avoid doing business. She has the drunk man in mind. She does not realize that this security guard is just as racist as the police and Yao until he says to her: “Let’s start with last month. Give me the names of all the Black customers who have come through here in the last month” (107). Mia has heard all she needs to know when the security guard asks for names of Black people specifically. She demonstrates that she will not support his form of injustice by telling him to get out.

Hank’s reaction to the police’s questioning demonstrates the way that Blacks in America have become accustomed to being treated in a suspicious manner because of the color of their skin. Because Mia continues to insist that Hank is a good guy and did nothing wrong, the police take her back to the front office. She describes that she sees fury and frustration in Hank’s eyes because he is being singled out for questioning. When Mia later goes to talk to Hank about the unfair way he was treated, she gets more and more upset as she notices how Hank seems unfazed by what happened. He explains that he used to that sort of treatment: “This kind of thing happens to me all the time” (100). He goes on the explain that sort of treatment was experienced by all Black people at one time or the other.

Mia’s parents brought her to America hoping for a better life for her, yet Ying suggests that Mia will always be a step behind the others because English is not her native language. Ying was an engineer in China and wants her daughter to focus on her math skills. Mia, however, likes to write. She even enjoys writing in English even though she has trouble with the language. Her mother tries to convince Mia that she will never be good at English: “You heard Mr. Yao. You gotta be native at English. And I’m sorry, but we’re just not” (89). Ying suggests that Mia could be native at math, a subject that does not interest Mia like writing. When Mia continues to argue, her mother responds: “‘You’re not getting it, are you?’ she said. She sat down on the bed and looked me in the eye. ‘You just can’t be as good as the white kids in their language, honey. It’s their language’” (90). Ying refers to the English language as if it is an object that is owned by the White people. She seems to imply that Mia will never be able to “own” the language simply because she is an immigrant.

Mia demonstrates her determination when she borrows a dictionary and starts writing therapeutically despite the bad grade she received on a class essay. After Mia received a C-minus on an essay she submitted in class, she worried that she did not have the skills that she needed to win the essay contest. Lupe writes out on one of the feedback cards Mia placed in the front office: “You can’t win if you don’t play,” (123) her way of encouraging her friend to take the chance. Mia borrowed a dictionary/thesaurus from one of the weeklies to help her with her grammar when she decided to write a thank you note to a customer who had left her an eight dollar tip. Mia later writes a letter to the mean girls who insist on making fun of the cotton pants she wears. Mia does not send this letter, but just writing it makes her feel better.

The author includes the text of Mia’s letters both before and after editing to demonstrate Mia’s mistakes as well as showing readers how to correct these mistakes. Mia crosses out mistakes and corrects them as she goes along so her writing looks like this: “[Your] You’re right. I [by] buy my clothes by the pound. My mom and I go over to the Goodwill and we buy [old] secondhand clothes. Clothes you probably [through] threw away” (135). In this case, the words inside the brackets are words that Mia has lined through and replaced with the proper words or tenses. She corrects “Your” which is a possessive with the proper contracted form of “you are”. Mia also corrects for those words in English that are pronounced the same, but have different meanings depending on their spelling. For instance, she replaces the preposition “by” with the verb “buy” which means to purchase.

**Discussion Question 1**

Consider the depth of racism that Mia encounters after Mr. Lorenz’s car is stolen. Why does Hank not get more upset when the police and Yao single him out for questioning?

**Discussion Question 2**

Consider Lupe’s words of encouragement to Mia: “You’ve got to play to win” (123). What is Lupe saying to her friend? How does Lupe’s advice contradict that given to Mia by her mother?

**Discussion Question 3**

Discuss Ying’s argument that Mia has a better chance at math than English because Mia is not native to America. What does Ying seem to be telling her daughter about her chances for success in America as an immigrant?

**Vocabulary**

nostalgic, rivalry, tactics, famished, temporary, prosperity, dictionary, thesaurus, concoction

**Chapters 32 - 40**

**Summary**

In Chapter 32, the popular girls were excited when Mia was put their team to answer a math challenge. They believed Mia was good at math because she was Chinese. The question asked how much a motel owner would charge to rent a room for two hours if he charged $30 a night. Based on real-world experience, Mia insisted the answer was $30 because hotels did not give a discount. Her teammates were angry when the teacher said that answer was wrong. Mia wondered if she looked like the other students if she would be accepted even though she had gotten the answer wrong.

In Chapter 33, at the motel that afternoon Mia held up a banana peel next to her face to see what she might look like if she were blond. When Mia’s mother saw what she was doing, she asked if something had happened at school. Mia cried as she told the story of how the students mocked her for getting the answer to a math problem wrong. To Mia’s surprise, her mother sided with the mean girls. Ying told Mia that math was all she had. Mia screamed that she liked English. Mia’s mother warned her that in English, Mia was a bicycle while the other students were cars.

In Chapter 34, Mia remembered how an uncle told her that once a bowl was broken, it could be repaired, but would never be the same. Mia felt as if she and her mother’s bowl had been broken when her mother called her a bike. What hurt the most was Mia’s belief that her mother was right.

That Sunday, Mia’s father took her to a stationery shop and bought a green, sparkly pencil that cost $5.99. Outside the shop, he knelt in front of her as he gave her the pencil and told her that she was not a bike.

In Chapter 35, Uncle Fung, who had been an accountant in China, visited the Calivista. He said that he had gotten fired from his job as a waiter after a female customer slapped him when he said: “Hey baby!” (150) to her. He thought it was an acceptable greeting. Ying informed him that was what a man said to greet his girlfriend. Later, Mia noticed Uncle Fung was scratching his nose with his middle finger, an action that looked like he was “flipping me off” (151). Mia could tell he had no idea the gesture was offensive. That night, Mia put together a pamphlet of American phrases and customs she felt Uncle Fung did not understand.

On Halloween, Mia noticed she was getting extra tips. She assumed people felt sorry for her. The weeklies surprised Mia by taking her trick-or-treating. Mia’s mother had called Lupe to join them.

In Chapter 36, the next Sunday, Mia and her mother went to the mall. Ying had two shopping bags from expensive stores she found in the trash that she carried with her because she thought it made people nicer. Mia and her mother were shocked to see Jason and his mother in Macy’s. Ying’s face turned red when Jason’s mother said that she did not know that they shopped at Macy’s. When Mia and her mother returned to their car, her mother started having a panic attack. Ying was afraid that Jason’s mother would assume that by seeing her with the bags, that the family had savings. She was afraid they would start to squeeze them for more money. Mia realizes how bad things were when her mother tore up the shopping bags. She felt guilty about the $100 she had saved for the essay contest.

In Chapter 37, in school, Mia’s teacher taught about Mexican factories and the low wages they paid their workers. She picked Jason to defend the Mexican factories and answer questions from the other students. After Jason presented his opening statement, Mia asked him how he felt squeezing his employees for every last cent they had. Jason argued that if he was in the position of the employees, he would appreciate having a job. Mia pointed out that Jason needed his workers as much as they needed a job, and asked why he just had to take and take and take from his employees. When all the other students started yelling at Jason, he asked for help from the teacher.

Later, Mia asked Lupe why she did not back her up with any questions for Jason. Lupe stung Mia with the comment that it did not appear Mia needed help. As Mia walked past a Pizza Hut, she remembered in China that it was considered rude to split the bill. Customers would fight over who got to pay. That did not happen in America. People happily split the bill. Mia reasoned it was because Americans were out for themselves.

In Chapter 38, the next day in class, Jason stole Mia’s sparkly pencil. He managed to convince the teacher it was him. Mia was angry that Jason had taken the nicest thing she had.

In Chapter 39, Mia wrote a letter to Jason asking for her pencil back. She was interrupted when Yao called on the phone to say he and his family would be gone for the weekend. Mia thought it was an opportunity to get her pencil back. Mia asked Lupe to help, but Lupe said she could not help Mia because she and her father needed Yao. They did not have another plan, like Mia did.

In Chapter 40, Mia realized how much her behavior had hurt Lupe. She realized that Lupe should be the one entering the essay contest instead of Mia and wrote Lupe a letter telling her so. In the letter, she also told Lupe she was not going to try to get her pencil back.

In retaliation, Mia took a vial of Chinese medication with her to school. The medication had a strong scent that made a person’s eyes water. Mia put this medicine on Jason’s pencils. When he brought one of the pencils close to his face, the smell burned his eyes, and his eyes started watering. The students gathered around Jason because they thought he was crying.

**Analysis**

The stereotype that Chinese are good at math is an example that Yang includes to demonstrate the way that all races of people, not just those with dark skin, have a set of preconceived notions assigned to them. Mia falls prey to this preconceived notion when the popular girls cheer because she is assigned to their group for a math challenge. The question is a trick question of sorts, especially for Mia, because she has real-world experience in running a motel. In the real world, a motel owner does not give a discount if a customer only wants to stay part of a day. In fifth-grade math, however, these rules do not apply. The teacher wants her students to calculate an hourly rate to demonstrate they know how to do the math. Mia’s teammates, however, do not understand Mia’s confusion. They say to her: “You’re Chinese! You’re supposed to be good at math!” (141). Mia’s mother makes her feel even worse when she tells Mia that she should have gotten the answer to the question correctly. Mia wonders if she was not Chinese, but instead had blue eyes and blond hair if she would be accepted even if she was not good at math.

Ying uses the analogy of bikes versus cars to impress upon Mia how hard Ying believes it will be for Mia to compete with students who are native English speakers. Mia says that her mother “breathed out a tornado. / ‘You know what you are in English? You’re a bicycle, and the other kids are cars’” (145). Ying uses the analogy believing it will show Mia the advantage that native Americans have over her when it comes to English. In this analogy, Mia is a bicycle, a form of transportation that is faster than walking, but one that takes a good deal of effort and is relatively slow compared to other forms of transportation. The native English speakers are cars. Ying believes they can speed along effortlessly because they grew up hearing and speaking English. Mia hears only her mother’s doubt in her ability to learn.

Yang continues to use imagery, such as the imagery of the broken bowl, that helps young readers understand how Mia is feeling. After Mia’s argument with her mother about the incorrect math problem, she remembers a story that her uncle told her: “He said that if you break a bowl, you can put all the pieces back together, but it will never be the same. Water will seep through the cracks. That’s what it felt like when my mom called me a bike — like our bowl shattered and we’d never be whole again” (146). While a reader might not understand how it feels to be an immigrant frustrated because she is competing on an uneven playing field who has her mother voice her lack of confidence in her, a reader can understand Mia’s bowl imagery. Most everyone has an experience in which they have broken something and tried to repair it, only to discover that there is always evidence of the original damage. Mia believes that moving forward, her relationship with her mother will always be defined by this instance.

The sparkly pencil is a symbol both of faith and of cruelty. Mia’s father spends all of the recycling money that he and Mia earn for one week to buy this expensive pencil from a fancy stationery store. He presents it to Mia and tells her that she is not a bike. He asks her: “Do you understand?” (149). His question implies that he does not believe she is at a disadvantage because she is an immigrant. He believes in her and wants her to do what makes her happy. The pencil becomes a symbol of cruelty when Jason steals it from Mia and then makes the teacher believe that it is his. Mia believes that Jason is retaliating because she tried to make him understand that his father was just like a Mexican factory owner in the way he ran the motel during a previous class. As Mia questioned Jason she tried to make him understand that rich people like Yao took and took from the poor people who worked for them, without realizing that they actually depended on each other. Jason does not understand the lesson Mia was trying to teach him because at the end of the day: “Jason walked off with the nicest thing I had” (167), a further reason from Mia to resent Jason.

Mia writes out a pamphlet of American customs and sayings to help Fung navigate the unfamiliar culture, demonstrating that she is already using her writing skills to make life better for others. Fung complains that he got fired when he greeted a female customer “Hey baby” (150) Without realizing that it was a term of endearment between a girlfriend and boyfriend, but in other cases a form of sexual harassment. He also did not realize that when he scratched his nose with his middle finger, that gesture could be interpreted as an obscene hand gesture. When Mia calls his attention to his mistake, his response is so innocent that Mia realizes he was unaware what he was doing could be considered offensive. In her pamphlet, she includes advice like: “The word ‘dude’ is a slang term for a male friend. It should not be used when addressing the police, your boss, a senior citizen, or a female” (152). Advice like this seems common sense to native Americans, but those new to the culture often try to copy what they hear others say and sometimes get the word usage wrong, or take statements literally that have an understood, but not obvious meaning.

The shopping bags represent normalcy. Mia’s mother was excited to find these bags from high-end stores because she believes people are nicer to her when they see her in the mall with shopping bags. The bags make Mia’s mother feel normal, like she could afford the things that are for sale in the stores. This aura of normalcy backfires when Mia and her mother happen to run into Jason and his mother in Macy’s. Ying fears that Jason’s mother will believe that the family has savings that allow them to shop in expensive stores. She believes that the Yaos will press them for even more money. Ying tears up these shopping bags after the experience with Jason’s mother, an action that demonstrates that Ying does not believe that her attempts to feel normal are worth the possible backlash.

**Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the significance of the pencil in this section of chapters. What does it represent to Mia? What does it represent to Jason? Why does it hurt Mia so badly that Jason takes it away from her?

**Discussion Question 2**

Consider Mia’s heartbreak after her mother called her a bicycle. Did Ying intend to hurt her daughter’s feelings as badly as she did? What was Ying trying to impress upon Mia with the analogy?

**Discussion Question 3**

Discuss Fung’s misunderstanding of American phrases and culture. How does Mia help him? What does this say about her and her writing skills?

**Vocabulary**

mesmerized, animated, idioms, civil, feigned, furiously

**Chapters 41 - 49**

**Summary**

In Chapter 41, Lupe forgave Mia after she read the letter, but Mia’s good mood was destroyed when she found her mother, bleeding from a head wound and lying on the side of the road in front of the motel. Ying said people had tried to break into the front office. Ying confronted them, but they kicked her in the stomach and the head. Hank chased off the people who were trying to break in, but he had not yet come back. Mia’s father was in the laundry and had not heard what happened.

Mia insisted her father take Ying to the hospital. Mia brought out her tip money when Ying worried because they did not have insurance. The doctor determined there were no serious injuries, but the bill was $5,800. Yang explained in broken English that they did not have insurance. Even though Mia’s parents made less than the federal poverty guidelines, their fees could not be waived because they were not charged rent. When the doctor who had taken care of Ying heard what was happening, he confronted the supervisor. They went into a room by themselves where Mia could see the doctor gesturing angrily. When they returned, the doctor informed them they were going to waive the fees considering the circumstances. They would only have to pay the hospital fee of $150. Mia had that much in tip money. Mia was saddened that she had to give up her tip money, but she was proud that she was able to help her parents.

In Chapter 42, Hank finally returned the next morning. He said he chased the people who tried to break in and made them stop when he threw a rock at them. The police saw him throw the rock and the resulting fight. Hank was charged with assault with a deadly weapon. He took a plea deal and had to spend only one night in jail.

After Hank made sure that Mia’s mother was okay, he said he had to pack because he had broken his 30 day probabtion. He explained the police called Yao because of the stolen car report. They wanted Yao to know Hank had been arrested on another charge.

In Chapter 43, because Hank had no money and no place to go, Mia’s parents agreed to hide him. Hank promised it would not be long because he would get a new job. However, he was having trouble because he could not get a letter of reference from his old boss. Hank hurt Mia’s feelings when he told her she would not understand his problem because she was a kid, Mia asked him to give her a chance to understand. He explained the issue with the reference letter. He also explained that because he was Black, prospective employers would not believe that he had been defending Ying when he was convicted. Hank said people looked at him and saw a criminal. For that reason, he took the plea. Mia realized that there was a whole level of things that she did not understand.

In Chapter 44, when the security guard from the Topaz Inn came to offer his services, Hank got the idea to try to get a job as a security guard. The next morning, he asked Mia to mail four letters for him. Mia saw that the letters were addressed to several malls in the area. When one of the letters fell out of the envelope, Mia read it and saw that Hank was looking for a job as a security guard.

Hoping to help Hank, Mia wrote a reference letter for him, as if he had worked for the Calivista Motel as a security guard. She explained Hank was arrested because he had fought with the men who attacked the manager. Mia also changed Hank’s letter to state that he had worked at the Calivista. Mia briefly worried she might get caught, or that Hank would be mad at her, but she remembered how her mother would eavesdrop on her brother’s math lessons. Her mother did not get a tutor because she was a girl. The Chinese did not believe it was worthwhile to educate a girl. So, her mother had taken things into her own hands and been creative. As a result, Ying had excelled in math.

In Chapter 45, when a girl Mia’s age stayed in the motel, she left a pair of jeans behind. Ying brought them to Mia to wear. They fit perfectly.

In Chapter 46, one night Hank announced to Mia that he had gotten a job as a security officer at the mall. He said her letter was bold, but his new boss believed her. Hank said he realized what Mia had done when the man asked about Hank’s job at the Calivista. Hank followed his lead. When Hank asked Mia what possessed her, she showed him Lupe’s card that stated: “You can’t win if you don’t play” (197).

In Chapter 47, a Chinese immigrant named Zhang who had worked as an engineer in China with Ying, came to stay at the hotel. Zhang said he was in a mess. His employer took his workers’ passports and IDs, claiming they were safer with him. Zhang and the others were expected to work 18 hours a day with only one day off a month. They slept in their employer’s basement. He said he was practically a slave. He was out only because he and the other workers fled through secret tunnels when immigration raided the restaurant. He had to go back to get his passport and ID. He explained he had taken the job because he was desperate, he had gotten in trouble with loan sharks.

In Chapter 48, Zhang said he borrowed $500 from the loan sharks because he wanted his family in China to think he was doing well financially. He sent the money to his dying mother because he wanted her to die knowing that he was okay. Later, Mia asked her father what Zhang was going to do. Her father assured her that only a lawyer could help Zhang. Mia wrote a letter in which she pretended to be a lawyer demanding that Zhang be given his identification back. She gave it to Zhang the following day and told him that she hoped it worked.

In Chapter 49, Mia had enlisted immigrants to check the addresses of the clients who had checked out of the motel early on the day Mr. Lorenz’s car was stolen. She was relieved when the car was not found at any of the addresses. She and Lupe walked to Mr. Lorenz’s house to give him the news. As they were talking to him, they were surprised when a man drove up in the green Thunderbird. Mia and Lupe tried to pretend they had not seen the car, but Mr. Lorenz warned them if they said anything, he would find them.

**Analysis**

Hank emerges as a hero in this section of the novel when he saves Ying from the men trying to break into the motel office and runs them down, resulting in their arrest. Mia comes home from school to discover her mother laying near the street, bleeding from a wound on her head. She tells Mia about the men who tried to break into the front office of the motel. Hank came running when he heard Ying scream: “Hank ran after them. I’d never seen him so angry. He’s still out there—” (115). Hank chased the men down and caught them. However, the police saw Hank throw a rock at men as he was chasing them and arrested Hank as well as the men who had assaulted Mia’s mother.

The strength of the stereotype that Blacks are bad is demonstrated when Hank decides to take the plea and live with a criminal conviction instead of arguing his case. Because Hank had to stay in jail for one night, he has broken the law that allowed him to continue staying at the motel even though he could not pay. He worries to Mia that he will have trouble getting a job not only because he has a criminal conviction, but also because his former boss will not write him a reference letter. Mia argues that Hank should not have gotten a conviction because he was protecting Ying when he went after the men who tried to break into the front office. Mia is surprised when Hank tells her that even if he explains how he received the conviction, his prospective bosses will not believe him. Hank told Mia that because he was Black, people looked at him and saw a criminal: “Why do you think I took the plea? I know what the verdict would be if we went to trial. People look at me and see guilty” (187). For the first time, Mia realizes that Hank is right, there are things on a whole different level that she does not understand.

Mia demonstrates her intelligence and creativity when she uses her writing abilities to help Hank and also to try to help Zhang, an immigrant who comes to them after escaping a unscrupulous boss. When Mia learns that Hank is trying to get a job as a security officer, she steps in to help out. Reasoning that Hank was acting as an unpaid security officer both when he rescued Mia from the drunk man and later when he chased down the men who attacked her mother, Mia writes a letter of reference as if Hank were actually an employee of the motel. She also changes Hank’s letters requesting interviews so that they also state that he had been working for the motel. Hank is intelligent enough to play along when a prospective boss asks about his work at the Calivista. In Zhang’s case, Mia writes a letter to Zhang’s boss pretending to be a lawyer, and demanding that Zhang be given back his passport and identification.

Zhang’s story highlights how easy it is for employers to take advantage of immigrant workers since they have so few connections in America. Zhang tells Mia and her family that he took the job at a restaurant because he was desperate. He had borrowed money from loan sharks and needed a way to pay it back. However “The employer was an American guy and told all the workers that their passports and IDs would be safer with him. So he took them all away” (200). The employees could not leave because they had no identification. The employer worked them 18 hours a day and treated them like slaves. Zhang said he had only managed to get away because workers from immigration had raided the restaurant. His employer still had a hold on him because he had Zhang’s passport and identification. Zhang felt he had no choice but to return to the illegal working conditions.

Yang includes the story of Zhang’s experience with the loan sharks to remind the reader how dangerous it is to get caught up with these sorts of people. This reminder about loan sharks and their unfair practices will be significant as the story progresses. In this case, Zhang tells Mia and her family that he borrowed money because he wanted to show his mother, who was dying of cancer, how well he was doing in America: “I borrowed the money so she could die knowing her only son was okay out there. That I had made it in America. Instead of the loser …” (202). Because of the way Zhang has been treated in America, he has lost self-esteem and believes that he is not worthy of fair treatment.

Mia and her parent’s experience in the emergency room illustrates that even though the American system seems weighted against immigrants, there are some people who are compassionate and willing to help. Mia’s parents naively went to the emergency room with $150 thinking that would be enough to pay for any costs associated with getting Ying’s injuries checked. They are all shocked when they are presented with a bill for $5,800. They do not understand the forms that they are supposed to fill out to request a fee waiver: “So we were well below the poverty line, but the form also asked us how much we paid in rent. We put down $0, because technically, we got free board living in the manager’s quarters” (178). The supervisor tells them that they cannot get free rent and free medical services as well. He does not understand and Mia’s family is unable to explain that the free rent is part of their employment agreement, not because they are getting government assistance. The doctor who examined Ying is more compassionate and yells at the supervisor: “You want to charge these poor people three thousand four hundred and eighty dollars? Can’t you see they just got the crap beat out of them?” (179). The doctor manages to convince the supervisor to waive the charges with the exception of the hospital fee of $150.

**Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Mia’s reaction when Hank tells her that people see him as a criminal simply because of the color of his skin. She indicates that she has realized there is a whole other level of “you don’t understand” (187). What does she mean by this? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.

**Discussion Question 2**

Consider the doctor who helps get the astronomical hospital bill waived. How does he help to restore Mia’s faith in mankind? How does the Tang’s experience in the emergency room illustrate how difficult it is for immigrants to make a case for themselves?

**Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the way Mia uses her writing skills to help Hank and Zhang. What does it say about Mia that she believes that she can change things for her friends?

**Vocabulary**

indescribable, categorically, adamant, substituted, hounding, excruciating, virtually, confiscate, syntax

**Chapters 50 - 58**

**Summary**

In Chapter 50, Mia told Hank about the car. He admitted he the theft was an inside job to get money from insurance. Mia called the police and was surprised Officer Phillips listened to her. Officers caught Mr. Lorenz trying to sell the car and arrested him. When Phillips came to thank Mia, she nudged him toward Hank’s room. Hank told Phillips that his suspicions had cost Hank his job. When the officer said he was sorry, Hank asked him to be better, to stop and think before he blindly accused a Black man.

Later, Mia’s parents told her they had come to America because of what had happened between Phillips and Hank. The experience showed that people were innocent until proven guilty. They told her about the Cultural Revolution in China where people were arrested for no reason. They left China because they did not want anything like that to happen to Mia.

In Chapter 51, even though Hank was not responsible for the car theft, the security guard at the Topaz Inn still refused to tear up his list of bad people he was circulating to area businesses. Mia and Hank wrote a letter to distribute to area business owners stating that the people on the list were not necessarily bad. The people were just Black. In the letter, Mia asked them to join her in treating customers with respect regardless of their skin color. The business owners responded in favor of Mia’s proposal. One said that he had immigrated from the Philippines seven years ago and had forgotten what it was like to be judged. The towel and sheet supplier for the Topaz Inn, who was Black, threatened to stop doing business with the Topaz if its policies did not change. The manager at the Topaz not only changed the policy, but he also fired the security guard.

In Chapter 52, Zhang called and told Mia that her letter worked. His boss had given everyone back their identification and passports. Mia was glad to learn she had changed Zhang’s life. She thought about the essay contest and wondered if she could change her family’s life as well.

In school, Mia’s teacher asked her students to write about a moment that meant everything. Mia wrote about leaving China. When it came time to turn the stories in, Mia worried what she had written was too personal. She wanted to hide it, but knew she had to get past her feeling of being uncomfortable.

In Chapter 53, that evening Mia decided to sell the lucky pennies to pay the entry fee for the essay contest. She sent Hank to trade the coins. He returned with $315. When Mia finished her essay, Hank said that it was perfect. She hesitated before mailing it, but Hank reminded her of Lupe’s words, that she could not win if she did not play.

In Chapter 54, the next day in school, there was a substitute teacher in Mia’s class. She was soft-spoken so Jason made fun of her by asking her to repeat herself. The other kids laughed, encouraging Jason to continue. When the classroom was empty at lunch, Mia overheard the substitute talking on the phone and crying. She told her friend she did not think she had what it took to be a real teacher.

As soon as the students were back in the class, Jason started making fun again. Mia made an excuse for her and Jason to leave the room together. She told Jason what she had overheard the teacher say at lunch. Jason pretended that he did not care. Mia told him that he did not have to be his father. Jason did say anything else the rest of the day.

Later that day, Yao and Jason stopped by the motel. Mia froze because two Chinese immigrants were staying there. Mia ran, calling for her parents. Yao said he had been hearing a rumor they were hiding Chinese immigrants in the hotel. Tang claimed they were not hiding immigrants, but Yao wrote down the numbers of all the rooms in which lights were on. He called Mia and her parents to go to the registration desk with him. He said they would pay if there were any occupied rooms without a registration card.

When Yao found an occupied room with no registration card, he threatened to call the police. Just at that time, a car pulled up and the girl who left the jeans stepped out. During the confrontation between the girl and Mia, Mia’s parents were able to warn the immigrants to sneak out of the room. Jason watched them out the window, but did not say anything. Meanwhile, Mia had to give the jeans back to the girl because they had her name written on the tag.

In Chapter 55, weeks later, Yao told Mia’s parents that he was selling the motel. He needed cash because another real estate deal had gone bad. He said he did not know what the new owner would want to do with them. They worried about what they would do if they lost their jobs and if they should start looking. Mia asked them if they thought it would be nice if they owned the motel. Her parents smiled as they thought about it, but her father said they might own the hotel in another life. Mia finally told them about the contest she had entered.

In Chapter 56, Mia’s parents were quiet, and then she looked at the disappointment in her mother’s face. Her mother was disappointed because Mia had thought she could win. Mia yelled at her mother that she was not a “bike” (240). Her mother said that was not what she meant. She meant that those contests were all rigged, that people did not do things just out of the goodness of their hearts.

In Chapter 57, Yao spent the day in the office looking over the motel ledger and pounding on the calculator. He noticed the hat on the counter and said that it belonged to the previous manager. He commented that the man had been a hard worker. Mia hoped one day that Yao would say good things about them.

When the letter from Vermont finally came, Hank gathered Mia’s parents and all of the weeklies into the managers’ quarters. Hank announced that Mia had changed all of their lives. That day, hers was going to change. When Hank’s smile vanished as he read the letter, Mia knew.

In Chapter 58, Hank was angry and said he thought the whole thing was just a scam. He said the people just wanted money and did not know that Mia had sold the lucky pennies to get the entry fee. Mia saw her father’s face fall. In his face, she saw all his hope fade. Mia’s dad claimed he was fine. Later, she found her father sitting in the laundry room. She could tell he had been crying. She apologized for always losing for them. He reminded her of how she had helped Hank and Zhang. Mia said that she had wanted to win for them.

**Analysis**

The novel climaxes when Yao almost catches Mia’s parents harboring immigrants in his motel. Yao does not get the proof he needs against the Tangs because his crusade against them is interrupted when Polly returns to claim her jeans. Yao is distracted from the fact he believes there are non paying customers when Polly accuses Mia of stealing her jeans. He focuses on Mia’s crime and does not notice when Mia’s parents sneak out of the office to warn the immigrants. Mia is glad the immigrants are safe, but narrates: “My mom would never know the price I paid for their safety” (234)

Jason’s decision not to tell his father that he saw Mia’s parents warning the immigrants to leave demonstrates that he has taken Mia’s advice, that he does not have to be like his father, to heart. Mia becomes so frustrated by the way that Jason is treating their substitute teacher that she finally makes up a reason to get him out of the classroom so she can talk to him: “Did you know I overheard her talking to her friend on the phone and she said she didn’t know if she had what it took to be a real teacher? And she was crying” (228) Jason tells Mia that he does not care how bad he might be making the substitute teacher feel. He cares only that he is making the other students laugh. Mia tells him: “You don’t have to be your father” (228). Mia notes that Jason does not make fun of the teacher anymore. When Jason does not tell his father that he saw Mia’s parents warning the immigrants to leave, it gives her hope that Jason might change his attitude and become a nicer person than his father.

Yao’s claim that Blacks are bad is weakened when it is discovered that neither Hank nor Mrs. Robinson had anything to do with the theft of Mr. Lorenz’s car. Even though Mr. Lorenz warned Lupe and Mia he would find them if they told anyone they saw the car, Mia tells Hank what she saw. Hank is not surprised as he says to the friend with him: “What’d I tell you, Fred? It was an inside job. The guy probably thought he could pull a thirty-day special!” (209). Hank had suspected from the beginning that Mr. Lorenz arranged to have the car stolen so he could collect insurance on it. Hank did not voice his suspicions because he did not think anyone would take the word of a Black man over a White man.

When Hank’s name is cleared in the theft case, it verifies the decision that Mia’s parents made to come to America. When Mia and her parents first arrived in America, Ying told Mia that America was “freer” (4) an explanation that Mia did not understand at the time. After Officer Phillips apologizes to Hank for assuming that Hank was guilty because he is Black, Mia’s parents use this situation as a learning tool. Ying reminds Mia of the time that she had asked why they came to America and explains that it is because of the justice system in America. She tells Mia: “here people are innocent until proven guilty. For the most part, at least. That’s what you saw tonight” (211). Mia’s parents tell her about the Cultural Revolution in China when people were arrested and taken away without just cause. Mia’s parents did not want to take the chance that something like that could happen again. Mia’s father adds: “Tonight, seeing that police officer arrest Mr. Lorenz and actually come back here and apologize to Hank—okay, he didn’t really want to apologize, but still, he did—I know I made the right decision. America may not be perfect, but she’s free. And that makes all the difference” (211). Mia’s dad argues that despite their financial situation, he still believes that he has made the right decision.

Mia’s decision to take an active role against the list of Black people demonstrates that there are people willing to take a stand against injustice. It also demonstrates that great changes can be made if people stand together against injustice. The security guard at the Topaz, the one whose idea it was to put together the list of undesirable customers, is ultimately fired for his discriminatory behavior. Mia wrote a letter to distribute to the other business owners in the area to whom the security guard had given copies of the list. She tells them the list contains not the names of bad customers, but the names of Black customers. She asks that they “please tear up the list. Let’s [treet] treat all our customers with kindness and respect and not judge anyone by the color of their skin” (213). The man from the liquor store agreed with Mia. He told her “if I judged all my customers by the way they look, I’d be out of business” (214). The Filipino at the convenience store tells Mia he had forgotten what it was like to be judged and was tearing up the letter.

Mia lashes out at her mother when Mia tells her that she has entered an essay contest to win a motel, a reaction that demonstrates how badly Ying hurt Mia when she criticized her dreams of being able to be a good writer in English. As soon as Mia announces she submitted an essay, Mia’s mother informs her that she is not going to win. Mia describes: “Her voice was certain, positive. She looked right at me, her eyes a mixture of pain and sadness, but not sad like I’m-sad-you’re-not-going-to-win, sad like I’m-sad-you-actually-thought-you-could-win” (240). Mia thinks her mother is going to criticize her again for not being a native English speaker and yells at her mother that she is not a bike. Mia’s mother tells Mia that her certainty that Mia is not going to win is not a criticism against Mia. Mia’s mother believes the contest is rigged, just a way for the people hosting the contest to make money.

**Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the reaction Mia’s mother has to the news that her daughter has entered an essay contest in hopes of winning a motel. Why does Ying not think that Mia will win?

**Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the reason why Mia’s parents came to America. How do they use the experience with Hank to demonstrate how things in America are different than things in China?

**Discussion Question 3**

Consider the changes that Mia notices in Jason after she tells him that he does not have to be his father. How does Jason at first respond to Mia when she tells him he has hurt the substitute teacher’s feelings? What changes Jason’s mind about his attitude? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.

**Vocabulary**

discriminatory, prompted, disintegrated, incompetent

**Chapters 59 - 67**

**Summary**

In Chapter 59, when Mia told Lupe she had not won the contest, Lupe admitted she was glad that Mia was not going. She said that she did not want to stay on the roller coaster by herself. In class later that day, the teacher called Mia to the front of the room and asked her to read her story out loud because it was so good. When Mia was finished, there was silence, and then the students began clapping. Mrs. Douglas gave Mia a Pizza Hut coupon for writing such a good story.

In Chapter 60, Mia’s parents were thrilled that Mia had won a writing contest. Mia, Lupe, and Ying ate pizza in the restaurant and brought some home for Mia’s father. When Mia commented it was not bad for a bicycle, Mia’s mother told Mia that she was not a bicycle. Mia’s mother felt like she was a bicycle because she could help Mia with math, but could not help her with English.

In Chapter 61, Mia received a letter from Shen telling her how the country was changing. The government was tearing down old buildings and building new high rises. He said they had moved to a bigger apartment by the river and had bought a car. Based on the letter, Mia decided Shen and his family were rich.

In Chapter 62, at first, Mia’s parents laughed when she suggested they try to get her mother’s sister to lend them the money to buy the Calivista. Hank agreed to talk to Mia’s parents and told them about a time when he gave up his dream of being a swimmer when he was discouraged after losing his first meet. He said they owed it to Mia to swallow their pride and try to buy the motel.

Mia’s mother called her sister. She was upset when her sister said they were saving up to buy an apartment for Shen. Mia’s mother suggested that each family member could put in just a little bit. She finally told her sister they were really struggling and needed help.

In Chapter 63, Mia’s mother was inconsolable because her sister refused to help. As Mia thought about the conversation, she wondered what would happen if everyone they knew put in just a little toward the motel.

The next day, Mia told Lupe what she had planned. They discussed their idea with Hank. He said Yao would probably want at least $300,000 for the motel. Mia suggested they could each invest just a little money in the motel. They would all own it. Mia planned to find six hundred people willing to donate $500 each. The weeklies invested $3,628. Mia passed out copies of her essay and was surprised how many people were willing to invest. A venture capitalist wrote a check for $50,000. Lupe and her family invested $10,000, the entirety of their emergency fund.

The immigrants who stayed at the motel invested. They decided if they could not achieve the American Dream on their own, perhaps, they could achieve it together. Hank called the essay contest people and got the money back for Mia’s entrance fee. Mia wrote to the owners of the Vermont hotel and other people who had entered the essay contest donated money. By the end of the month, they had their goal of $300,000.

In Chapter 64, Yao laughed when Mia’s parents told him they wanted to buy the motel. He stopped laughing when he heard they had $300,000. Yao was angry and asked Mia’s father who he thought he was. When Mia said he was the man who was going to buy Yao’s motel, Yao claimed there was another buyer who was offering $50,000 more. Mia tried to find more investors to come up with the extra $50,000, but did not have any luck.

In Chapter 65, when Mia’s parents said they were considering going to a loan shark, Mia said no. She remembered what had happened to Ming. Her father convinced her that it was a real opportunity and they would be able to pay the money back.

The loan sharks wanted passports and identification as collateral for the loan. Mia tried to remind her parents about Zhang, but they motioned for her to be quiet. The terms were $50,000 plus $20,000 in interest.

In Chapter 66, the loan sharks were supposed to come back the next afternoon with the $50,000. Mia was sick all day at school. She was surprised when Jason returned her pencil to her. He apologized for making the year so miserable for her. She handed him the thank you note. Jason smiled as he read it. Before Mia left, Jason told her that his father was bluffing about another buyer. Mia saw kindness and courage in his eyes before she ran home to her parents.

In Chapter 67, Mia arrived at the same time the loan sharks did. She told her father that Yao was bluffing and the deal was called off. Mia called Yao and offered $300,000 for the motel. Mia was excited as she announced to her parents and the weeklies that Yao had accepted the deal.

When the lawyer wrote up the contract for the purchase of the hotel, they had to use three pages to list all of the owners. After the sale was final, Hank jumped into the pool fully clothed. Yao yelled he could not jump in his pool with his clothes on, but Hank reminded him it was not his pool anymore. Mia’s dad threw her mother in as other people jumped in as well. Mia turned to Jason and asked if he was coming. Yao scoffed when Jason asked if he could stay. He indicated that Jason did not want to go swimming with the losers. Jason said he was going swimming with the winners. He took Mia’s hand and they jumped into the pool.

**Analysis**

Mia and her parents’ ability to buy the Calivista from Yao demonstrates the power of teamwork. Mia is disappointed when she does not win the essay contest. Ying is devastated when her sister refuses to help them. Mia comes up with an idea when she overhears her mother asking her sister if all of the family members might agree to put in some money to help them out. Mia considers: “What if we didn’t need one rich relative? What if what we needed instead was a lot of poor people? My mom said it herself—everybody could each put in a little” (267). Mia and her parents are surprised by how many people step forward to invest some money in the motel. Mia says that on the day the loan is approved, they have to have three extra sheets of paper to list all of the names of the owners. Lupe’s parents invest the entirety of their emergency fund into the motel. A venture capitalist who happens to stay at the motel writes a check for $50,000. All of the weekly residents invest as much as they can in the motel. Even the other immigrants, who are struggling just as much as Mia’s family find money to invest. The immigrants reason: “If we can’t have the American dream ourselves, maybe we can have it together!” (271).

Hank’s story about denying one’s dreams illustrates that a person should never give up, even when he thinks that his dreams are beyond his reach. Hank describes how he had always dreamed of being a competitive swimmer. He even made the swim team at his school, but gave up on his dream when he lost his first competition. At the time, he thought it was the right thing to do, but has reconsidered his decision since he met Mia: “I think if it were Mia, she wouldn’t have quit. She wouldn’t have let those punks take away her dream. She would have worked hard and gotten better. So what if you lose the first race, you get back in there and keep swimming” (262). Hank encourages Mia’s parents to keep swimming by not giving up on their dream of buying Yao’s motel and running it themselves.

Yang creates a tone of desperation as Mia’s parents consider going to loan sharks to get the extra $50,000 that Yao has told them he needs to sell the motel to them. Even though Mia’s parents have the money that Yao has requested to buy the motel, he is so unwilling to sell his motel to immigrants that he lies and says he has another buyer. Mia reminds her parents what happened to Ming when he could not pay the loan sharks back. Her father tells her: “I know. But this is different. You said it yourself, this is a huge opportunity” (279). Mia’s father believes that the experience with the loan sharks will turn out differently for his family, just like the other immigrants have probably believed the experience would turn out differently for them. Mia is not comforted when her father agrees to hand over his identification and passport to the loan sharks as collateral for the loan. She remembers what happened to Zhang. She tries to remind her father, but he will not listen. The boss of the loan sharks warns Mia’s father “‘if you don’t pay us back the fifty thousand dollars plus another twenty thousand on top, well, then …’ The boss glanced at his associates. / His associates stretched out their hands and cracked their knuckles” (280).

Jason demonstrates he has changed when he tells Mia that his father is bluffing about there being another buyer. The change is also apparent when Mia sees the courage and kindness in Jason’s eyes. Jason approached Mia the last hour of school on the day her parents were supposed to meet with the loan sharks and gave her back the sparkly pencil that he had taken from her. Mia notes: “I’d expected it to be super short and beat-up by now — I had had visions of Jason’s dog chewing on it, Jason stabbing things at home with it, wearing it down to a nub — but it was exactly the same length as before and as beautiful and sparkly as ever” (281). Jason also tells Mia that his father is bluffing, that he does not have another prospective buyer for the motel, and that his father will sell the motel for $300,000. Mia stares at Jason when he betrays his father: “His brown eyes blazed with courage. / But it was his kindness that blew me away” (282).

The pool at the motel is a symbol of privilege. Mia and the weekly residents at the motel were denied this privilege because Yao did not want people like them in his pool. Their act of jumping into the pool after the sale of the motel is complete demonstrates their act of taking possession of the privileges they have as the new owners.

**Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Mia’s response to her parents’ decision to go to loan sharks to get the remainder of the money they need to buy the Calivista. Why are Mia’s parents willing to take this chance? Why is Mia concerned that they are making a bad decision?

**Discussion Question 2**

Consider Jason’s decision to betray his father and tell Mia that there is no other buyer for the motel. What does this say about Mia’s impact on Jason? Give examples from the novel to support your answer.

**Discussion Question 3**

Discuss how this novel demonstrates the power of team work. Why is it important for the immigrants, weeklies, and others to work together to own the motel?

**Vocabulary**

animated, inconsolable, venture, capitalist, frugally, denial, morphed

**Characters**

**Mia Tang**

Mia Tang is the heroine and narrator of this novel. She is a ten-year-old Chinese immigrant struggling to understand why her parents decided to move to America. Since they arrived, they have lived in their car. Also, employers have lied to them, cheated them out of pay, and fired them. Mia’s mother tells her that America is “freer,” (4) but in Mia’s experience it is more expensive. Mia’s parents later explain to her that America is free in regard to its justice system. Even though people can be suspected of a crime, there must be proof that they committed that crime before they are put in prison.

Mia also learns that in America, it is possible to achieve one’s dreams, especially if people work together instead of against each other. Mia imagined being able to seal her parents’ success when she won a hotel in Virginia being given away to the winner of an essay contest. Mia does not win the contest, but she does win when she reaches out to friends, fellow business managers, and other immigrants to cobble together enough money for her parents to buy the motel they have been managing.

During the time that her parents spend managing the Calivista Motel, Mia becomes acquainted with the unfairness of racism and racial inequality. Mia’s friend Lupe tells her about the poor roller coaster and rich roller coaster, which represent societal racism that keep poor people poor and rich people rich. Mia and Lupe promise one another that they will find some way to get themselves and their families off the poor roller coaster and onto the rich roller coaster.

Mia is shocked by how unfairly Hank, a Black man who has lived at the motel for six months, is treated when another guest reports that his car is stolen. She insists that Hank is innocent even though the police pull him aside for additional questioning. When Hank is fired from his job because he is a suspect in the car theft, Mia helps him get a new job by pretending that he worked as a security guard for the Calivista.

Mia befriends Jason, the son of the man who owns the motel where Mia’s parents work, and impacts his behavior. Mia notices that Jason is copying his father’s hateful, racist behavior. She tells Jason one day that he does not have to be like his father. One day while at the motel, Mia notices that Jason does not tell his father when he sees Mia’s parents warning two Chinese immigrants they were allowing to stay there that they need to go.

**Ying Tang**

Ying Tang is Mia’s mother. She was an engineer in China and is good at math. Because she is not able to speak English well, she is unable to get a good job in America. When Mia asks her mother why they came to America, Ying tries to tell her daughter it is because of the freedom they have in America. Mia misunderstands and thinks her mother is telling her it is because things are not as expensive. It is only after Officer Phillips apologizes to Hank for suspecting he was the one who stole Mr. Lorenz’s car because Hank is Black that Mia’s mother is able to tell her what she meant. She explains that in China, people could be arrested for no reason other than suspicion.

Ying criticizes Mia for enjoying English and wanting to write. Ying tells her daughter that she will never excel at English, that American natives will always be better at that language than Mia. Ying devastates her daughter when she tells Mia that regarding English, Mia is a bike while other students are cars. Ying later tells Mia that she wanted Mia to like math because Ying could help Mia with math. She could not help her with English.

Ying suffers a head injury as well as major bruising to her abdomen when she is attacked by men trying to break into the motel. She is impressed when Mia uses her tip money to pay the hospital fee. When Ying learns that Mia entered an essay contest to win a hotel, Ying is disappointed because she believes all those contests are rigged. When Mia does not win the contest, however, Ying is just as disappointed as the others.

Ying takes Hank’s advice and calls her family for help in financing the purchase of the motel when Yao decides he wants to sell it. Ying is upset when her family members refuse to help her because they are so interested in achieving their own goals.

**Michael Yao**

Michael Yao is the owner of the Calivista Motel. He is a tightfisted, racist cheat. He refuses to pay for upgrades to the office to make it safer after Mia is attacked. He assumes that because Hank is Black, Hank must be the one who stole Mr. Lorenz’s car. He tells Mia that she should not have let Mrs. Robinson, a Black woman, rent a room because Black people were bad. Yao originally told Mia’s parents they would get five dollars for every room they rented. After they worked one day, he went back on his word and told them they would be not be paid for the rooms in which the weeklies stayed or the first ten rooms they rented.

Yao treats his immigrant workers badly because he knows they have no way to fight his unjust policies. When Mia’s parents’ complain that Yao has changed the terms of their employment, he claims he did not change anything. He additionally tells them if they do not like his terms, they can quit because there are many other immigrants who would be willing to take their jobs.

Yao is angry when Mia’s parents tell him that they would like to buy the motel. He tells them he wants $300,000 for the motel, but he increases his asking price when they say they have enough money to buy it. Jason warns Mia that his father is bluffing and has not had another offer. When the sale of the motel is final, the new owners celebrate by jumping in the pool, something that Yao would never allow them to do. When Jason asks to stay, Yao is hateful and asks if Jason wants to swim with the losers.

**Jason Yao**

Jason Yao is the son of Michael Yao, the owner of the Calivista Motel. Jason’s attitude toward Mia and her parents demonstrates that he is starting to follow in his father’s footsteps. At school, Mia catches older boys bullying and fighting with Jason. It is Mia’s yelling that runs the boys off. A few days later, Jason tells Mia that he likes her, but Mia ignores his advances because he has been so hateful to her and her parents.

Jason continues to torment Mia through the rest of the school year. He steals an expensive pencil that her father bought for her as a gift and then makes the teacher believe it was his pencil. He leads the other students in making fun of Mia because she wears cheap cotton pants instead of fashionable expensive jeans. One day when Jason makes fun of a substitute teacher to the point that she cries, Mia confronts him. She tells him that he does not have to be like his father.

Jason demonstrates that he is changing when he sees Mia’s parents warning the Chinese immigrants to leave before Yao catches them. Jason does not tell his father what he saw. Mia is surprised again when Jason tells her that his father is bluffing when he claims he has another offer on the motel. She sees the kindness and courage in his eyes when he tells her. Later, when the sale of the hotel is final, when Jason asks his father if he can stay with Mia that afternoon, Yao asks if Jason really wants to swim with the losers. Jason tells his father that he will be swimming with the winners.

**Hank Caleb**

Hank Caleb is a Black man who is one of the weeklies. Because Mia is so kind to him and helps him get a job, Hank encourages Mia’s parents to follow their dreams and try to find a way to buy the motel. He tells them about a time when he allowed others to destroy a dream that he had for himself because they believed he was not talented enough to be a swimmer. He admits he has regretted giving up that dream.

Hank is the face of racism because of his color. Even though Yao has rented to Hank for months, Yao is still suspicious of Hank because he is Black. The policemen who come to investigate the theft of Mr. Lorenz’s car spend extra time interrogating Hank. They consider him a suspect of interest simply because of the color of his skin. Hank’s employer fires him when he discovers that Hank has been questioned about the car theft.

When a drunk man grabs Mia’s shirt because she tells him she needs to get her parents, Hank comes to her rescue. Hank also saves Ying from being beaten more severely when people tried to break into the front office and steal from the cash register. Hank catches the men who attempted to rob the motel. However, when the police see Hank fighting with those men, Hank is arrested as well. Hank pleads guilty to the charge without trying to defend himself because he believes a jury will think he is guilty when they see that he is Black.

**Mia’s Father**

Mia’s father is never given a proper first name. For this reason, he is sometimes referred to as Tang. Tang tells Mia that America has not been what he expected. Both Mia’s mother and father told her they would be able to live in a house, go on vacations, and maybe have a pet dog. After Officer Phillips apologizes to Hank for suspecting he had stolen a car based on the fact that Hank is Black, Mia’s mother and father explain to Mia that instance is an example of why they moved to America. They tell her about the Chinese Revolution during which people could be arrested and taken away for no reason.

Mia’s father sees how badly Ying has upset Mia by telling her that she will never excel at English because she was not born in America. He buys her an expensive sparkly green pencil as a sign that he believes in her writing ability. He assures her that she is not a bike.

Together, Mia and her father collect valuable pennies. Tang calls these their lucky pennies and imagines what their worth may be one day. He is disappointed when Mia trades in these pennies to pay for the entry fee for the essay contest. Mia sees the hope leave his eyes when he learns what she did, but he tells her that he understands she used them hoping to help the family.

**Guadalupe “Lupe” Garcia**

Guadalupe “Lupe” Garcia is José’s daughter. Lupe befriends Mia their first day of school. She tells Mia that she lives in a house with two pet dogs and a huge trampoline. It is only when Lupe comes with her father to fix the cable television at the Calivista that Mia learns that Lupe and her family are struggling financially, just like Mia’s family is.

Lupe tells Mia that her family and Mia’s family are on the poor roller coaster while Jason and his family are on the rich roller coaster. This analogy of the roller coasters describes societal racism. Lupe and Mia make a promise to one another to get off the poor roller coaster and onto the rich one.

Lupe encourages Mia to participate in the essay contest to win the hotel even though Mia’s grammar is not good. Lupe tells Mia that for her to have a chance to win, must submit an essay. Lupe promises to help Mia by checking her grammar before she submits the essay.

**Zhang**

Zhang is a close friend of Ying. They worked together as engineers in China. Zhang comes to the Calivista when he escapes his employer after the restaurant is raided by immigration. Zhang tells Mia’s parents that he got involved with loan sharks as soon as he came to America because he wanted to send money to China for his dying mother to prove he had found success in America. Zhang went to work at a restaurant to pay what he owed. His boss convinced Zhang and the other employees to give him their passports and identification for safekeeping. They could not leave because he would not return their documents. The employer worked them 18 hours a day and made them sleep in the basement of his home. Zhang said they were practically prisoners. Mia helped Zhang by writing a letter pretending that she was a lawyer and demanding that Zhang’s employer give him his identification and passport back.

**Mr. Lorenz**

Mr. Lorenz is the guest at the Calivista who claims his car is stolen while he is staying there. Because Officer Phillips refuses to follow up with the guests who left the hotel early, Mia asks the immigrants who stay at their hotel to check the addresses of those guests to see if Mr. Lorenz’s car is there. When Mia learns that the car is not located at any of those addresses, she and Lupe walk to Mr. Lorenz’s house, which is just down the street, to tell him they could not find his car.

When Mia is talking to Mr. Lorenz, she and Lupe are surprised to see someone drive the green Thunderbird up to Mr. Lorenz’s house. Mr. Lorenz warns them that if they tell anyone what they saw, he will come looking for them. Mia tells Hank, who calls the police. Mr. Lorenz is arrested for insurance fraud.

**Officer Phillips**

Officer Phillips is the police officer who is called to investigate the theft of Mr. Lorenz’s car. He shows no interest in following up with any other customers who checked out of the motel early because he believes Hank is responsible for the theft. He questions Hank as a suspect even though Hank insists he had nothing to do with the theft. Because of the way Officer Phillips treated Hank, Hank is fired from his job.

Later, when Mia and Lupe discover that Mr. Lorenz staged the theft of the car to get an insurance payoff, Mia encourages Officer Phillips to apologize to Hank for his unfair treatment. Hank asks the officer to use it as a learning experience and not just consider a man a suspect because of the color of his skin.

**Uncle Fung**

Uncle Fung, who is not Mia’s biological uncle, comes to stay with Mia and her parents after he is fired for scratching his nose and greeting a woman by saying: “Hey, Baby!” (150). Mia notices that he is scratching his nose with his middle finger, an action that looks like a rude gesture. Her parents inform Fung that the salutation he used was one that men use to greet their girlfriend. Fung was embarrassed, but he was unfamiliar with American culture. Mia puts together a pamphlet of American phrases and customs that she thinks Fung needs to know.

**Polly**

Polly is the rude White girl who leaves a pair of jeans behind after she and her mother stay at the Calivista Motel. Ying finds the jeans and discovers that they fit Mia perfectly. Mia wears the jeans to school every day until Polly and her mother return to claim the pants. Yao is there when they accuse Mia of having stolen the pants. Mia claims she did not steal the jeans, but she must give the jeans back when they discover that Polly’s name is written on the tag.

**Security Guard from the Topaz Hotel**

The security guard from the Topaz Hotel makes a list of bad people, and he suggests that the local businesses avoid transactions with them. Mia refuses to participate because she realizes that it is a list of Black people. Mia convinces the other business owners in the area that the list is discriminatory and that they should not use it. The security guard is ultimately fired when the Black man who supplies towels and sheets for the hotel threatens to stop doing business there as a result of the list.

**José Garcia**

José Garcia is Lupe’s father. He is the cable television repairman who works for Yao. It is only when Lupe comes with her father when he is called to fix the cable that Mia learns Lupe was lying about being wealthy. When José and his wife learn that Mia and her parents are looking for investors in their hotel, they invest their entire $10,000 emergency fund.

**Aunt Juli**

Aunt Juli is Mia’s aunt. She is the sister of Mia’s mother and Shen’s mother. Juli and her family still live in China. When Yao announces that he is selling the motel, Hank convinces Ying to call Juli and ask if she would be willing to invest in the hotel. Juli refuses to help her sister because she is saving up for a new apartment. She will not help even when Ying tells her how much trouble they are having financially.

**Mrs. Robinson**

Mrs. Robinson is one of the customers at the hotel who checks out early the night that Mr. Lorenz’s car is stolen. When Yao learns that Mrs. Robinson is Black, he asks Mia why she rented a room to a bad person. It is with this statement that Mia realizes that Yao is a racist, he believes Black people are automatically bad.

**Uncle Ming**

Uncle Ming is not really Mia’s biological uncle. He worked with Mia’s father at a Chinese restaurant. He came to stay with Mia and her parents after loan sharks found him and beat him to make him pay what he owed them. Ming said that he borrowed from the loan sharks only because he was desperate.

**Mrs. Douglas**

Mrs. Douglas is Mia, Lupe, and Jason’s fifth-grade teacher. She is the one who decides the green sparkly pencil is Jason’s because he speaks up before Mia and asks Mrs. Douglas not to break it in half. Mrs. Douglas also is the one who awards Mia the Pizza Hut coupon for writing such a good story about her trip from China to America.

**Aunt Ling**

Aunt Ling, who is not Mia’s biological aunt, has just quit her job as a nail technician. She complains to Mia and Mia's parents that the ladies she served would complain about their Chinese maids and assume that the maids stole from them. Ling felt like a "thing" around these women rather than a person.

**Shen**

Shen is Mia’s cousin in China. Because the families in China were allowed to have only one child, Shen and Mia are like brother and sister. Leaving Shen was the most difficult part of leaving China.

**Mrs. Yao**

Mia and her mother meet Mrs. Yao briefly at Macy’s. Ying was carrying her toilet paper filled shopping bags, but she feared that Mrs. Yao thought they had savings that allowed her to go shopping.

**Symbols and Symbolism**

**Hamburgers**

Hamburgers are symbols of both wealth and poverty. The hamburgers that Mia and her parents imagine they will be able to eat daily in America represent the financial success they believe they will achieve. The burger that they eat at the space center that is so expensive they can only buy one represents wealth. Hank’s hamburgers, which are made with a combination of hamburger meat and crushed up saltine crackers, are a symbol of poverty. Hank and his friends have to make their burgers this way because they cannot afford enough meat.

**Swimming Pool**

The swimming pool is a symbol of privilege. When Mia and her parents first move into the motel, Yao tells Mia that she is not allowed to use the pool. Even as a resident at the hotel, Hank has not been allowed to use the pool. It is only after Mia, her parents, and their investors buy the motel that they can use the pool. Hank jumps into the pool fully-clothed because he is so excited to take advantage of the privilege of being an owner, not just a resident.

**Jasmine Tea**

The jasmine tea is a symbol of celebration. Mia’s parents brought a container of this tea to America with them. They brew some tea each time they want to celebrate, such as the first night they spend at the Calivista Motel as the managers.

**Cup of Tea**

The cup of tea is a symbol of kindness. Mia takes a cup of jasmine tea to Hank on the first night she and her parents stay at the motel. Her parents made the tea because they were celebrating their good luck. Hank comments that the previous managers had not been that kind to him. This kindness pays off because Hank repays the kindness both when Mia is attacked by the drunk customer and then when Ying is beaten up by the men trying to break into the front office.

**Shirt**

Mia’s shirt is a symbol of danger. Mia allowed a drunk man into the front office before she realized how inebriated he was. He grabbed her shirt and pulled him close to her to scream in her face when she asked him to step out of the office while she got her parents. This experience made Mia realize that there was danger associated with her job. She kept the shirt so she would not forget that danger.

**Roller Coaster**

The roller coasters are symbols of societal racism. Lupe’s father told Lupe that a poor roller coaster and a rich roller coaster existed in life. He explained that because poor people could not send their children to good schools, their children could not get good jobs, keeping them on this poor roller coaster. He said that the condition was the opposite for rich people. Because they could afford to give their children good schooling and good opportunities, they would get good jobs that would keep them rich.

**The List**

The list is a symbol of racism. When the security guard at the Topaz first comes to Mia wanting her to contribute to a list of bad people with whom they should not do business, Mia agrees to help him. When the security guard lets Mia know that he considers Black people to be bad, she asks him to leave. Mia and Hank work together to get other business owners to disregard this list because it is just a list of Black people. Mia argues they should not judge a person by the color of his skin.

**Blue Yankees Baseball Cap**

The blue Yankees baseball cap is a symbol of hospitality. When this cap is out, Yao is on the property and immigrants should not come into the front office to get a room. When the cap is out of sight, it means that immigrants can be assured of being given a free place to stay.

**Green Sparkly Pencil**

The sparkly pencil is a symbol of faith, cruelty, and change. Mia’s father buys this pencil for her after Ying tells Mia that she is a bike while other students are cars regarding knowledge of the English language. When Mia’s father gives her this pencil, he demonstrates that he has faith in her intelligence and her ability to learn the English language. He tells her that she is not a bike. He wants her to use the pencil to write down everything she experiences. When Jason steals this pencil and then manages to convince the teacher it is his, the sparkly pencil is a symbol of cruelty. Mia’s father spent all the money the family received from their recycled cans in a week to buy the pencil. Mia had never had anything so nice. She is angry because of Jason’s cruelty and because he took from her the nicest thing she ever owned. Later, Jason returns Mia’s pencil to her, demonstrating that he is changing and becoming a nicer person.

**Shopping Bags**

The shopping bags are symbols of normalcy. Ying finds these shopping bags labeled for expensive stores in the trash and carries them with her when she and Mia visit the mall. She believes people are nicer when they believe she has money to make purchases. They make Ying feel as if she is normal and is able to make purchases. Ying is embarrassed and angry when Yao’s wife and son see her and Mia in Macy’s with the bags. Ying fears that Yao’s wife will think they have savings and that Yao will press them for even more money.

**Settings**

**Houston Space Center**

Mia and her parents visit the Houston space center at a time in their lives when they are living in their car. Their main reason for visiting the center is to enjoy the free air-conditioning. They buy a burger at the space center, but it is so expensive they can purchase only one to split between the three of them.

**Calivista Motel in Anaheim, California**

The majority of the action of the novel is set on the grounds of the Calivista Motel. Mia spends a good deal of time in the front office where she helps her parents out by checking customers in so that they can clean rooms. It is in the front office that Mia is attacked by the drunk guy. It is also in the front office that Mia is confronted by the girl whose jeans Mia started wearing after they were left at the motel. Mia visits Hank’s room frequently during the novel to talk to him about situations she has encountered and ask his advice.

**Dale Elementary School**

Dale Elementary School is the school that Mia, Lupe, and Jason attend. They are in the same fifth-grade class. A good deal of the interaction between Mia and Jason takes place at school because that is where they see each other the most. For example, Jason steals Mia’s pencil at school. Mia retaliates by putting Chinese medicine on his regular pencils. It is while they are at school that Jason tells Mia that her father is bluffing when he says that he has another buyer making a better offer on the house.

**School Library**

The school library is the place where Mia learns about the essay contest being hosted by the elderly couple in Vermont who wants to give away their hotel. Mia had visited the library to find out how much it costs to buy a hotel. The librarian happened to mention the contest to Mia.

**Pool**

The pool is a setting that is off-limits when Yao owns the motel. One of the first things that Yao tells Mia is that she cannot use the pool. The reader learns that Yao also denied his weekly renters the use of the pool. As soon as the papers are signed and Mia’s family and their slew of investors own the motel, Hank jumps into the pool fully clothed. The others join him, enjoying their new freedom.

**Themes and Motifs**

**Following One’s Dreams**

Front Desk illustrates the importance of following one’s dreams and never giving up regardless of how unreachable those dreams might seem. Mia’s parents move to America because they want Mia to live with more freedom and they imagine financial success. When this success seems very far away, Hank tells the story of how he gave up on his dream because he chose to believe what others said about him. Mia and her parents are disappointed by the original attempts to achieve their dreams, but they keep working and find an option that works for them.

Mia’s parents dream of Mia living in a country where she can pursue success and not worry about being unfairly imprisoned. Mia’s father admits to her that America has not been exactly what he expected. Mia’s parents told her they anticipated they would be able to live in a house, take vacations, eat in restaurants, and even have a pet dog. None of those things came true right away for Mia and her parents. When Officer Phillips apologized to Hank about singling him out for questioning about the car theft, Mia’s parents tell her about the Cultural Revolution in China: “My parents said that during the Cultural Revolution, my grandparents were locked up and shipped away. It didn’t matter whether they actually did anything wrong” (211). The Tangs did not want to live in a country where there was a chance something like that could happen to Mia.

Hank encourages Mia’s parents to take another chance on Mia’s future when he tells them the story of how he gave up on his love of swimming when it became too hard. Hank explained that he had worked hard and made a spot on his high school’s swim team. When he came in last place in the first competition, he gave up, a decision that he regrets. He encourages Mia’s parents not to give up on their dream just because they do not want to have to admit to their relatives in China how difficult life in America has been.

Even though it appears that all options have been exhausted when Mia does not win the essay contest and her aunt refuses to help pay for the purchase of the motel, Mia and her parents find a new option. Mia reaches out to all the people she knows who might be interested in investing in American property. The immigrants, in particular, believe it is a great idea: “If we can’t have the American dream ourselves, maybe we can have it together!” (271). Mia’s parents were surprised how many strangers invested in their dream, demonstrating that they believed in them and what they had in mind.

**The Value of Kindness**

The author contrasts reactions to kind people and reactions to unkind people to demonstrate the value of kindness. For instance, Hank and the weeklies repay the kindness that Mia and her family show them. Hank and Mia’s opinions of Yao demonstrate the thoughts that people have of those who do not show them kindness. Jason demonstrates that he is starting to understand the importance of kindness after his behavior changes when Mia tells him that he does not have to be like his father.

Hank notes how kind Mia and her family are to him and the weeklies as compared to the former managers. Mia befriends Hank and the others early on by sharing a cup of jasmine tea with them. This offer of friendship pays off as Hank rescues Mia when the drunk man assaults her, and then later runs off the men who beat up Ying when she tried to stop them from breaking into the front office. Later, Hank and the weeklies agree to help Mia and her parents buy the Calivista by putting all the money they have toward the purchase.

Because Yao is hateful to the weeklies and to Mia and her parents, their relationship illustrates what happens between people when no kindness is shown. For instance, Mia is proud when Hank makes a comment about Yao and insinuates that he considers Mia one of his group rather than a member of Yao’s group. Yao makes Mia and the others feel worthless. He calls them names and makes fun of them. In response, Mia, Hank, and the others work together to buy the hotel from Yao even though Yao does not think they are worthy of the purchase. Even Jason betrays his father in the end when he realizes there is a better way to treat people.

Jason tells Mia that he likes her, but Mia is revolted by that idea because Jason can be just as unkind as his father. After Mia rejects Jason, he responds by doing things, like stealing the pencil her father gave her, just to make her miserable. One day when Jason is tormenting a substitute teacher, Mia decides that she cannot take any more of Jason’s behavior. She tells him: “You don’t have to be your father” (228). Jason appears to take Mia’s criticism to heart because he chooses not to tell his father that he saw Mia’s parents sneaking nonpaying customers out of a hotel room. Jason also shares with Mia that his father is lying about having someone else who is interested in buying the motel.

**The Dangers of Racism and Injustice**

Front Desk argues that racism and injustice are dangerous on many levels because they cause division, put people in danger, and discourage change in society. Hank is a symbol of this divided society when he tells Mia that people look at him and see him as a criminal. Because Yao believes his managers at the motel are inferior to him, he refuses to upgrade security in the front office. Lupe describes the poor/rich roller coaster, the idea that people of a certain race or skin color are inferior and are not given the chance to take advantage of opportunities other people enjoy. This causes society to stagnate with the poor never given a chance to change their situation.

Because of the color of Hank’s skin, he is treated differently by society in general and specifically by the police. In the car theft incident, the police consider Hank their main suspect because he is Black. Hank later describes to Mia why he took the plea he was offered instead of trying to argue his case: “When people look at you, they see a nice, sweet Chinese girl. When they look at me do you know what they see? A criminal” (219). Hank feels divided from the rest of society as a result of the color of his skin. He believes he will always be seen as a criminal and will never be accepted for who he really is.

Racial bias and the unjust treatment of people who are different put people in danger. Hank is hurt when he loses his job simply because the police questioned him as a suspect in a theft. Mia and her parents are put in danger because Yao refuses to spend the money to properly protect the front office. When Mia suggests to Yao that he add some security features, he insinuates that she and her parents are not worth the expense. He asks her “You know what’s the difference between a good employee and a bad employee?” (62). When Mia shakes her head, he continues: “It’s not whether they’re hardworking or even whether they’re smart … It’s whether they know their place” (62).

Racial bias and unjust treatment also discourage change in society. Lupe tells Mia about the poor roller coaster and rich roller coaster. She explains how difficult it is for a person to get off the poor roller coaster and onto the rich one simply because poor people do not get the same opportunities as rich people, simply because they are poor. This is true of Mia’s parents. They had believed they would be able to earn a good living as managers of the Calivista, but Yao makes them work under conditions so strict they are barely able to survive. Because they have no money to seek a lawyer and sue for more just conditions, Yao believes that he will be able to control Mia’s parents by threatening to replace them with other immigrants who are looking for jobs if they do not comply. Yao does not take into consideration the friends that Mia and her family have and that they are able to put together the money to buy the hotel.

**The Parent/Child Relationship**

Front Desk demonstrates the stress that can infect a parent/child relationship based on the different ideas that each has for the child’s success. Mia, for instance, likes English and wants to develop her writing skills. Mia’s mother, however, pushes her daughter toward math, telling her that she will never be good in English. Mia’s father encourages his daughter to write if that is what she enjoys.

Mia imagines what it would be like to be able to speak and write like a native American. When Yao brags that Jason can speak English well because he is native, Mia repeats the word to herself: “Native. I mouthed the word. I wondered if I worked really hard, would I also be able to speak native English one day? Or was that something completely off-limits for me?” (6). Mia is disappointed when she receives a C-minus on an essay she wrote for school, but is determined to do better. She borrows and dictionary/thesaurus and begins using it to check her verb tenses and word usage. Even though she does not win the essay contest for the motel, she does receive a prize for writing the best story in her class.

Mia’s mother puts a wedge between her and her daughter when she compares her daughter’s English skills to a person riding a bike. Mia’s mother worked as an engineer in China and wants her daughter to be as strong in math as she was. When Mia says she is more interested in writing than in English, her mother tells her: “You know what you are in English? You’re a bicycle, and the other kids are cars” (145). The insinuation is that Mia will always struggle with English and will never be as good as the children born in America are in English.

Mia’s father tries to bridge the gap between his daughter and wife, but it is not until Ying admits she criticized Mia because she was embarrassed by her own English that their relationship starts to be repaired. Mia’s father takes her to an expensive stationery store and buys an expensive sparkly pencil. He tells her when he gives it to her that she is not a bike. He encourages Mia to write down everything that she experiences. Later, after Mia wins the Pizza Hut coupon, her mother shares with her the real reason why she was so critical of Mia’s interest in writing: “Math I could help you with, but, Mia, I cannot help you with English!” (253). The idea that Mia’s mother wants to help her but cannot eases Mia’s anger with her.

**The Meaning of Success**

Success can be defined in a variety of ways. Some, like Yao, believe success is measured by a person’s wealth. At one point, Mia thought success was a measure of whether a family had food to eat. Lupe believes success means not having a bed in the living room. Mia comes to realize that success is a measure of the friends one has.

Yao measures his success in terms of money and investments. Even though he is an immigrant, like Mia and her parents, Yao has forgotten what it was like to be new to America. He treats Mia and her parents as if they are inferior to him. He cheats them out of the salary they are owed and forces them to pay for broken machinery even though they do not have the money to afford those repairs. Yao is interested only in making himself richer. In the end, even Yao’s son betrays him because of his greedy ways.

Mia believed at one point the success was a measure of having enough to eat each day. Mia reconsiders her idea of success when Lupe tells her about the rich roller coaster and the poor roller coaster. She thinks that since she is getting free meals at school and is not hungry all the time any more she should upgrade her idea of success. Curious, Mia asks Lupe about her definition of success. Lupe says: “I think being successful in this country means having a living room without a bed in it” (83). Both girls have set very low standards for success.

After Mia’s friends all pitch in to invest in the Calivista, she realizes that money, food, and the location of beds are not the best measure of success. She believes success is measured in the friends one has. On Thanksgiving Mia tells Hank, her parents, and the other weeklies that she is thankful for them. Later, after Mia’s friends work together to buy the Calivista, she considers herself successful, not because she and her parents are motel owners, but because they have such loyal friends.

**Styles**

**Point of View**

This novel is told from the first-person point of view of Mia Tang. Because Mia is only ten she can give the child's view of the experiences as an immigrant from China. For instance, “We were living in our car that summer, which sounds like a lot of fun but actually wasn’t, because our car’s AC was busted” (1). Only a child would consider living in a car to be fun, whether or not the air-conditioner worked. Along with Mia’s unusual idea of what is fun, Mia also gives a fresh look at the way Blacks and immigrants are treated in America. She responds angrily when Yao reminds her that she was not supposed to rent rooms to bad people when she notes a guest was Black: “You said bad people, not Black people” (96). Mia is innocent enough that she does not hesitate to point out the problem with Yao’s way of thinking.

Mia’s story is one best told from the first-person point of view. If either of Mia’s parents were to have told the story, they would only be reporting from second hand what they believed Mia was experiencing. By making Mia the narrator, Yang is able to describe the challenges unique to children who are immigrants, such as being made fun of in school. When Hank accuses Mia of not understanding injustice, Mia wants to tell him: “No, you don’t understand! You don’t understand what it’s like to have to hold in your pee and not make a sound when you’re in the bathroom, and the popular girls walk in and start talking about you” (186). Mia’s first-person narration also gives the reader an emotional connection to her. When she begins her campaign to put together enough investors to buy the Calivista, the reader is rooting in her favor.

**Language and Meaning**

The author manages to teach a grammar lesson as she teaches children about racism and injustice. The book includes Mia’s original writing with her mistakes lined through and corrections written beside the mistakes. For instance, Mia writes about the security guard at the Topaz: “He [puts] put them on the list because he [seem] seems to think that all black customers are bad. But that’s (1) not true and (2) incredibly [mean] discriminatory” (213). Mia uses a dictionary and thesaurus to help her identify proper word usage, verb tenses, and spelling. Mia tells her reader what a thesaurus is: “A thesaurus, Mrs. T said, was a list of words that meant the same thing as other words. You could trade them freely, like you can trade one US dollar for eight Chinese renminbi” (126). Mia’s comparison of trading words to trading different forms of currency helps young readers understand how a thesaurus works.

When Mia writes the letter for Zhang in which she pretends to be a lawyer, Mia introduces additional writing terms. Mia narrates: “I worked on the letter all night long, making sure the tone, punctuation, and syntax was all right” (205). Again, Yang includes Mia’s original draft of the letter with the sections that send the wrong message crossed out and replaced with appropriate wording. For instance: “[If you don’t do it, you’ll be sorry.] Failure to do so will result in [big trouble] serious consequences. [And don’t lie and say you did because I’m gonna ask Mr. Zhang!] I will be [asking] following up with Mr. Zhang to see if you have returned his passport and ID” (204-205). Mia realizes that she must write the letter using the words and phrases that a lawyer would use instead of the words and phrases that a 10-year-old might use to make her point.

**Structure**

The exposition is given in the first several chapters of the novel as Mia describes the situations in which she and her parents have lived since coming to America. The exposition includes the situation when Mia and her parents find themselves at the Calivista. The action begins to rise as Mia realizes how unscrupulous Yao is and she puts together Plan B for her parents.

The climax comes when Yao visits the motel unexpectedly when there are Chinese immigrants sheltering there. Mia’s parents manage to sneak out of the office and warn the immigrants to leave while Mia is left to deal with Yao and the girl who left her pants at the motel.

The action falls when Mia learns that she did not win the motel in Vermont. The denouement comes when Mia, her family, and the other investors in the Calivista jump into the motel pool after they sign the papers and become motel owners.

**Quotes**

We were living in our car that summer, which sounds like a lot of fun but actually wasn’t, because our car’s AC was busted.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 1) **Importance**: Mia’s admission that her family was living in their car demonstrates the level of poverty to which they dropped when they came to America. Mia describes how they visited the Houston space center simply to take advantage of the free air conditioning.

Because it’s freer here,’ she finally said, which didn’t make any sense. Nothing was free in America. Everything was so expensive.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 1) **Importance**: Mia misunderstands her mother’s explanation for why they decided to move to America. When Ying says that America is “freer” (4), Mia relates that to money. Her mother means that they came to America for freedom, that Mia did not have to worry about being arrested and imprisoned without a trial.

I thought I could make the front desk better with all my spare keys and comments cards. But no card in the world could protect me from what I’d been avoiding since day one: One wrong buzz and it was all over.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 12) **Importance**: Mia does not recognize the danger associated with working at the front desk until a drunk man comes in and threatens her. She keeps the shirt she was wearing that day, the one he grabbed to pull her close to him to remind herself how quickly her job could become dangerous.

As much as I liked Lupe, she was just in a different world. Her and her perfect parents and her perfect dogs. It just wasn’t fair!”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 14) **Importance**: When Lupe first meets Mia, she tells her that she lives in a house with pet dogs and a father who goes on business trips. Mia believes that Lupe’s family is financially stable and perfect. As a result, she does not want to tell Lupe that her family lives in a motel that they manage.

Wait a minute, she’s black?’ he yelled. ‘I thought I told you not to rent to bad people!’”  
-- Yao (Chapter 21) **Importance**: Yao had told Mia that she should be able to recognize bad people by the way they looked. When he learns that she rented a room to Mrs. Robinson, a Black woman, he is angry because he had told her not to rent rooms to bad people. It is only at this point that Mia realizes that Yao believes that Black people are, without question, bad.

Mr. Yao said, taking their interrogation of Hank as evidence that his theory about black people was valid. He was wrong. The only thing it proved was that the police were just like him.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 21) **Importance**: When the police question Hank as a suspect in the theft of Mr. Lorenz’s car, Yao believes it proves he is right, that Black people are inherently bad. Mia sees beyond Yao’s justification. She realizes that it proves only that the police are just as racist as Yao.

You are not a bicycle,’ he said. / My eyes searched his. / ‘Do you understand?’ he asked.”  
-- Mia’s Father (Chapter 34) **Importance**: When Mia told her mother that she liked English, Ying compared Mia’s English skills to a person riding a bike in contrast to native English speakers whose English skills were like a person driving a car. Mia’s father buys her an expensive pencil, a symbol that Mia is better at English and smarter than her mother gives her credit. He tells her that she is not a bike, encouraging her love of English and writing instead of criticizing it.

So don’t you understand? People like us don’t go to Macy’s. Especially if we’re paying twenty dollars a day for Hank. They’re probably thinking we must have savings, and now they’re going to try to squeeze us for even more money. Oh God, oh God!”  
-- Mia’s Mother (Chapter 36) **Importance**: Mia’s mother fears that because Mrs. Yao and Jason saw her in Macy’s with the shopping bags that came from expensive stores, they will assume that they have money hidden somewhere. Ying fears that the Yaos will start pressing them to get even more money out of them.

Free rent? I’m sorry, but I don’t think you qualify,’ he said.”  
-- The Supervisor (Chapter 41) **Importance**: When the supervisor at the hospital learns that Mia and her family receive a place to live for free as part of their employment agreement, he says that he does not think they will qualify to have their fees waived. Mia is angry with him because their income falls so far below the federal poverty level.

Why do you think I took the plea? I know what the verdict would be if we went to trial. People look at me and see guilty.”  
-- Hank (Chapter 43) **Importance**: Hank warns Mia that she will not understand the extent of the racism he feels on a day-to-day basis. He shares with her that he took a plea deal even though he had been protecting Ying because he knew that a jury would see a criminal when they saw a Black man. He assumed in advance that they would not listen to him and would find him guilty.

I’m basically a slave,’ he cried. ‘I only got out today because Immigration came and raided us, so everyone had to flee through the secret tunnels!’”  
-- Uncle Zhang (Chapter 47) **Importance**: Zhang describes the way his employer treats him like a slave, making him work 18 hours a day and forcing him to hand over his passport and identification. Zhang says he only got away from his employer because immigration raided the restaurant. He tells Mia and her parents that he must go back to get his passport and identification.

Don’t be sorry. Be better,’ Hank said. ‘Next time you accuse a black man, stop and think.’”  
-- Hank (Chapter 50) **Importance**: Hank asks Officer Phillips, the officer who was determined Hank was guilty of stealing Mr. Lorenz’s car, to be better by not automatically assuming that any Black man was guilty. Hank told Phillips that he lost his job as a result of Phillips' assumption.

No, sweetheart,’ she said. ‘Because here people are innocent until proven guilty. For the most part, at least. That’s what you saw tonight.’”  
-- Mia’s Mother (Chapter 50) **Importance**: After Officer Phillips apologizes to Hank, Mia’s mother and father tell her that they moved to America because a person had to be proven guilty before going to prison. They tell her about the Cultural Revolution in China in which people were arrested and sent away for no reason.

Her voice was certain, positive. She looked right at me, her eyes a mixture of pain and sadness, but not sad like I’m-sad-you’re-not-going-to-win, sad like I’m-sad-you-actually-thought-you-could-win.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 56) **Importance**: Mia is upset by her mother when she insinuates that she is disappointed in Mia because Mia believed she could win the essay contest. Mia’s mother tells Mia that the essay contest was probably rigged. It is not the response Mia was expecting, but she is still disappointed that her mother did not think she had a chance at winning.

I stared at Jason. His brown eyes blazed with courage. / But it was his kindness that blew me away. / When the school bell rang, I ran.”  
-- Narrator (Chapter 66) **Importance**: Mia sees both the courage and the kindness in Jason’s eyes when he tells Mia that his father is bluffing when he tells them that he has another buyer who is offering more money. Mia’s admiration for Jason grows when he is willing to help her instead of advancing his father’s selfish demands.