

A Curriculum Guide to

Girl in Reverse

by Barbara Stuber

Themes explored in this guide are:

- International adoption
- Seeking birth parents
- Teens caught between cultures—too American or not American enough
- Bullying in the name of patriotism
- Parents supporting (or not supporting) these struggles with their kids
- Prejudice/segregation then and now
- Threat of war/ terrorism then and now
- How art broadens our understanding of culture
- How art inspires and educates us

About the book:

When Lily was three, her mother put her up for adoption, then disappeared without a trace. Or so Lily was told. Lily grew up in her new family and tried to forget her past. But with the Korean War raging and the fear of “Commies” everywhere, Lily’s Asian heritage makes her a target. She is sick of the racism she faces, a fact her adoptive parents won’t take seriously. For Lily, war is everywhere—the dinner table, the halls at school, and especially within her own skin.

Then her brainy little brother, Ralph, finds a box containing a baffling jumble of broken antiques—clues to her past left by her “Gone Mom.” Lily and Ralph attempt to match these fragments with rare Chinese artifacts at the art museum, where she encounters the artistic genius Elliot James. Elliot attracts and infuriates Lily—especially when he calls their first kiss “undimensional.” With the help of Ralph and Elliot, will Lily summon the courage to confront her own remarkable creation story?

Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts:

Wars come in all sizes: whole world, playground, classroom, even inside your own skin. My mittens are fists. I wipe my eyes, furious that I didn’t protect myself way back then. I should have stood up, fought back. But I didn’t. I didn’t know how. And now I’m still just me, still trying to ignore it.

...until today.

- Is it true that playgrounds and classrooms can be war zones? How so?
- Tell why Lily chose this day to protect herself.
- List prior situations in which Lily experienced prejudice as a result of her “skin.”
- Explain why Lily decided to walk out of Miss Arth’s class at this moment, rather than ignore the racial degradation?
- Describe the agitation, turbulence, and restlessness mounting within her.
 - Identify the source of her unrest.

- Do you think these feelings gave her the strength to stand up for herself? How so?
- Patriotism is defined as being devotion to one's country. Are there ways that the bullying acts of prejudice toward Lily could be considered patriotic? How so?

✍ **Writing Prompt—An Argument:** “The most cited—and misunderstood—idea today is patriotism,” states Brenda K. [\(Teen Ink\)](#). Do you agree? Consider today's political climate and/or that of the Fifties, the era during which *Girl in Reverse* is set, to support your view. Cite instances in the novel to validate your argument.

CCSS Alignment: RL.6.1, RL.6.2, RL.6.6, RL.6.10, RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.10, RL. 8.1, RL.8.10, RL.9-10.1, RL.11-12.1, W.6.1, W.6.4, W.6.5, W.7.1, W.7.4, W.7.5, W.7.9, W.8.1, W.8.4, W.8.5, W.9-10.1, W.9-10.4, W.9-10.5, W.11.12.1, W.11.12.4, W.11.12.5

“It’s not new. You wouldn’t remember it, but in grade school kids teased me all the time thinking I was Japanese. I didn’t even get what was going on.” I chew my thumbnail. “But it’s switched. Everybody’s prejudiced against Chinese people because they are Communists now and they’re trying to take over Korea. I’ve become the enemy because I am Chinese even though I’ve never been there and I know exactly zero about it.”

- Tell how Lily's perception of allies and enemies shifted throughout the story.
- Discuss others' perception of Lily in this regard. How did the notion of Lily being an ally and enemy shift?
- Define communism.
- Compare and contrast communism and American patriotism.
 - Are there ways the two are alike? Explain.
 - Are there ways that the two are different? How so?
- In today's current culture, does terrorism pose a threat to the American way of life? How so?
- Define Lily's desire. What does she want? Why can't she have it? What stands in her way?

✍ **Writing Prompt—A Narrative:** Craft a narrative in Lily's point of view in defense of herself. Write it as if she were talking to you directly. Let her explain her issues in light of today's political climate. Allow her to compare the prejudices she endured in the 1950s with those occurring today.

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The Chows are not huddled behind the Bamboo Curtain. They are not avoiding themselves. They're loud and colorful, making a living off their Chineseness.

- Define the term “Chineseness.”
- Explain why the Chow's bold “Chineseness” fascinates Lily.
- How is Lily caught between cultures, by not being fully American or fully Chinese?
- Tell why Lily is unable to ignore cultural differences any longer.
 - What sorts of events are taking place that are forcing her to consider cultural issues?

- What sorts of emotional responses are taking place that warrant exploring her cultural heritage?
- Explain how someone can avoid themselves.

✍ **Writing Prompt—Informative/Explanatory:** Lily states that she feels guilty for standing up for her “Chineseness.” Explore the various expressions of “Chineseness.” Explain why Lily feels guilty while the Chows seem to fully embrace the notion of “Chineseness” and why she cannot ignore it any longer.

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The first film features a man who is finding homes in America for “war waifs”—unbaptized babies with mixed Asian and American blood that nobody wants. A beaming crowd of dignitaries applauds as the orphans are unloaded from military planes. The man and his wife wave, surrounded by six waifs they have adopted themselves. The kids look too petrified to blink, despite the flashbulbs.

- List the commonalities Lily shares with the war waifs featured in the classroom film.
- Describe the differences between the waifs and Lily.
- Consider the motivation to adopt six war waifs, as the couple featured in the film apparently did.
 - Tell how having so many adopted brothers and sisters can be beneficial.
 - Predict some of the problems the children may have growing up in America.
- Explain why the dignitaries in the film are beaming and applauding.
- Discuss the cultural disconnect between Lily and her parents.
 - Do you think their conflict was inevitable? Why or why not?
 - Do you think this sort of cultural disconnection is an inevitable phenomenon in all international adoptions? How so?
- What are the pros and cons of international adoption? State and support your opinion.

✍ **Writing Prompt—Informative/Explanatory:** Foreshadowing is a literary tool used to give an advance sign of what is to come in the later parts of the novel. Explain how this film clip foreshadows events to come in *Girl in Reverse*. Cite examples from the text in your essay.

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I let my mind tumble back and I am little, reaching with both arms to hug Mamá around the neck. I pull in a deep breath. She still smells like sandalwood.

- Lily allows her mind to tumble back into the past. Could it be that there is a part of her that is protecting her from the truth? A part of her that desires to keep things as they are? To remain emotionally safe? How so?
- Explain the power of sensory memory in this scene.

- Lily had a physical connection with her birth mother, one that left an indelible imprint on her heart that she could not ignore. Tell how this memory caused the lie inside Lily to become restless enough to discover the truth about her birth parents.

✍ Writing Prompt—Informative/Explanatory and/or An Argument: Explore the motivation to discover one's birth parents. Tell how this act is an emotionally brave one. Consider if and when it is best for an adopted child to know their birth parents.

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“Our bodhisattva was the victim of a thousand-year wreck, the result of China’s political collapse, religious turmoil, chronic warfare. It was neglected, abused, and scattered. Our team saved this sacred sculpture from oblivion.”

- Is Dr. Benton’s depiction of China’s political collapse, religious turmoil, and chronic warfare part of the Chows’ “Chineseness.” Of Lily’s? How so?
- Define the word “compassion.”
- Explain the connection between compassion and the bodhisattva.
- What role does compassion play in healing neglect, abuse, and brokenness?
- Explain how the bodhisattva’s compassion helped to heal Lily’s emotional turmoil.
- The bodhisattva Dr. Benton is referring to in this passage is a physical piece of cultural art. Is it possible that the bodhisattva represents a metaphor for Lily’s state of being? How so?


✍ Writing Prompt—Informative/Explanatory: Write an opinion piece explaining the role that art plays in broadening the understanding of culture and, perhaps, even ourselves.

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“I wasn’t born the day you chose me, or I chose you, or we chose each other. I had almost four years already. You and Dad were the keepers of my little life story, my provenance, until I discovered your version wasn’t true.”

- Consider Lily’s parents’ motivation to conceal her true life story. Explore their intentions. Did they do so out of shame, the desire to control, or out of love for her?
- Tell of ways that Lily was actually born into a new life the day she was chosen for adoption.
- Explore the ways that Lily’s mother lived a lie.
- Why did Lily’s mother fabricate stories about the crystal and the compact?
- In what ways did Lily’s mother project her own inner demons onto Lily?
- Examine Ralph’s role in Lily’s search for truth.

- How did Lily’s “Chineseness” affect her relationship with Ralph? Did Ralph and Lily have a cultural disconnect? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that Lily respected his feelings while she pressed her parents for information? Explain your answer.
- Is it permissible to meet one’s own needs at the expense of another’s? How so?
- Do you think it is possible for a parent to support their children in truth when they are not able to live in truth themselves? Explain your answer using Lily and her mother as examples.
- Can lies be retold often enough to become a reality? Explain how this can or cannot happen.
- Are there times when the truth should be altered? Avoided? Covered up all together? If so, when and why?

 **Writing Prompt—Informative/Explanatory:** Provenance can be defined as the history of ownership of a valued object or work of art or literature. Explore the use of the word “provenance” as a metaphor for Lily’s journey to discover her personal history and self-worth, and to see herself as a thing of beauty.

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The Lie
by Lily Firestone

When I was four I swallowed a lie.
It sunk inside me, grew a shell, stayed hidden.
But the lie became restless.
It broke into bits and surfaced so I could not ignore it anymore.
The lie dissolved into truth and
showed up in the mirror.

The author began the novel with this poem written by the protagonist. Tell how these words serve as both an intriguing opening to the novel and an effective closing.

- Examine the word “hidden” as it was used in the story.
 - Tell what things were hidden.
 - Tell what emotions were hidden.
- Explain how the lie became restless.
- Discuss how the lie surfaced in such a way that it could not be ignored.
- Consider the use of mirrors and light in the story.
 - Mr. Howard’s prism theory
 - In Picasso’s painting
 - The antique compact as a tracking tool
 - As a reflection of the truth

- Explain how looking in reverse informs the present.

 **Writing Prompt—Informative/Explanatory:** Examine the use of metaphors in the poem. Choose one and analyze how its symbolic message was woven throughout the novel.

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Links for Further Research:

- [The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art](#)
- [Somewhere Between – the movie](#)
- [The Thinker](#)
- [Miniature Pair of Slippers of the Sui Dynasty](#)
- [Girl Before a Mirror by Picasso](#)
- [Atalanta and Meleager with the Calydonian Boar](#)
- [Ritual Disc with Dragon Motif](#)
- [Asia in the 1950s](#)
- [Chinese Calligraphy](#)
- [Boy Scouts in the 1950s](#)
- [Family Life in the 1950s](#)
- [International Adoption in the 1950s](#)
- [War Waifs](#)
- [Author Barbara Stuber](#)

References:

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<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/tps/1950.htm>
- “Adoption History—Interview with Barbara Melosh.”
<http://www.comeunity.com/adoption/adopt/interview-adoptionhistory.html>
- “Art Gallery.” Barbara Stuber. http://barbarastuber.com/novel-art-tour/#mg_ld_267
- “Family Life in the 1950s.” <http://www.mylearning.org/family-life-in-the-1950s/>
- Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. “Chinese Calligraphy.”
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chcl/hd_chcl.htm
- “History of the Boy Scouts of America.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Boy_Scouts_of_America#1950s

“In the Name of Patriotism.” *Teen Ink*. <http://www.teenink.com/opinion/all/article/9956/In-the-Name-of-Patriotism/>

Korean War Children's Memorial. <http://www.koreanwarorphans.org/the-war-years/kiddy-car-airlift/78-the-war-years/kiddy-car-airlift/132.html>

Somewhere Between. <http://www.somewherebetweenmovie.com/>

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Kansas City, Missouri. <http://nelson-atkins.org/>



Guide written by Deb Gonzales, a former classroom teacher, school administrator, and educational consultant. She earned her MFA in writing for children and young adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts and has published several early-readers. To review the wide variety of guides she's created, access her website at www.debbiegonzales.com.

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