

Teacher Discussion Guide for ***SECRET KEEPER*** by Mitali Perkins

Paperback classroom copy sets available from [Random House](#)

ABOUT THIS BOOK



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When her father loses his job and leaves India in 1974 to look for work in America, Asha Gupta, her older sister, Reet, and their mother must wait with Baba's brother and his family, as well as their grandmother, in Calcutta. Uncle is welcoming, but in a country steeped in tradition, the three women must abide by his decisions. Asha's only solace is her rooftop hideaway, where she pours her heart out in her diary, and where she begins a clandestine friendship with Jay Sen, the boy next door. Asha can hardly believe that she, and not Reet, is the object of Jay's attention. Then news arrives about Baba . . . and Asha must make a choice that will change their lives forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mitali Perkins was born in Kolkata, India and immigrated to the States with her family at age seven. She's written several other award-winning novels for young readers, including *Monsoon Summer*, *Rickshaw Girl*, the *First Daughter* books, *Bamboo People*, and *The Sunita Experiment*. Find out more about the author at her website, (mitaliperkins.com) or her blog (mitaliblog.com)

AWARDS

Skipping Stone Honor Award, IRA Notable Books for a Global Society, Massachusetts Book Award shortlist, ALA Amelia Bloomer Award.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Teacher,

I invite you and your students to travel to the city of my birth, Kolkata (Calcutta), to meet Asha Gupta, a young woman who would do almost anything to keep her sister safe. As you connect with Asha, I hope my story will be a mirror into family and gender issues we all face as well as a window into another time and place.

The character of Jay came to mind when my mother told me one of her secrets. She was a teenager growing up in Kolkata, India, much like Asha and Reet, and they had moved to a similar house with extended family.

One afternoon, Ma went on the rooftop to let her long hair dry in the sun. A window next door flew open, and a neighbor guy started a conversation. It was sweet, innocent by Western standards, but flirtatious nonetheless, and risky for a girl and boy who could never marry for love. They spoke a few more times, and soon it was clear: he liked her, and she liked him.

Somehow, my grandmother found out. Next thing my mother knew, the

servants had boarded up the door to the roof, and my grandmother was issuing a stern diatribe about shaming the entire family.



My own parents' marriage was arranged shortly after that. They saw each other briefly before their wedding in front of the extended family, and Ma served Baba tea, but they first spoke to each other on their wedding night. The good news is that Ma did get her happy ending, as I trust Reet and Asha both will in the book: my parents (see photo) have been married for over fifty years now, and they adore each other.

Catch the book trailer [here](#) or watch a librarian [book talk](#) the novel. You may also contact me at mitaliperk-at-yahoo.com if you're interested in having me skype into your classroom for a quick, free chat with your students.

Affectionately,
Mitali Perkins

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. The French translation of the book is titled *Waiting for New York*. Brainstorm other alternate title possibilities for *Secret Keeper*. Would you keep the original? Why or why not?
2. How does Ma help or hinder the girls' situation?
3. Doors, gates, and locks are used as metaphors throughout the novel. Find a few and discuss why and how they reflect themes in the story.
4. One reviewer called the book an "anti-fairy tale." Do you agree? How is the hope of happily-ever-after depicted in the book?
5. Imagine a sequel that takes place in the 1990s, twenty years into the future for Asha and Reet. What do you hope their lives are like?

6. Ask students to write a reflective piece based on this question: Do you have a “secret keeper” where you turn to confess secrets and explore thoughts and ideas?
7. *History and Economics*: India’s economy is growing fast. Ask students to research changes for women in India since the time of the novel, both in cities as well as in villages.
8. *Politics*: Indira Gandhi was the first and only female Prime Minister of India in the 1970s. Read the author’s note and discuss the controversial decision Gandhi made to impose martial law on India. Could the government limit our personal liberties in the United States? Why or why not? Explore recent Homeland Security laws that have passed in the United States.
9. *Literature: Secret Keeper* was written partly in homage to Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, so you might want students to read excerpts of that novel as well. How is Asha’s life similar to Jo’s? How are they different? Discuss the limitations and expectations these girls faced in their contexts: Asha in Kolkata, India in the 1970s, and Jo in Concord, Massachusetts in the mid-19th century.
10. *Culture*: Order in an Indian lunch for your students. Buy (check eBay) or borrow a sari, watch this [youtube video](#) demonstrating how to put one on, and try it with your students.

VOCABULARY

p. 42:	admonish
p. 42:	inadvertently
p. 53:	disconcerting
p. 53:	ogled
p. 56:	retort
p. 56:	averted
p. 59:	abating
p. 60:	fervently
p. 67:	recluse
p. 71:	slathered
p. 71:	retorted
p. 73:	wistfully
p. 86:	nape
p. 86:	coronet
p. 97:	malicious
p. 106:	cower
p. 106:	escapade
p. 106:	sauntered
p. 134:	stupor

p. 211: rapturously

MORE TO EXPLORE

Mitali Perkins' [website](http://www.mitaliperkins.com): www.mitaliperkins.com

Mitali Perkins' [blog](http://www.mitaliblog.com): www.mitaliblog.com

Annotated [bibliography](http://poojamakhijani.com/sakidlit.html) of South Asia and the South Asian diaspora in children's and YA literature: <http://poojamakhijani.com/sakidlit.html>

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