

English 9 Honors: Summer Reading Guide for *Girl in Translation* by Jean Kwok

The details below will help you enjoy and understand *Girl in Translation* this summer. **Please note that the exercises described below are OPTIONAL. They are for your own benefit, and will not be collected or graded.**

Nevertheless, it is highly recommended that you do **annotate** the novel as you read it (see “As You Read the Novel,” below). This will help you remember what you have read and be able to dive right in when we begin class in the fall.

Before You Read the Novel

Time needed: About an hour

Check out the following questions and videos. You can simply think about your answers to these questions, or jot down your responses.

1. Get to know the author: Jean Kwok was born in Hong Kong in 1958 and immigrated to Brooklyn as a child. She earned her undergraduate degree from Harvard and an MFA in fiction writing from Columbia University. After working as an English teacher and a Dutch-English translator at Leiden University in the Netherlands, she became a full-time writer. [Watch this seven-minute video of Jean Kwok speaking about her background and the inspiration for this book.](#)
2. Get to know the setting: *Girl in Translation* is set in Chinatown, New York City, during the early 1980s. [Watch the 28-minute documentary “Chinatown: Immigrants in America” \(dir. John Alpert, Yoko Maruyana, and Keiko Tsuno, 1976\)](#) to get a feel for the place and many of the issues raised in the book, including garment factory labor, the language barrier, and housing.
3. Going further: In the book, Kimberly and her mother immigrate from Hong Kong, China, to Brooklyn for the chance at a better life. Kimberly also relates how her grandparents lost their land and fortune during the Cultural Revolution in mainland China during the 1950s. Take a few minutes to conduct an internet search for the following: (1) the location of Chinatown within New York City, (2) the location of Hong Kong (3) the history of Hong Kong (colonized by Britain in

the 1800s, it was returned to Chinese rule in 1997), (4) the Cultural Revolution in China, which was launched by Mao Zedong in 1966 and lasted until his death in 1976.

As You Read the Novel

Time needed: No extra time is needed. You will add these notes as you read the novel!

If you have a hard copy of the novel, read with a pen/pencil in hand. As you read, use margin notes (marginalia) to mark key material. These marks can include check marks, question marks, stars, arrows, brackets, and written words and phrases. Create your own system for marking what is important, interesting, questionable, emotionally moving, and so on. We will talk more about techniques and uses of annotation during the fall.

In addition, circle words you do not know, and make a list of these words inside the back cover of the book so you can look them up later. ☺

After You Read the Novel

Time needed: About 20-30 minutes, or longer.

Consider doing one of the following to respond to the novel. Set aside a half hour and a quiet space to reflect and write!

ONE. Coming of Age: The theme for our course this year is “coming of age.” In the simplest terms, coming of age refers to a young person’s transition from being a child to being an adult. In many cultures and times in history, a young person’s coming of age was marked by a special ceremony or observance. (You might be familiar with examples of these ceremonies, which include a bar or bat mitzvah, a confirmation, or a quinceañera.) With or without a formal ceremony, coming of age involves acquiring new responsibilities, along with new rights and freedoms. There is also a change in social identity. In coming of age, a person ends their childhood role and becomes a full-fledged adult member of the community.

Pause here and freewrite about the ways that *Girl in Translation* can be considered a coming-of-age novel. What are the new responsibilities and the new rights and freedoms that Kim obtains? What responsibilities and rights or freedoms do *you* expect to obtain as you come of age?

TWO. The American Dream: *Girl in Translation* is the story, among other things, of an immigrant family's rise out of poverty. Consider these two definitions of the American Dream:

The American dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society in which upward mobility¹ is possible for everyone.

(www.investopedia.com)

American dream: the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved.

(Oxford Languages)

Does *Girl in Translation* make you more optimistic or more pessimistic about people's chances of achieving the American dream? Why? Freewrite for five to ten minutes about your response.

THREE. Mirrors and windows: Works of literature can be "mirrors" as well as "windows." A story acts as a "mirror" when it is relatable, revealing our own experiences and feelings to us; it is a "window" when it enlarges our sense of the world by showing us lives and experiences beyond what we have known. Think for a few minutes about a way that the novel has been a "mirror" for you, as well as how it's been a "window." Be specific. Jot down your thoughts.

¹ **upward mobility**: the movement of a person, group, or class to a higher position of power or status. Upward mobility might include obtaining more money, better living conditions, better job opportunities, higher social standing, leadership positions, etc.