

# MESSY ROOTS

## EDUCATORS & BOOK CLUBS GUIDE



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# TEACHING GRAPHIC NOVELS

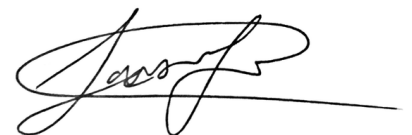
Graphic novels are among the first books I ever read after immigrating to the United States. Despite being enrolled in my elementary school's English as a Second Language program, I reaped the fastest improvements by scouring the nascent Comics section of my public library every weekend. My instructors were The Justice League, English-translated volumes of Naruto, and Saturday morning re-runs of Blues Clues. It's no surprise that comics has become my choice of storytelling today in our ever-growing multilingual world.

Some educators I've met have questioned the need to teach graphic novels when there's plenty of great prose literature already. In response, I like to inquire back: "Why must graphic novels be *in competition* with prose novels? How can kids benefit from both?"

Graphic novels are an effective entry-point for readers who learn through visual and tactile methods. Many of the activities I've created in the Discussion Guide below exercise students' creativity in less daunting ways than traditional essay writing. Many educators have written to me that their students continue to create comics about their own lives long after I've visited their schools.

Unlike students of previous generations, kids today are already entrenched in comics. A raise of hands will show a sea of hardcore manga fans or kids who've grown up on Raina Telgemeier's and Dav Pilkey's works. This Educators & Book Clubs Guide is meant to supplement their natural curiosity and enthusiasm for the medium. I hope Messy Roots will leave just as much of a lasting impression as those that came before it.

Thank you,  
Laura Gao



## RESOURCES ON TEACHING GRAPHIC NOVELS

[Graphic Novels Guide from Penguin Random House](#)

[Graphic Novels Educators Guide from Random House Graphics](#)



RETIRED POKEMON MASTER,  
PICTIONARY CHALLENGER



FISH ENTHUSIAST  
LEGEND OF ZELDA FAN ARTIST

## LAURA GAO

she/her and they/them

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**Laura Gao (she/they)** is a queer author, illustrator, bread vacuum, and everything in between. Gao immigrated from China to Texas, where their career blossomed from doodling on Pokémon cards to being featured on NPR, the Library of Congress, the MoCA, and most notably, their parents' fridge. Their works include the viral webcomic, "The Wuhan I Know", and the bestselling graphic memoir, *Messy Roots*. Their newest book, *Kirby's Lessons on Falling (In Love)*, will be released in 2025.

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**Weiwei Xu (she/her)** is an artist of picture books, comics, concept art, and backgrounds for animation and video games. She loves adding Chinese folklore and casual fantasy in her art. She has a Science degree, which, while not particularly useful, occasionally manifests in her art. When not drawing, she'll be cooking up a storm(-y bowl of noodles), or deep-diving into local forest trails and internet rabbit holes.

# MESSY ROOTS

## A GRAPHIC MEMOIR OF A WUHANES AMERICAN

After spending her early years in Wuhan, China, riding water buffalos and devouring stinky tofu, Laura immigrates to Texas, where her hometown is as foreign as Mars--at least until 2020, when COVID-19 makes Wuhan a household name.

In *Messy Roots*, Laura illustrates her coming-of-age as the girl who simply wants to make the basketball team, escape Chinese school, and figure out why girls make her heart flutter.

Insightful, original, and hilarious, toggling seamlessly between past and present, China and America, Gao and Xu's debut is a tour de force of graphic storytelling.



## ACCOLADES

**INDIES NEXT LIST FINALIST**



**TEXAS MAVERICKS LIST FINALIST**



**NYPL BEST BOOKS OF 2022**



**INDIES INTRODUCE LIST FINALIST**



**GOLDEN POPPY AWARD WINNER**



**CALA BEST BOOKS OF 2023 AWARD**



**RECIPIENT OF THREE STARRED REVIEWS**



**HARVEY AWARDS FINALIST**



**GREEN MOUNTAIN BOOK AWARD NOMINEE**



**GOODREADS CHOICE AWARDS FINALIST**



**CYBIL AWARD WINNER**



**BLACK EYED SUSAN AWARD NOMINEE**



# HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXT

## COVID-19 AND THE RISE OF ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asians around the world faced hate crimes stemming from xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering of the virus. Several U.S. politicians stoked the fire further by referring to COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus", "Wuhan Virus" and "Kung Flu". According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2022, 1 out of 3 Asian Americans know someone who has been threatened or attacked. This number rose to 40% for Chinese adults. The organization Stop AAPI Hate received more than 11,000 self-reported incidents of anti-Asian discrimination.

In 2021, Asian Americans and allies protested nationally against this injustice, rallying behind slogans like "Stop Asian Hate" and "Hate is a Virus". By May, with overwhelming support from Congress, President Biden signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act to fund resources to combat anti-Asian racism.

## "THE WUHAN I KNOW"

During this period, Laura Gao resided in San Francisco, where several cases of violence against Asian seniors rocked the city. Their fear was torn in several directions - fear for their own safety, their parents' safety in Texas, and their extended family's well-being in Wuhan, China, where the first deathly wave of COVID-19 was discovered.

However, Gao decided to channel these fears into their art. By publishing a webcomic called "The Wuhan I Know", Gao hoped to create both a love letter to their hometown and a rallying call for Asian Americans. When the comic went viral on Twitter and was featured on global news, Gao expanded it into their memoir, *Messy Roots*.

## FURTHER READING

[Pew Research Center Study](#)  
[Asian Americans Advancing Justice](#)  
[Stop Asian Hate Movement](#)  
[NIH Study on Anti-Asian Racism Impacts](#)  
[Report on Anti-Asian Racism by the](#)  
[California Department of Justice](#)



# THE WUHAN I KNOW

## WHERE IS WUHAN?

Wuhan is the capital of Hubei Province in central China. With a population of over 11 million, it's the biggest city in Hubei and the 9th most populous in China. Its population rivals cities like New York City, London, and Tokyo. Resting between two major rivers, the Yangtze and Han Rivers, Wuhan is a major transportation and economic hub, boasting dozens of ports, state-of-the-art bullet trains, and other forms of transportation, coining it by some as "the Chicago of China".



## WHAT IS WUHAN KNOWN FOR?

Wuhan is home to several landmarks, including its eleven Yangtze River bridges, the Yellow Crane Tower, and the French Quarters in Hankou.

The Yellow Crane Tower (黄鹤楼 Huánghè Lóu) was built in 220 AD by the Emperor Sun Qian. Donning an extricate coat of red and gold, the tower illuminates during sunset.

## WHAT IS WUHAN'S HISTORICAL MARK?

During the Qing Dynasty, much of China's economy had been seized by western powers. Hankou, a district of Wuhan, became a trading hub for the French. Much of the French architecture still remains today, including the French Consulate and the former Customs House.



In 1911, Wuhan became the site of the turning point in the Chinese Revolution against the Qing rule. Led by Sun Yatsen of the Kuomintang party, the Wuchang Uprising ended 2,000 years of dynastic rule and established modern day China. Afterwards, Wuhan briefly served as the capital of China in 1927 and again in 1937 during WWII.



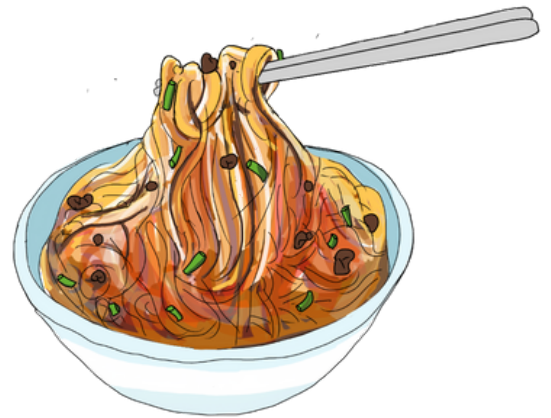
## WUHAN'S STREET FOOD

Wuhan's province, Hubei, is known for one of China's ten major styles of cooking. With a history of more than 2,000 years, Hubei cuisine flaunts a wide array of spicy and salty street food and an unmatched love for breakfast, called guozao (过早). On any morning, one can wake up to countless stalls lining the streets as aunties and uncles fry up noodles in giant woks, and scoop up tubs of soy milk over propane tanks.

Some of my favorites highlighted in Messy Roots are:

### HOT AND DRY NOODLES (热干面 RÈ GĀN MIÀN)

Freshly boiled noodles mixed with sesame paste. Usually topped with pinches of ground meat and preserved vegetables.

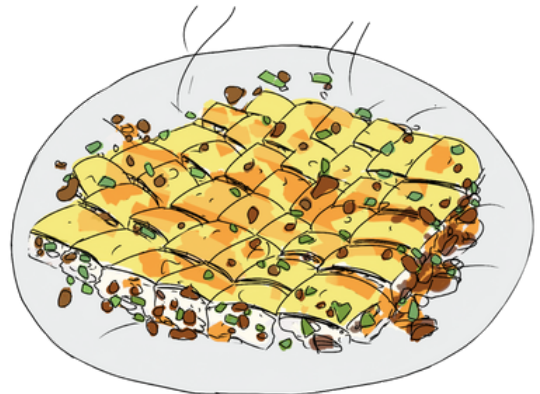


### SPICY DUCK NECK (鸭脖子 YĀ BÓZI)

Cuts of duck neck marinated in extremely hot spices that wake you up immediately!

### BEAN SKIN "OMELET" 豆皮 (DÒU PÍ)

Savory sticky rice, egg, meat, and mushrooms wrapped in bean skin and fried on a giant wok. This is 100% so bad, yet so good for you.





# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## PROLOGUE AND CHAPTER 1: THE WUHAN I KNEW

- Why was Laura upset at her friend in the prologue?
- What is the significance of the author's choice in portraying her friend's prejudices about Chinese culture during a ping-pong match?
- **Art Literacy:** Why are some speech bubbles outlined in blue vs. black? Why are different types of speech bubbles used (e.g. scribbles, pictographs, dotted lines)?
- **Art Literacy:** In what ways does the art depict how alienated Laura feels in the U.S.?
- **Art Literacy:** Where does the color scheme change across scenes? What is the illustrator trying to convey with these different colors?
- **Exercise:** Discuss in small groups. Have there been times in which you felt alienated at school or elsewhere? In what ways did you try to fit in?
- **Exercise:** Draw a short comic about the meaning, origin, or story of your name. Students can ask their parents or come up with their own story if there isn't one. ("Say My Name, Say My Name" Workshop in the [Interactive School Visits Guide](#).)

## CHAPTER 2: DISS (DECEPTION FOR IMMIGRANT SIBLING SOLIDARITY)

- What is the significance of choosing a name for Laura's younger brother, Jerry?
- What dilemma does Laura and Jerry face at the airport?
- **Art Literacy:** On page 29, the illustrator transforms the 2x2 panel grid into more than just a panel containing art - it also serves as a window where the smoke escapes. In what ways does this trick elevate the art?
- **Art Literacy:** How do the different video game illustrations enhance the story? Can you guess which video games the author played as a child that inspired her?
- **Art Literacy:** On page 32, the dialogue from the mother's nagging shifts from English to Chinese across two panels. What is the author trying to convey with this?
- **Exercise:** Are there secret rules or oaths between you and your siblings? Write or draw a fake contract between you and your siblings, similar to page 22.
- **Exercise:** The author portrays several habits unique to their immigrant family experience, such as storing sewing supplies in cookie tins and reusing containers for ingredients. Discuss in small groups. What are some unique habits your family has? Do they share similarities with any other classmates? Illustrate these habits in a short comic.

## CHAPTER 3: MATHLETE TO ATHLETE

- What are the differences between Coppell and the other schools Laura attended?
- Why do you think Laura did not go up on stage for her award?
- Why was Laura upset about being matched with the only other Asian on the basketball team?

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## CHAPTER 3: MATHLETE TO ATHLETE (CONTINUED)

- What is a micro-aggression? What are the micro-aggressions Laura hears during lunch?
- **Exercise:** Discuss in small groups. Have you ever experienced any micro-aggressions? How did they make you feel?

## CHAPTER 4: MESSY ROOTS AND RIPPED GENES

- Why did Laura resent having to go to Chinese school?
- What kinds of pressures did Laura face as the oldest child in an immigrant family? Why was this at odds with their own desires?
- **Art Literacy:** In what ways does the title “Messy Roots and Ripped Genes” appear throughout the chapter?
- **Art Literacy:** What influenced Laura to shave off her eyebrow? Which illustrations show the beauty standards she felt beholden to?
- **Exercise:** Discuss in small groups. What languages do you know? How do they differ from each other in writing, speech, or meaning? Draw a short comic about a word that’s expressed in two different language, and highlight the similarities and differences. (“Ni Hao, Goodbye!” Workshop in the [Interactive School Visits Guide](#)).
- **Exercise:** Write a letter to your parents and have them respond in another language. Students who share only one language with their parents can get creative by using emojis, “yoda-speak”, Shakespearean Old English, or another short-hand. Compare and contrast the two letters. What’s lost in translation? What meaning has been morphed completely?

## CHAPTER 5: MERRY JERRY CHRISTMAS

- What are the parallels between the pages Laura read from *American Born Chinese* and her experience with her brother during Christmas?
- What changes did Laura have to make for the Elf on the Shelf tradition to fit her family?
- What do you think was the one key ingredient Laura’s family was missing during Christmas?
- In what ways does being a part of two cultures affect the ways Laura thinks about food?
- **Art Literacy:** How does the illustrator show a time skip on pages 70-71?
- **Art Literacy:** How does color convey the shift in mood on pages 70-75?
- **Exercise:** What cultural holidays does your family celebrate? Which traditions were passed down and which ones were newly created? Make a short comic illustrating these traditions.

## CHAPTER 6: THE WUHAN I KNEW?

- What’s the significance of the Chang’e folktale at the beginning of the chapter?
- Why did Laura feel insecure during her first meal with her relatives?

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## CHAPTER 6: THE WUHAN I KNEW? (CONTINUED)

- What do you think Laura’s mother thinks about the changes happening in their hometown?
- **Art Literacy:** In what ways do the shifts in color schemes portray different settings?
- **Art Literacy:** Pages 90–91 are mostly silent, relying on the art to convey emotions. What is the art telling you about Laura’s interaction with the cafe worker?
- **Exercise:** What are your favorite foods from your culture? What memories are associated with them whenever you eat them? Write out a recipe for your favorite food, but instead of listing real ingredients, list the memories, emotions, settings, and people you associate with it. (The “I” in Foodie Workshop in the [Interactive School Visits Guide](#)).
- **Exercise:** What are some folktales you know from childhood? Are there any passed down from your family or culture? Create a short comic retelling that folktale but with you as the main character. How would you react to the conflicts in the story? Which characters are your allies or your enemies? If you could change one thing about the story, what would it be? (“Once Upon A Time” Workshop in the [Interactive School Visits Guide](#)).

## CHAPTER 7: TAKE ME HOME, COUNTRY ROADS

- What are the ways Laura and her cousins bond despite their cultural differences?
- What pressures do you think Laura’s father faced in regards to his family?
- **Art Literacy:** What are some recurring motifs you’ve noticed in the last few chapters (e.g. the rabbit in the moon on page 112 and the White Rabbit candy on page 104)?
- **Exercise:** What words do only you and your family or friends use? These can be words from a different language, words unique to a dialect, nicknames, or even inside jokes. Make a dictionary or glossary of these words and their definitions, similar to the one on page 101.
- **Exercise:** Discuss in small groups. What are customs or unspoken rules in your culture that someone from the outside wouldn’t understand? Reference page 92 for examples.

## CHAPTER 8: HIGH SCHOOL WOO-SICAL

- How did Laura feel about other Asians at her high school? Why do you think she felt this way?
- How did being on the basketball team affect Laura’s self-image and confidence?
- What caused Laura’s feelings for Hank to change? What insecurities did Laura feel about dating in general?
- **Art Literacy:** Which previous page does page 123 mirror? Why did the illustrator decide to juxtapose these two scenes together?
- **Exercise:** Discuss in small groups. What would you have done in Laura’s shoes in this chapter? Write a letter to high school Laura with your encouragement.

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## CHAPTER 9: BENCHED

- What caused Laura’s downwards spiral in this chapter?
- Why do you think the author purposefully left “sui ni” untranslated on page 141?
- **Art Literacy:** In pages 135–136, the illustrator portrays Laura being benched across several mirrored panels. In what ways does this repetition stress her predicament?
- **Art Literacy:** In what ways do the open skies of Texas juxtapose against how Laura was feeling internally?
- **Art Literacy:** Based on the art, what do you think Laura and her dad are thinking internally?
- **Exercise:** Write in your journal. Do you remember a time in which your stresses seemed to pile on endlessly? What caused those stresses? How did you handle them? Write a letter of encouragement to your younger self based on what you know now.

## CHAPTER 10: HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

- Why did Laura feel embarrassed when Sree defended her against the boys in the hallway?
- What lessons did Laura take away from Sree’s advice for her painting?
- In what ways did religion influence Laura’s family and life?
- **Art Literacy:** What do the elements on the fridge on page 142 tell you about Laura’s family?
- **Art Literacy:** What’s the significance of Laura’s painting in relation to her own life?
- **Exercise:** Write a letter to Future You. Where do you hope Future You is living and with who? What do you wish they were doing or have already accomplished by then? Students can also use FutureMe.org to schedule an email to themselves for the future.

## CHAPTER 11: CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER

- In what ways does Laura’s perceptions of the different “types” of Asians combat against *and* feed into stereotypes?
- Why did Laura throw away the cultural show invitation from the CSA club?
- Was there a right or wrong side at the CSA Lunar New Years Party? In what ways did each person’s accusations of each other amplify their biases?
- **Art Literacy:** Why do you think the illustrator depicted Laura’s transition to college with a video game sequence?
- **Art Literacy:** How does the Unlocked Character reflect Laura’s painting from Chapter 10?
- **Exercise:** Create your own video game character. Draw its figure, weapon of choice, sidekick, and outfit. Write down its character name, special powers, and weaknesses. Discuss the ways this character reflects yourself or differs.
- **Exercise:** Discuss in small groups. What is a stereotype? What kinds of stereotypes have you heard about people like yourself? Why are stereotypes harmful?

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## CHAPTER 12: WHITE RABBIT CANDY

- What's the significance of the white rabbit candy history lesson and what symbolism does it show throughout the chapter? Where else do you see it appear in the book?
- What takeaways did Laura receive from her talk with Yejin? In what ways do the two bond over cultural similarities despite having two different backgrounds?
- What causes Laura to decide to enroll in Chinese Language and Culture classes?
- **Art Literacy:** In what ways does the ominous blue and striking yellow opposing colors impact the mood of the chapter?
- **Exercise:** Choose your favorite childhood candy or snack and research the history behind it. Create a short comic about your learnings: When and where was it created? Has the flavor or name changed since then? What was the first memory you have of eating it? If you could go back in time and talk to the inventor on the day it was created, what would you say?
- **Exercise:** Write in your journal about a time you misunderstood someone or assumed something about them. How did it make them feel? What did you learn from it?

## CHAPTER 13: Q&A

- What's the significance of the chapter title "Q&A"?
- Why was coming out to Yejin the hardest for Laura?
- Where in previous chapters did the author foreshadow Valerie as a potential love interest?
- **Art Literacy:** What's the significance of the BuzzFeed quiz Laura takes? In what ways does the creative format of a quiz enhance the story?
- **Art Literacy:** In what ways does the size and shape of the panels in pages 186-187 affect the pacing and meaning of the scene?

## CHAPTER 14: DISASTROUS MASTERPIECE

- In what ways did the CSA Cultural Show help Laura unravel her feelings about her identity?
- What does the giant rabbit spirit represent? Why does Laura need to confront it?
- In what ways can satire and comedy bring light to serious issues? Where else has it been successful? In what ways can it be reductive?
- **Exercise:** Discuss in small groups. Have you ever felt stuck between two worlds, cultures, or sides? What were the challenges? What were the advantages?
- **Exercise:** What's an internal battle you're facing right now? Create a short comic in which that conflict is personified as a giant monster or creature, and you are the hero fighting it. ("Unleash the Beast" Workshop in the [Interactive School Visits Guide](#)).

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## CHAPTER 15: BAYSIAN ON THE BEST COAST

- What do you think is the significance of Laura's haircut in San Francisco?
- How has the meaning of home changed for Laura throughout the course of the book?
- **Art Literacy:** Why do you think the illustrator used different color schemes to represent Texas vs. San Francisco/University of Pennsylvania? What emotions do the colors convey?
- **Exercise:** How many times have you moved in your life? Create a fake social media post for each move, illustrating your very first day. How did you feel? Who were you with? What did you do? Choose a different color scheme for each place depending on the moods.

## CHAPTER 16: STRANGER IN MY OWN HOME

- Why did the author choose to narrate her experience at the grocery store with a podcast?
- What was the author's purpose in recalling previous scenes in her life on pages 232-233? How does this connect to the prologue?
- What were Laura and her dad's opposing views on how to deal with anti-Asian racism during COVID-19? Who do you agree with?
- What's the significance of Laura cutting her mom's hair?
- What important revelations did Laura learn while cooking with her dad? How did this change her understanding of her parents growing up?
- What did Laura try to confess to her dad at the end of the chapter? Why didn't she go through with it?
- **Art Literacy:** Food serves as important imagery and connection to Laura's culture in *Messy Roots*. What kinds of food imagery did you witness in this chapter? How did they enhance your understanding of the story?
- **Exercise:** Think about a vivid memory you shared with a family member or a friend. Write it down and recount it to that person. Then, ask them to recount and write down *their* version of the memory to you. Compare the similarities and differences in these accounts. Why are memories sometimes unreliable? How do our emotions and biases impact them?
- **Exercise:** Journal separately or discuss in small groups. What was your COVID-19 experience? Was your family or someone else you know impacted greatly? Did you encounter any stresses or conflicts? Who were the people who helped you get through it?

## CHAPTER 17: THE WUHAN I LOVE

- In what ways has Wuhan changed since the last few times Laura was there?
- In what new ways was Laura able to bond with her relatives in China?

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## CHAPTER 17: THE WUHAN I LOVE (CONTINUED)

- Do you think Laura has completed her journey in finding her identity and home? Why or why not?
- What's the significance of the meaning behind Laura's name throughout the book?
- **Art Literacy:** A common literary trick is to mirror the ending and beginning scenes, signifying a "return" journey of the main character who has grown. What parts of this chapter "return" to the first chapter, *The Wuhan I Knew*? For example, the mahjong piece shown in Chapter 1 is 东, the word for "east", while the piece shown in the last chapter is 西, the word for "west".
- **Art Literacy:** In what ways has the title "Messy Roots" appeared throughout the book? What other repeating motifs can you recall?
- **Exercise:** Each location in *Messy Roots* is characterized by a unique color palette that reflects the relationship Laura had with it. For example, the muddy yellows and browns in the Texas scenes represent Laura's feelings of being suffocated or boxed-in there, while the Wuhan scenes are painted with vibrant greens and oranges for a nostalgic, mystical feel. Think about every place you've ever lived. Draw a setting from each place and color them with 1-2 colors each that reflect your feelings towards it.
- **Exercise:** The art of comics share similarities with the art of theater. A comic script looks very similar to a screenplay, depicting scene changes, character dialogue, and actions. Pair up with a partner and choose a short scene from *Messy Roots* to write a comic script for. Use green for *art direction*, or anything that will be acted out and not verbalized. For example:

*(Cut to full page panel of me opening up the oven door and a fire rages out. Next shot of me slamming the door closed with sweat on my forehead.)*

Me: ohmygodohmyGODOHMYGOD

*(Cut to Jerry holding his head tightly, face red.)*

Jerry: WHAT DO WE DO?! Call 911?!!

*(I shoot him a death glare.)*

Me: No way! Would you rather die from a fire or from mom and dad?

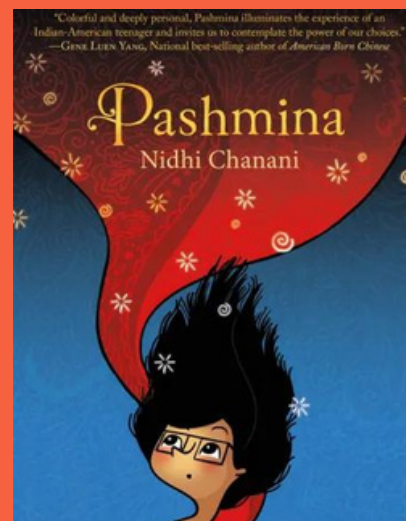
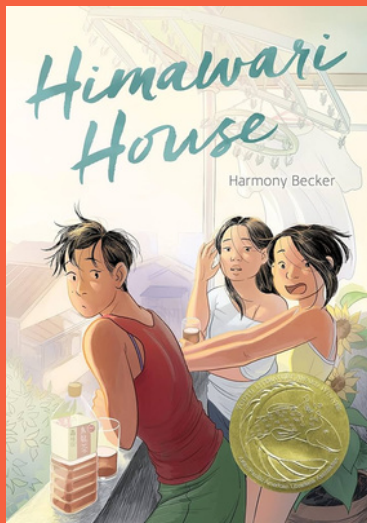
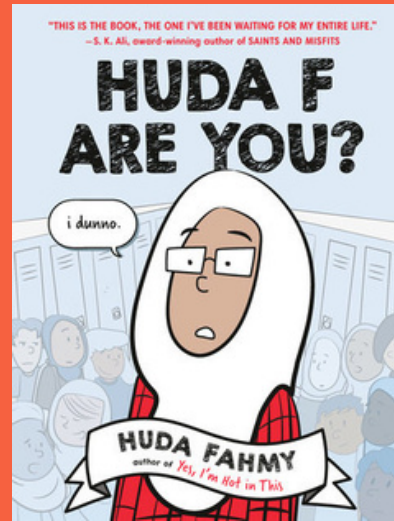
*(I look around.)*

(Green) =  
Art  
Direction

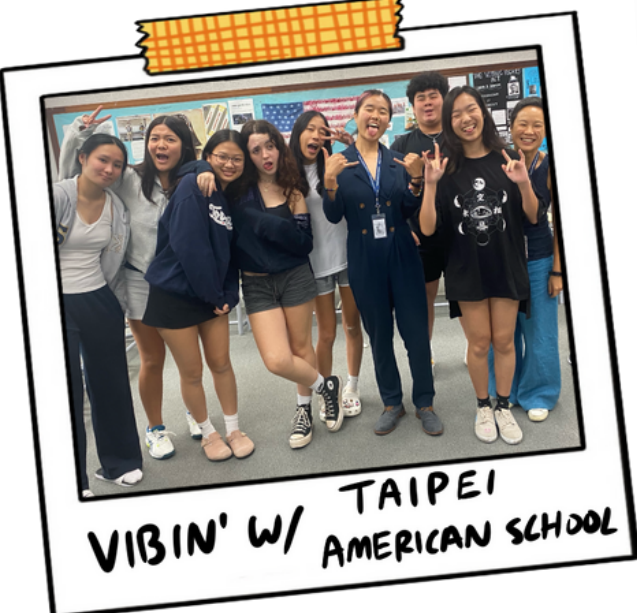


Use your creativity and change up the script! Then trade scripts with another pair and act out their new scene. Discuss how acting it out enhances the story. How would you improve your script after seeing it on stage? ("Act it Out" Workshop in the [Interactive School Visits Guide](#)).

# OTHER BOOKS TO READ IF YOU LIKED MESSY ROOTS







VIBIN' W/ TAIPEI AMERICAN SCHOOL



SDCC EISNER AWARDS

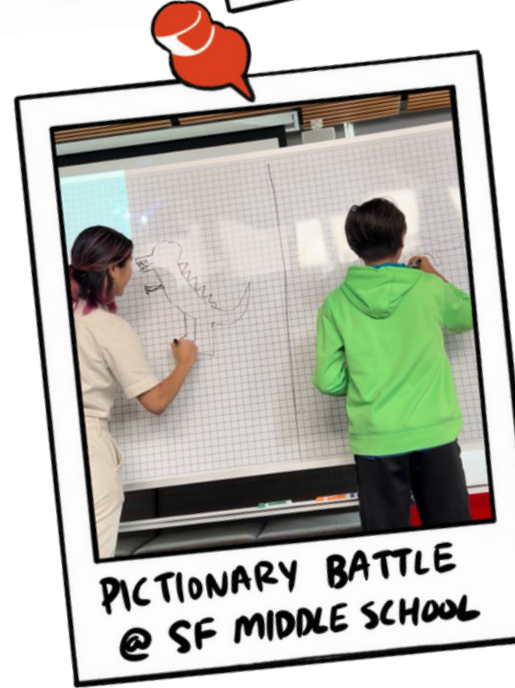


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TLA CONFERENCE!



HOMETOWN TALK @ COPPELL PUBLIC LIBRARY



COMIC WORKSHOP @ UNIS HANOI 15



**ISBN:** 9780063067776

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2022

**Pages:** 272

**Language:** English

**Genre:** Young Adult Nonfiction,  
Graphic Novels

**Recommended Age:** 12+

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