



Curriculum Connections

Bridge Across the Sky

by Freedom Ng

Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2024

Fiction, set in the United States

2024 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature

There's always / one guy / who doesn't realize / that this place / is a prison.

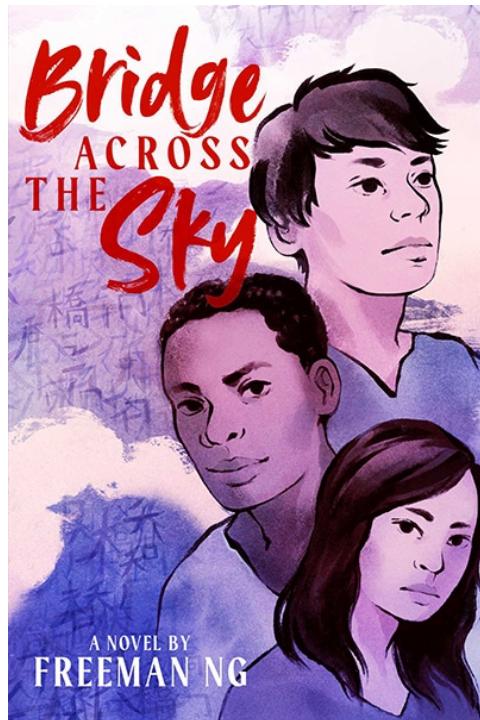
—*Bridge Across the Sky* (p. 19)

Appropriate for Grades: 6–12

Best for Grades: 8–12

Introduction to the Book

Narrative poetry is an immensely inviting genre for a spectrum of readers; struggling readers are drawn to its brevity while stronger readers are afforded more time to delve into the specificity of language. Freeman Ng's *Bridge Across the Sky* is a superlative example of the art form. The protagonist, Soo Tai Go (aka Lee Yip Jing), narrates in verse the story of his incarceration on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay during the 1920s. This book can be read purely for its narrative elements (potentially in a Social Studies classroom) to shed light on the 1920s Chinese immigrant perspective, yet the poetry is so well-crafted that it, too, could be used as an anchor text for deep language-analysis studies in an English classroom.



Note: Though the book has some swearing and a little of the crudeness to be expected in a men's incarceration unit, two poems—titled “both bigger” (pp. 42–44) and “I take” (pp. 254–256)—involve intense descriptions of the protagonist's erections. If necessary, those passages could be excised for a specific group of students so that the remainder of the novel might still be used in a curriculum.

Best Matched Curricular Units

- Social (In)justice
- Racial Relations in America
- Immigration
- Separation



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Essential Questions

- When should truth be withheld, and when should it be told?
- How much should someone be willing to pay for a chance to better his family's position in life?
- At what point does treating a stranger humanely become too expensive?
- Is connection to your past more important than your attention on the future?

Cultural Clarification Vocabulary

- *Gold Mountain*: This is a direct translation of the name the Chinese use for San Francisco. It derives from the California Gold Rush which spurred the need for the Transcontinental Railroad, resulting in the first major influx of Chinese immigrants into the U.S. to build that railroad.
- *White ghosts*: In its original Chinese, this term has derogatory connotations.
- *Black ghost*: Also derogatory in its Chinese use, but to this day, it carries a much uglier, pejorative sense than even "white ghost."
- *Sè-less ones* (p. 31): This is a clever play on the Mandarin Chinese word "死" (pronounced: sì) and the English "soulless."

Suggested Activities

Pre-search. Prior to reading the novel, explore information regarding the following topics:

- Angel Island Barracks living conditions and photographs
- Chinese Exclusion Act and the Johnson-Reed (Immigration) Act of 1924
- Warlord Era in China
- Sino-Japanese Relations from 1895 onward
- Chinese Famine of 1920–1921

Trace the Metaphors. Three major metaphors are woven throughout the novel: 1) The Go game board; 2) Jab the awl; and 3) The bridge (across the sky). Prior to reading the novel, select one of the metaphors to pay close attention to, noting its explicit appearances in the novel as well as its implicit and figurative presence.



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Weight of Words. In English-language poetry, typically the final word of any line carries the greatest weight in that particular line of poetry, and the final line of any poem carries the greatest weight of meaning for that particular poem. Select a poem to practice analyzing theme with this method. Highlight or circle the final word of each line as well as the final line of the poem. Using only the marked words, develop an argument around how these specific words illuminate a major theme in the poem.

Extension: Look for various poetic devices and examine how they support or refute the argued theme.

Two Letters. After reading Part I ("arrival"), from the perspective of an Angel Island "prisoner," write a letter home to a loved one or close friend in China, advising whether to embark on the journey to America or stay in China. Be sure to explain why you are for or against his embarkation. After reading the entire novel, write a second letter (from the same perspective) advising the same person once more, using new evidence gathered from the rest of the novel to support your advice.

Complete the Story. In the poem "a story" (pp. 72–75), the protagonist tells of a Japanese traveler who tried to leave his village with a Chinese girl, but of their story, the protagonist says, "No one / would ever tell me / how it ended." Finish their story (as a poem) from the Chinese girl's perspective.

Yukiko's Poems. Yukiko writes several short haiku poems that are dense with meaning. Select one to analyze and present to a (small or large) group:

- "Falling petals / the words inscribed on the walls / of my heart" (p. 222)
- "Just as bright / on this side of the sky, the moon / through barred windows" (p. 236)
- "Is that the face of a god / among the clouds? Only the light / of what will be" (p. 244)
- "In darkest night, / the uncountable stars / like so many friends" (p. 271)

Poetry Analysis. Several poems of note are provided below, as well as a suggested line, plot element, or thematic concept worth exploring:

"except" (p. 152). "my bridge across the sky was broken." What does this mean?



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"too many eyes" (pp. 211–214). In this poem, Soo Tai Go witnesses Boucher being beaten by four men for possibly being a spy. Soo Tai Go seems to recognize that Yen Yi's flaws may now undo the strength of his virtues. Are Yen Yi's flaws too great? Can all virtues be undone by someone's flaws? Are any virtues durable?

"reach" (p. 233). In this poem, the protagonist confirms that both he and Yukiko are communicating through poetry, and he even offers some analysis of hers. How does writing poetry rather than prose change communication in letters? *Extension: Write a poem to a partner, imparting the story of an event in your life, and have the partner respond in poetry.*

"so many more" (p. 240). "I picture her spending / her strength beside me / in the fields—for what? / A house? A job? / to be the girl / of someone else's / life?" What is the role of women in this book? Consider the mothers, the sister (Kow Loon), and the girl (Yukiko).

"a damn" (p. 284). Yen Yi says, "We owe / no truth to men / who will consign us / to despair."

"the verdict" (p. 328). The protagonist writes, "I was not / the hero of my own story. / I was the villain / of another's."

Debate/Socratic Seminar. After reading the novel, hold either a debate or a Socratic seminar centered on immigration. During the debate, speakers must use evidence from the novel to support their assertions in order for their arguments to be considered. Possible guiding discourses: What are the benefits of more/fewer restrictions for opportunities to apply for immigration to America? How many barriers should stand at the border between a prospective immigrant and their opportunity to begin a new life in America? Where does racism land in the immigration equation? Is it possible to have immigration controls without racism?

Learn Go. In the "Resources" section of the Endnotes, the author provides websites for learning to play Go. The game could be learned before reading the novel to influence the reading experience, or it could be learned afterward once the novel has sparked an interest.



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Suggested Discussion/Writing Prompts

Themes to Explore. Secrets and trust. Identity—real or fabricated. Loss of family history/identity. Realms of inequality. Forgetting and memory. Knowledge—gift and burden. Tribes and kin.

Power in Poetry. The protagonist writes, “There are poems / on the walls!” (p. 26) and “For the first time, I am struck / by the poetry of the poems” (p. 153). He notes that the pale powers paint over the poems or sand them off the walls (p. 61). Yukiko also notes that the walls of the women’s side have poems all over them (p. 221). Why poetry? What advantages does poetry have compared to prose? Why is poetry chosen as a way to maintain memory for all of the prisoners? Is writing your own story a human necessity?

Victims and Villains. Soo Tai Go writes, “My / ‘fuck you’ was a fuck you / to the Association” (p. 61); the Association comprises imprisoned Chinese men. We also learn that the guards are not unkind to Yukiko, but the Chinese women who are imprisoned along with her, however, are terrible to her. Why are the imprisoned so unkind to one another? Who is worse: the prisoners or the prison keepers?

Final Considerations. Consider these three important questions after reading the novel:

1. By the end, were you rooting for the family to be “landed” in America or returned home to China? Where are they better off? Was splitting up best for all of them?
2. This story is entirely from Soo Tai Go’s perspective, and after his admission of guilt, we never hear from Yukiko again. Consider her perspective: How much did she lose through Sow Fong’s and Soo Tai Go’s actions?
3. In the poem, *an ardor* (257), Boucher writes, “At night we dream / the moon through bars.” What do you make of this line in light of Yukiko’s second poem written to Soo Tai Go in which she uses the same imagery?

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