

# The NOT-SO-UNIFORM Life of HOLLY-MEI

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

**Packed with humor and heart, this debut middle-grade series follows a girl finding her place in a brand-new world of private school and frenemies when her family moves to Hong Kong.**

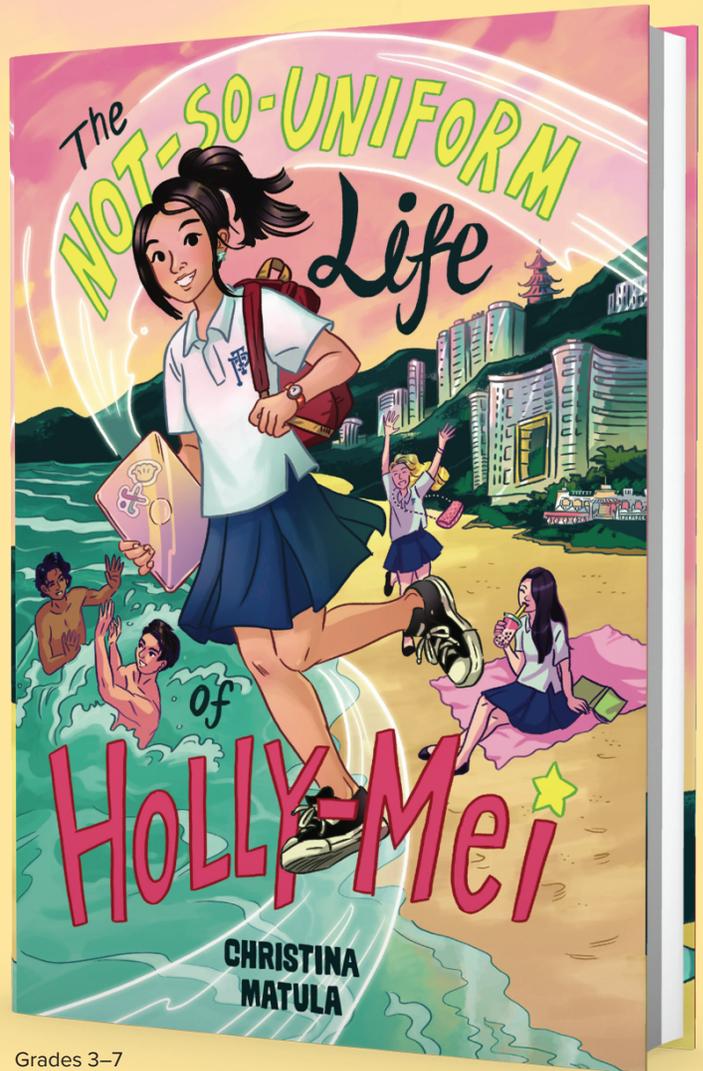
Holly-Mei Jones couldn't be more excited about moving to Hong Kong for her mother's job. Her new school is right on the beach and her family's apartment is beyond beautiful. Everything is going to be perfect...right?

Maybe not. It feels like everywhere she turns, there are new rules to follow and expectations to meet. On top of that, the most popular girl in her grade is quickly becoming a frenemy. And without the guidance of her loving Ah-ma, who stayed behind in Toronto, Holly-Mei just can't seem to get it right.

It will take all of Holly-Mei's determination and sparkle (and maybe even a tiny bit of stubbornness) to get through seventh grade and turn her life in Hong Kong into the ultimate adventure!

**"I can't wait for readers to explore Hong Kong with Holly-Mei. I have no doubt they will love both as much as I did."**

**—ERIN ENTRADA KELLY**, 2018 Newbery Medalist and 2021 Newbery Honoree



Grades 3–7

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## PRE-READING ACTIVITY: EXPLORING FAIRNESS, RULES, AND CODES

Think about the concept of fairness. Why is it important to be fair? Think about a time when you felt something was unfair. Why was it unfair? Were rules or codes broken? Is “the right thing to do” sometimes the wrong thing to do? Why do rules exist? Is it always wrong to break a rule? Are rules and codes the same thing? What are some unwritten rules or codes we should follow? How do we learn these?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ★ Holly-Mei is excluded from her group of friends in Canada because she revealed that Logan Lucas cheated on the math test, and she told the umpire that the field hockey ball hit her foot (which is against the rules), discounting a goal she scored during a match, which led them to a tie instead of a win. She is accused of always being *fair*, of snitching, and always having “to be right, do the right thing...even if it hurts others” (p. 11). Natalie tries to help Holly-Mei understand the need to be flexible and think about other people’s feelings (p. 12). Do you think the group, Natalie, or Holly-Mei is right? Why or why not? If you were Holly-Mei, how would you have responded?
- ★ A stereotype is a commonly held belief but is often an incomplete or untrue idea of a group of people, a person, or thing. Holly-Mei’s mother jokes that Dad is so British and avoids confrontation (p.17). Is this a stereotype? Is there truth to stereotypes? Is it bad to stereotype people? Why or why not?
- ★ Holly-Mei says in Toronto, “it’s not exactly that I feel like I don’t fit in, but more like I stand out, like when people say I look exotic or ask me where I’m really from, and by that they don’t mean Canada” (pp. 33–34). What does she mean by this? Would you feel like you belong if you were called exotic, or if you were asked where you are really from, or why your nose is so big? A microaggression is an indirect, subtle, or unintended comment or act that discriminates against marginalized people. Would you think of comments or questions like these as microaggressions?
- ★ On a couple of occasions, Holly-Mei questions the skin-whitening creams she sees in fashion advertisements “that promise to whiten and brighten” skin or “reveal your true inner beauty” (p. 49 and 144). Why do you think people want to use these products in Hong Kong? What are the differences between the ideal of beauty in Asia versus North America? What are Holly-Mei’s and her mother’s attitudes toward skin color? Do you agree with their attitudes or not? Why?
- ★ Before Holly-Mei starts her new school, her mother says that she’ll be meeting people in a “different sphere” (p. 53) and “all the right people in Hong Kong” (p. 54). Holly-Mei questions this in her mind. What do you think her mom means by the “right people,” and why does she care that Holly-Mei mixes with them? Do you think it matters who she becomes friends with? Why?
- ★ Holly-Mei’s mother describes *guanxi* as “the Chinese word for *connections*, but it’s so much deeper than that. It’s not just knowing someone. It’s about trust and loyalty. Opportunity” (p. 111). She later says that making a good impression on Gemma’s mother would be hitting the “guanxi jackpot” (p. 117). How has *guanxi* helped characters in the story, and how has it hindered them? Find evidence in the text to support your views. Do you think having *guanxi* in your own life would make a difference? How?



- ☆ Holly-Mei grapples with the Chinese concept of *face*, describing it as “something about honor, respectability, and how people see you” (p. 137). How does face complicate the relationships of Holly-Mei and her mother, Theo and Dev, and other characters in the story? Do you think face exists in your own culture? Are you concerned about maintaining face for yourself or your family? Why or why not?
- ☆ Theo Fitzwilliam shares his great-great-grandparents’ love story but says, “People on both sides thought there shouldn’t be mixing” (p. 167). Why do you think people thought this way 100 years ago when the couple got married? Do you think the same attitudes exist today? Do you think these attitudes link to today’s racial conflicts? Why or why not?
- ☆ Holly-Mei feels pressure from her mother, and Gemma feels pressure from her parents to perform well at the gala. How is the pressure they feel similar or different? Why have the parents acted in the ways that they have? Do you think this parental pressure is fair? Why or why not? Is there a time when you felt pressure from your parents? How did this make you feel? How did that pressure cause you to act or perform?
- ☆ Holly-Mei has a special relationship with her grandmother or “Ah-ma.” She even says, “I really can’t talk to my mom in the same way as I can talk to her” (p. 210). What role does Ah-ma play in helping Holly-Mei move and settle into Hong Kong? Do you have a similar relationship with your grandparents, another relative, or a family friend? How did you develop this relationship, and what makes it special to you?
- ☆ Holly-Mei and Gemma have a big argument when locked in the field hockey equipment storage hut. Despite arguing, Holly-Mei thinks to herself, “Her life looks so easy. So perfect. But maybe not everything that sparkles is gold” (p. 248). Do you agree with Holly-Mei? What did the argument reveal about Gemma and her family? How has arguing changed Holly-Mei and Gemma’s relationship? Can having arguments be positive? Have you ever experienced an argument and felt better about the situation afterwards?
- ☆ A lack of communication and misunderstanding breaks down the friendships of Holly-Mei and Natalie, and Dev and Theo. How are these situations similar or different? Why did the friendships break down, and how did they recover? Think about a friendship you had when you were younger and don’t have now? Why did your friendship drift apart? How might you have saved the friendship, or was it worth saving? Now that time has passed, do you wish you had acted differently?
- ☆ Toward the beginning of the book, Holly-Mei’s mom told her to “filter your thoughts” and “think before you speak,” that learning social skills is “like any other subject at school” (p. 18). How have Holly-Mei’s social skills evolved since her move to Hong Kong? Who or what has helped her to change throughout the book? Are social skills something you worry about or need to focus on? Is this something you or your friends find difficult?
- ☆ Before Holly-Mei and her family move, Ah-ma explains a couple of Chinese idioms, “chi ku” and “ku jin gan lai.” Ah-ma describes how Holly-Mei’s mother worked hard to become successful and swallowed bitterness, or *chi ku*, in the process (pp. 32–33). Ah-Ma also shares that she graduated from the “Harvard of Taiwan.” When she immigrated to Canada, her English wasn’t good enough to pursue art history. However, she focused on painting and her family and was able to realize “ku jin gan lai—bitterness finishes, sweetness begins” (pp. 39–40). At the end of the book, Holly-Mei feels a sense of *gan lai*, or sweetness, too (p. 268). What are some of the struggles or sacrifices that your grandparents, parents, or you have had to face or make in your lives? How have you overcome the challenges?



# ACTIVITIES

## Idioms

An idiom is a group of words regularly used that differ from the literal meaning. Idioms are expressions that might be hard to understand if you live in another country and study a new language. “Chi ku” is an example of a Chinese idiom that translates to “to eat bitterness” (its literal meaning) but means to endure hardship (p. 32). Think of English language idioms that might be difficult for a visitor from another country to understand? Draw a comic strip of its literal meaning and show what misunderstanding could result from the idiom’s literal meaning.

## Beauty Standards

Society’s ideals of beauty and dress are addressed in several instances in the book. Find an advertisement that projects ideal beauty standards. Explain why the advertisement is effective? Do you agree or disagree with the advertisement’s ideal of beauty? If you could change this advertisement, what would your ideal be? Make a drawing of your new advertisement with your ideal and explain why you’ve made the changes.



Author Photo: William Furniss

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**CHRISTINA MATULA** grew up in Ottawa, Canada. Being a child of immigrant parents, she has always been curious about other cultures and far-off places. Dumplings are her favorite food, especially her mother’s savory Taiwanese jiaozi and her father’s sweet Hungarian gomboc. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Hong Kong and now lives in Finland with her husband, two children, and puppy.

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