

## THE GIRL WHO WROTE IN SILK

by Kelli Estes

### Reading Group Guide

1. Discuss the role of race in this novel. What are some examples of racial discrimination you have experienced in your own life? Do you feel race relations have improved in the more than a century that has passed since Mei Lien's time? Why or why not?
2. Discuss Mei Lien's decision to hide herself and her son away on the farm to avoid contact with other people. In her shoes, would you have done the same thing or something different? Why?
3. Before reading this novel, had you already been aware of the "driving out" of Chinese people from American and Canadian towns? Share what you know. If you weren't previously aware of these events, what was your reaction to learning of these racial purges?
4. Family relationships are a key theme in *The Girl Who Wrote in Silk*. In what ways do you think Mei Lien and Inara have similar familial experiences? In what ways are their experiences different?
5. Both Mei Lien and Inara struggle with the death of loved ones. Discuss how their methods of mourning and honoring their lost loved ones differ or are similar. Is there anything they do or do not do that surprises you?
6. The island setting is an important one in both time periods. Do you think that Mei Lien and Inara experienced the Orcas Island in the same way or differently? What causes these similarities or differences?
7. Compare and contrast the father-daughter relationships in the story. How do you think they might have been different if the women's mothers had lived?
8. After finding her grandmother's body on the beach and realizing that her family had indeed been killed, Mei Lien feels that a part of her heart has died, a part that will forever keep her from loving Joseph fully. Do you think this came to be true for her? Have you lost a loved one and felt that a part of you is now lost forever?
9. Inara struggles with accepting the fact that her ancestor committed a heinous crime. Do you think she is able to absolve her family of this shameful act? What would you do if you discovered an honored ancestor of yours had done something shameful?

10. The “driving out” of Chinese occurred loosely about the same time in U.S. history as when Native Americans were forced onto reservations. If you had been alive at the time, how do you think you would have felt about these events? Can you think of similar ethnic cleanses occurring in today’s time, in the United States or in other countries?
11. Inara turns down the Starbucks job to renovate and eventually manage the boutique hotel on Orcas Island. What motivates her to make this decision? What decision would you make in a similar circumstance? Keep in mind issues such as security, family obligations, location, social obligations, and financial peace of mind.
12. Which character, Mei Lien or Inara, did you feel more connected to? Why? Is one more or less authentic than the other?
13. If you inherited a large family estate, what would you do with the property?
14. Inara thinks of Aunt Dahlia, Gretna Campbell, and herself as the family “oddballs” because of their unique ways of relating to the world around them. Have you ever felt like an oddball? Were you able to embrace it as Inara does? Explain.
15. Mei Lien sees her loved ones in the animals around her. In the final scene of the book, Daniel and Inara hear a seal splash in the water and feel it is Mei Lien giving her approval for their relationship. Do you think loved ones could return as animals that can interact with us? If you could come back as an animal, what would you be and why?
16. What do you imagine happens next after the novel ends? Will Inara and Daniel stay together? Will the hotel and restaurant be successful? What effect, if any, will what Duncan Campbell did have on the characters’ lives?
17. Finding the embroidered sleeve changes the course of Inara’s life because the intricate beauty and mystery won’t let her go. Have you ever come across, or do you own, an object that has a similar effect on you?
18. Another theme of this novel is belonging and acceptance. Mei Lien is ostracized because of her race. Aunt Dahlia was sent to live on the island because of her sexual orientation. Inara chose a field of study to please her father and live up to the professional success of her siblings. In what ways have you struggled in your life for acceptance?
19. Inara agonizes over whether to honor her father’s wishes and keep the truth a secret, or tell the truth and know it will hurt people she cares for. If you were in a similar situation, what would you do?

20. If Mei Lien had lived, what do you think she might have done to support herself and her son? Where would their story have taken them and what would have been different for Yan-Tao?
21. Mei Lien dresses as a boy in order to move freely and safely around Seattle. After she marries Joseph and starts dressing as a woman, she never really feels comfortable. Do you think her preference in clothing represents a deeper gender issue? What else might it represent for her?
22. We get hints at what Yan-Tao/Ken's life was like in the orphanage based on the curriculum taught there and about his life in Seattle based on what Vera tells her family. Do you think he found happiness? Given what you know from the story and world events of the twentieth century, what do you think his life was like?
23. Inara suspects that Vera Chin made up the Chin family's false background that Ken grew up in China then immigrated to Seattle in the early 1900's. Vera claims it must have been a mix-up but Inara wonders if Vera's sense of pride motivated the stories. Think of your own family history and the members of your family who are the keepers of the stories. Is the validity of any of your family stories suspect? Are any outrageous but you know them to be true?
24. Do you think Yan-Tao/Ken ever went back to the island to attempt to retrieve the sleeve his mother left for him in his secret hiding hole? Why or why not? If he did go back, why might he not have been successful?