

PIE *in the* SKY

Remy Lai

Teacher
Notes



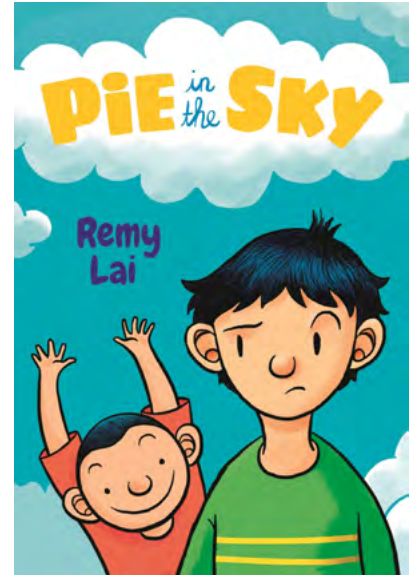
PIE *in the* SKY

El Deafo meets *Inside Out* and *Back Again* in this funny, emotional illustrated middle-grade debut about immigrating to Australia, being upstaged by an annoying little brother, baking cakes and overcoming loss.

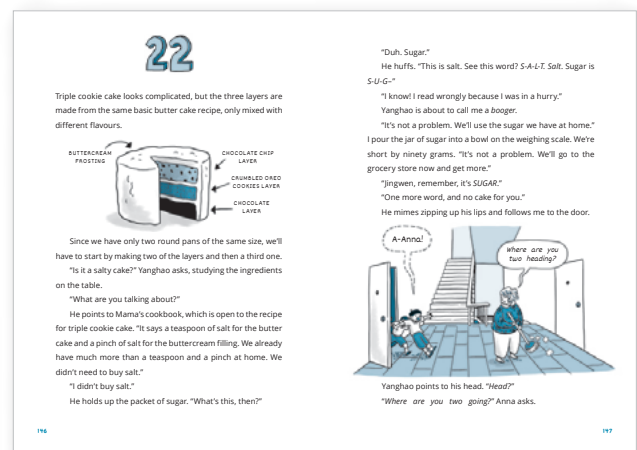
When Jingwen moves to Australia, he feels like he's landed on Mars. Making friends is impossible, since he doesn't speak English, and he's stuck looking after his little brother Yanghao. But Jingwen knows how to make everything better. If he can just make all of the cakes on the menu of the bakery his father had planned to open—and complete the dream he didn't have time to finish—then everything will be okay. Sure, he'll have to break his mother's most important rule about not using the oven when she's at work, keep his little brother from spilling his secret, and brush up on his baking skills, but some things are worth the risk.

In her debut novel, Remy Lai captures with humour and heart, what it means to want desperately to belong and just how powerful one wish can be.

Remy Lai studied fine arts, with a major in painting and drawing. She was born in Indonesia, grew up in Singapore, and currently lives in Brisbane, Australia where she writes and draws stories for kids, with her two dogs by her side. *Pie in the Sky* is her debut middle-grade novel.



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Steve Spargo
from Walker Books

Q & A!

With
Remy
Lai!



That's
me!

Question 1:
How did
the idea for
Pie in the Sky
come about?

For a long time, I had this picture in my mind:

DON'T
TELL
ANYONE.

two brothers
secretly baking



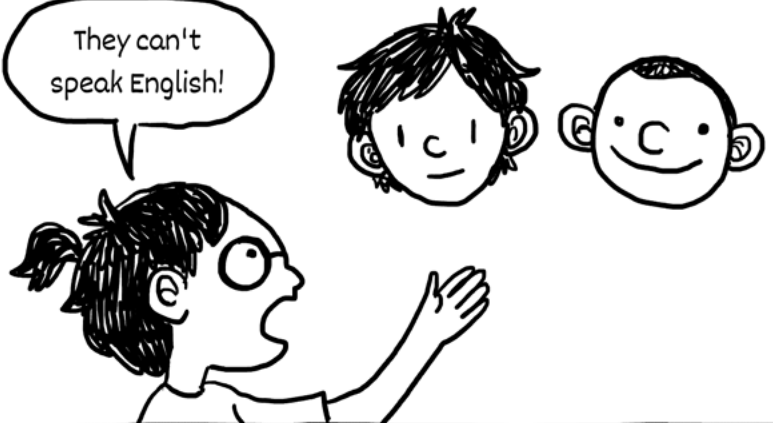
But it wasn't until one particular day...



AHA!

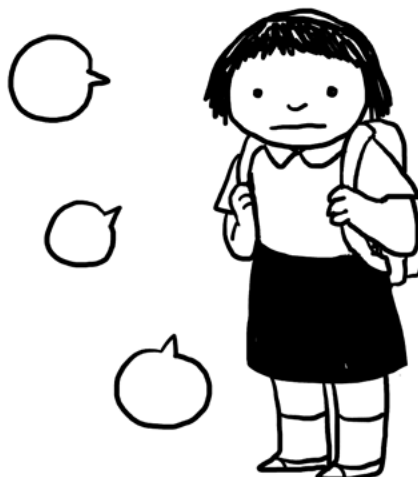


They can't
speak English!



The story that would
become *Pie in the Sky*
clicked into place. From
there, I borrowed things
from my childhood,
including how I emigrated
from Indonesia to
Singapore when I was nine,
which was also when I
started learning English.

me at nine
years old



Question 2:
Who did you
write *Pie in the
sky* for?

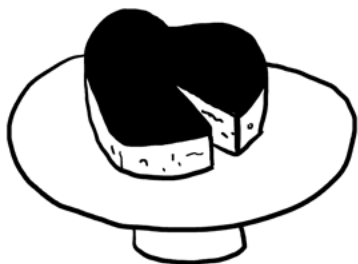
For someone who doesn't have
the words they want to say.



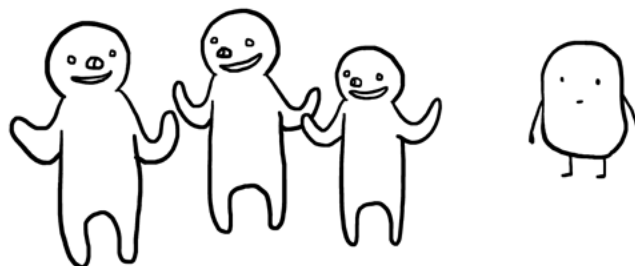
For someone who has an annoying
sibling (I have four).



For someone who has lost a loved one
and regrets having loved imperfectly.



For someone who sometimes feels like an outsider.



Question 3:
In *Pie in the Sky*
Jingwen struggles with
moving to Australia
and speaking limited
English. What would
you tell kids in this
position?

You might think that you've landed on Mars and you'll never make new
friends because you understand no one and no one understands you.



But you will learn the language.

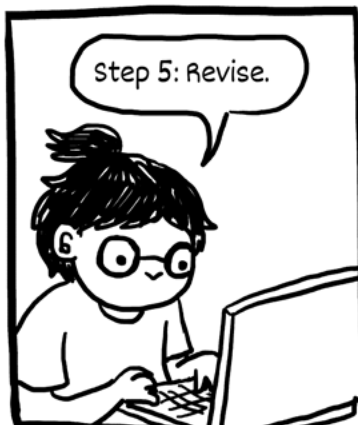


You will make new friends.



You will
be okay.

Question 4:
What is your
writing process for
Pie in the Sky?



Question 5:
What's your
advice to
aspiring young
writers and
illustrators?

Be brave enough
to make mistakes.



Have fun!

Question 6:
What's your
favourite
cake?

It's impossible to
have just one
favourite cake!
I love ...



Chiffon cake!



Paper-wrapped
sponge cake!



Ice cream
cake!



Mooncake!

Discussion Questions and Activities

Before Reading

Examine the front cover of the book. What do you think this story will be about? Now read the blurb and revise your predictions. Once you have finished reading the book, revisit your answer to this question to see how accurate your predictions were.

Exploring the Book

Literary devices

Remy Lai uses a number of literary devices in *Pie in the Sky*. Find other examples of each device from the list below and discuss how this device affects the reader.

- Simile: "The wing of the airplane slices through the fluffy cloud like a knife through cake" (page 2)
- Idiom: "birds of a feather" (page 34). (see further activity on idioms below)
- Metaphor: "concert of tears, wails, and snot" (page 9)
- Extended metaphor: "I'm on Mars." (page 10). Discuss Jingwen's references to Mars and Martians, symbols in the illustrations and characters drawn like aliens.

Some idioms are specific to a language or location and while the words can be translated and understood by people who speak a different language or are from a different place, the meaning may be lost. What challenges does Jingwen have when encountering idioms in the story? Why do you think Lai chose an idiom for the title of the book? The title also has multiple meanings, what are they?



Page 6

Examine the way "Letmeholdthecake!" is written on page 6. Why do you think the text is written like this? Conversely, why is the word "slow" written with extra letters and spaces on page 44? Find other examples of both of these styles in the text.

How does Jingwen's interaction with Joe on pages 30-31 make Jingwen feel? How does Lai show that in the illustrations? Why do you think she chose to convey this message without words?

In chapter 14 how does the smell of the cake affect Jingwen? Is this a good thing or a bad thing? What smells evoke memories in you? Think of special places, people, times and their associated smells and have a class discussion on the power of scent to evoke memories.

How does baking cakes affect Jingwen and Yanghao's relationship? How does it affect them in other ways? Find several scenes as evidence for you answer.

"Now he has his nose in two books. Double booger. Yet Mama still looks at him as if he were Einstein." (page 169)

Why does Jingwen repeatedly call Yanghao "booger"? Do you think it is just a meaningless taunt between brothers, or is there more to it?

In chapter 26, Yanghao describes the plot of *The Little Prince* to Jingwen. What are the similarities between the plot of *The Little Prince* and how Jingwen feels having moved to Australia?

"... I really don't know much about Ben, but suddenly, in this vast universe, there's someone who is different but the same as me." (page 224)
Draw a timeline of Ben and Jingwen's relationship using quotes from the book to show key moments. Discuss how not having a friend affects Jingwen and how this changes when he bonds with Ben.

The text on page 242, particularly the last three lines, are written in short sentences spaced out on new lines. Similarly, the speech bubbles on pages 311-312 are spaced out and each word is in a separate bubble. Why do you think Lai wrote the text like this? What effect does it have on you as the reader? Why do you think Jingwen told his mother he hates her? Was he telling the truth?

Much of the plot is driven by Jingwen's desire to bake all of the cakes that Papa was going to make in *Pie in the Sky*. To make this happen Jingwen lies to Mama, ignores his school work and doesn't try to learn English. However, in chapter 66 when he eventually makes the final cake – the rainbow cake – he isn't happy like he expected he would be. How does Lai show Jingwen's reaction? Why do you think he has this reaction? How does this affect Jingwen's behaviour for the rest of the book?

Themes

Immigrant experience



Page 44

A common misconception people have when communicating with someone who doesn't speak the same language is that the other person is slow or stupid. Do you think this is true or fair? How does Jingwen feel when he overhears Joe saying "because he is s l o o o o w" (page 44)?

Why does Lai draw dialogue in speech bubbles in symbols? Why are Jingwen's speech bubbles empty on page 17?

Lies

In chapter 11, Jingwen is planning on telling Mama that they should move home, but instead lies and says everything is fine. Why did he change his mind?

Jingwen thinks about the types of lies and puts them in order from best to worst. What are his classifications for lies? List the lies that he tells throughout the book under these classifications. Do you agree with Jingwen's classifications?

Hold a class debate about lying. Have teams of 4 take turns arguing that it is never ok to lie/it is ok to lie under certain circumstances. Use evidence from the book and from your own ideas. The remaining students are the judges, they must take notes and score each team.

Grief/guilt

"My brain knows we shouldn't have come to Australia without Papa. It knows picking up English equals loving Australia equals abandoning Papa equals I'm a terrible, terrible son." (page 172) Why does Jingwen feel this way? Do you think it is true?

"Papa didn't know I wasn't good." (page 186) Write a paragraph describing the reasons why Jingwen feels guilty about having secrets from Papa. In this way, his grief is tied into his guilt as he can't tell Papa the truth and apologise to him. How does he overcome this guilt?

"I laughed and laughed, not understanding why he had that look on his face, but maybe now I finally know what it meant. Sadness mixed with happiness." (page 349)

Sadness and happiness are opposites, yet Jingwen realises you can have complex emotions that are a mixture of both. How does this realisation help Jingwen process his grief?

Fitting in



Page 271

Why does Yanghao begin to appear as a Martian to Jingwen? How does this make Jingwen feel? Why? Jingwen has trouble making friends at school, though Yanghao seems to make friends quite easily at school and with Anna. Discuss why Jingwen and Yanghao have such different experiences.

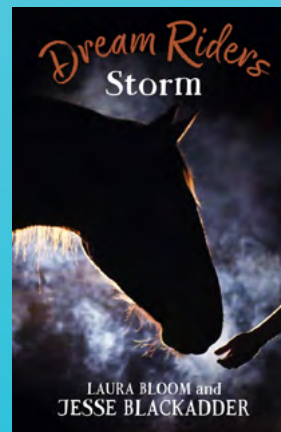
Visual Literacy

How are the illustrations set in the past and those set in the present differentiated? Why do you think they are designed this way?

Remy Lai's illustrations convey a lot of emotion and meaning for the characters even though there isn't a lot of detail. Choose several illustrations and discuss what the characters are feeling in that moment. How can you tell? Draw a character similar to Jingwen or Yanghao (or just a stick figure) and try to convey certain emotions using just dots for eyes and lines for eyebrows, a nose and a mouth.

Rewrite a section of prose (text) in Lai's comic style. Think about how you can convey the story, dialogue, emotions and action using just illustration and speech bubbles.

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