

HOT, SOUR, SALTY SWEET

Written by Sherri L. Smith
Teacher's guide



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About this Book

Ana Shen has what her social studies teacher calls a “marvelously biracial, multicultural family,” but what Ana simply calls a Chinese American father and an African American mother. And on eighth-grade graduation day, that’s a recipe for disaster. Both sets of grandparents are in town to celebrate, and Ana’s best friend has convinced her to invite Jamie Tabata—the cutest boy in school—for a home-cooked meal. Now Ana and her family have four hours to prepare their favorite dishes for dinner, and Grandma White and Nai Nai can’t agree on anything. Ana is tired of feeling caught between her grandparents and wishes she knew whose side she was supposed to be on. But when they all sit down for their hot, sour, salty, and sweet meal, Ana comes to understand how each of these different flavors, like family, fit perfectly together.

About the Author

Sherri L. Smith was born in Chicago, Illinois and spent most of her childhood reading books. She currently lives in Los Angeles, where she has worked in movies, animation, comic books and construction. Sherri’s first book, *Lucy the Giant* (Random House, 2002), was an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults in 2003. Translated into Dutch as *Lucy XXL* (Gottmer, 2005), her novel was awarded an Honorable Mention at the 2005 De Gouden Zoen, or Golden Kiss, Awards for Children’s Literature. Sherri’s second novel, *Sparrow* (Random House 2006) was nominated for the 2009 Louisiana Young Readers Choice Award. *Hot, Sour, Salty, Sweet* is her third novel. You can learn more about Sherri and her books on her website, www.sherrilsmith.com.

Teaching Ideas

Hot, Sour, Salty, Sweet tells the story of Ana Shen and her Chinese-African-American family on the last day of school, her last chance at catching the eye and winning the heart of her eighth-grade crush, Jamie Tabata. Identity, both ethnic and cultural, as well as the love that makes a family are key themes to explore in *Hot, Sour, Salty, Sweet*, along with the importance of food.

Thematic Connections

Importance of Family: Despite their differences, both sides of Ana's family come together for her graduation and the ensuing meal. What is it about a family that sometimes makes people overlook their disagreements? Is there a point in the story where it looks like Ana's family will fall apart?

Racial Identity: Ana is biracial, with an African American mother and a Chinese American father. What are the cultural differences between these two ethnicities? How does Ana identify with each?

Independence: Ana has just graduated from eighth grade and will be starting high school in a few months. She also has her first real crush. Her family, especially her father, still sees her as a little girl. How can Ana show her family that she is growing up?

Working with others: Even though her family drives her crazy, Ana relies on all of them to help make the meal a success. How does Ana get everyone to work together? What conflicts does she help resolve? Are there any conflicts that have no resolution? Is that okay?

Activities Across the Curriculum

Language Arts

Ana is bilingual, having learned Mandarin Chinese from her father's side of the family. Are any of your students, their friends, or their family members bilingual? What languages do they speak, and when? How does speaking more than one language affect their lives? Where have students seen bilingual or multilingual signs? What languages are spoken in their neighborhoods?

In the Chicken Story, Grandpa White has to communicate with a Chinese soldier using a third language, Korean. How would your students communicate with someone who does not speak their language? Have them attempt a cooperative group assignment without speaking, then have them write about the experience.

Social Studies

Hot, Sour, Salty, Sweet takes place in Los Angeles. What is the importance of this city to African-Americans and Chinese-Americans? Ana is a blend of two cultures. What elements of Los Angeles represent both sides of her heritage?

In the story, Ana and her family share stories, including her grandfathers' experiences in two different wars. Have students read more about the Korean War and the Chinese experience in World War II.

Not more than 50 years ago, anti-miscegenation laws would have prevented Ana's parents from marrying in some states. What has changed to allow such diversity in American society today?

Science

The book gets its title from the flavors of Asian cooking—hot, sour, salty and sweet. "Hot" is not technically a flavor, but science does accept that there actually are five flavors: sour, salty, sweet, bitter and *umami*—the Japanese word for “yummy,” represented by the meaty taste imparted by glutamate. Where are these different flavors tasted on the tongue? What foods do students associate with each flavor?

Math/Home Economics

In the book, Ana's family cooks several favorite recipes. Have students cook in class or bring in favorite family foods from their own lives, or try some of the foods mentioned in the book.

Recipes rely on measurements for accuracy. Have students work with fractions to double and half recipes. If they are able to prepare the recipe, ask them if the change in volume affects the taste.

Art

Study Chinese brush painting. Have students try their hand at brush painting by painting a picture of Ana's family with watercolors.

Music

In the book, Ana plays the saxophone and her grandparents offer to take her on a jazz heritage cruise. Have students listen to jazz and study its development in African American society.

Reading Skills and Strategies

Point of View: *Hot, Sour, Salty, Sweet* is written in the present tense, third-person limited point of view. How does it affect the way the story is told? Have students re-write a section of a chapter from another character's point of view. How does Nai Nai's story differ from the rest of the book? How would the story be different from Jamie's point of view? How does the story change if it is written in the past tense?

Compare and Contrast: Ana's grandmothers see nothing but the differences between the two of them. Have students discuss Grandma White and Nai Nai's similarities and differences, as well as the rest of Ana's family. How does the Shen family compare to Jamie's family? Chelsea's? Amanda's?

Make Judgments and Decisions: Ask students to identify an important decision one of the characters makes, and then use their own judgment: What choice would they have made? Is there a better choice? Why?

Story Connections: Ask students if they have ever been in a situation like Ana's. Some questions to ask are: Have you ever had a crush on someone, what did you do? Have you ever felt like the adults in your life do not understand you? Students can discuss their answers as a group, or privately in a story journal.

Reviews

Kirkus Review

"In a tale unfolding over one afternoon and evening, Smith serves up a funny, entertaining gumbo of cultural collisions and discoveries."

The Bulletin

"Smith writes with keen perception...of the tightrope walk forced upon a kid caught between family antagonists..."

This guide was prepared with assistance from Kathryn Hendess, Social Studies Teacher, San Jose, California.