

“IMMERSIVE, IMPORTANT, and thoroughly ENTERTAINING, *The Downstairs Girl* sparkles with all of Stacey Lee’s signature humor, charm, warmth, and wisdom.” —Kelly Loy Gilbert, Morris Award Finalist for *Conviction*



By day, seventeen-year-old Jo Kuan works as a lady’s maid for the cruel daughter of one of the wealthiest men in Atlanta. But by night, Jo moonlights as the pseudonymous author of a newspaper advice column for the genteel Southern lady, “Dear Miss Sweetie.”

When her column becomes wildly popular—and wildly criticized—Jo finds a mysterious letter that sets her off on a search for her own past and the parents who abandoned her. But when her efforts put her in the crosshairs of Atlanta’s most notorious criminal, Jo must decide whether she’s ready to come out of hiding in plain sight and step into the light.

“A bold portrait of this country’s past, brilliantly painted with wit, heartbreak, and unflinching honesty. Everyone needs to read this book.”
—Stephanie Garber, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Caraval*

“By shining a light on the lives of those whom history usually ignores, Stacey Lee gives us a marvelous gift: An entirely new and riveting look at our past.”
—Candace Fleming, award-winning author of *The Family Romanov*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Stacey Lee says in her author’s note that she’s “always trying to tell the stories of people who’ve fallen through the cracks.” Why are these important stories to tell? In what ways both literal and metaphorical is Jo Kuan someone who has fallen through the cracks?
2. Part of Jo’s identity is informed by the racial dichotomy of black vs. white. As a Chinese person, Jo doesn’t fall into either side of this divide, providing her with both privileges as a non-black person and marginalizations as a non-white person. What are the different ways both Jo’s privilege and lack thereof are exemplified throughout the story? What does that mean for someone who experiences intersectional identities?
3. Jo often shrouds herself in shadows, whether it’s literally in the basement of the Bells’ home, or figuratively under the pseudonym of Miss Sweetie. How else do shadows appear throughout *The Downstairs Girl*? What characters also spend time in the shadows? How do the intersections of race and gender play into their hidden selves?
4. Jo is criticized for being opinionated at Mrs. English’s millinery, but subscribers love Miss Sweetie’s saucebox comments—think about what distinguishes Jo from Miss Sweetie and compare.
5. Characters in the book are both encouraged to and discouraged from sharing their opinions based on their race and gender. What does this say about the society that dictates these unspoken rules?
6. Words and language are very important in *The Downstairs Girl*, whether it is Old Gin’s sayings, Miss Sweetie’s clever turns of phrase, or the ways different characters address one another, depending on their station. Discuss the use of language in the novel and identify ways, both large and small, that the words used define the situation.
7. On p. 39, Jo states that “Someone needs to blow the trumpets of change. Someone who has viewed society both from the top branch and the bottom, from the inside of the tree and from the outside.” How do different characters’ actions match this description? What kinds of change are they trying to effect, both big and small?
8. Miss Sweetie tackles many issues of the day in her columns and uses her platform to shed light on injustice. Discuss the changes Miss Sweetie is able to make through her writing, and how that impacts her life both directly and indirectly throughout the story.
9. Naomi says, “We got to jump in and make the rules . . . Or someone else will make them for us” (p. 115). In what ways do Jo and other characters attempt to make the rules? What role do rules—and their breaking, expanding, and reimagining—play in the story?
10. Jo and Noemi witness the statue of a Confederate officer being erected. Use their discussion on p. 114 as a jumping-off point to address the current events around the removal of these statues throughout the South.