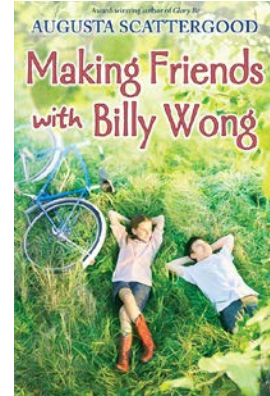


MAKING FRIENDS WITH BILLY WONG

Scholastic Press, 2016

Middle-grade Fiction

Ages 9-13



Making Friends with Billy Wong is a powerful story set in 1955 small-town Arkansas. The novel illuminates a friendship between Azalea Morgan, who has been sent there to help her grandmother, and Billy Wong, a Chinese American who works in his family's grocery and prepares to be the first non-white student to attend the local schools. This unlikely friendship unfolds in two distinct voices, Billy's poetic narrative and Azalea's expressive prose.

Based on the history of Chinese Americans living in the south, the novel fits well with immigration units, Civil Rights history, American studies, as well as literature discussions.

Discussion Questions

1. When the story begins, Azalea hardly knows her grandmother. Does the relationship change between the two?
2. How does Azalea deal with the many new situations she faces in her grandmother's small town? Can you share a time when you felt things changing in your own life?
3. What does Azalea think when she first hears about a boy named Billy Wong and what experiences make her decide to get to know him better? Can you find specific examples in the book where Azalea works to become a better friend to Billy?
4. Billy and Azalea's friendship changes from the beginning to the end of the book. What do you think will happen next summer if Azalea returns to Paris Junction?
5. Describe Mr. Wong's grocery. How is Lucky Foods different from the stores Azalea might have shopped in back home in Texas?
6. What does Azalea first think of the other "garden helpers" who appear at her grandmother's house? Does her opinion of Melinda or Willis change by the end of the book? Why or why not?
7. Both Billy and Azalea narrate this story. What's the difference in their voices? Can you list some of the things Billy's short chapters tell you about him?
8. The novel is set in 1955. What details does the author use to create a sense of this period in history?

9. Billy and his family experience many instances of prejudice. What are some of the stereotypes about Chinese Americans explored in the novel? What would you do if you were to experience or witness some of the hateful talk and acts portrayed in the story?
10. Augusta Scattergood's first book, *GLORY BE*, was also about a girl living in the South during the Civil Rights era (1964, Freedom Summer). If you've read both novels, are there similarities between *Glory* and *Azalea*? Do you think they would be friends?

Extension Activities

1. Billy's chapters are shorter and there aren't as many as there are for Azalea's character. Try to write a new chapter in Billy's voice.
2. As you read the book, did you picture the town of Paris Junction, Arkansas, in your mind? Can you illustrate what the town might look like? Draw a picture of the inside of Lucky Foods Grocery or of the History Room.
3. Azalea Morgan worries that the helpers who come to her grandmother's garden might make fun of her being named for a flowering bush. (p. 39) Does your own name have a meaning? Try to research the reason you were named that? Can you discover the meaning and origin of your names?
4. Azalea says, "I had a lot to learn about making friends." (p. 92) Give her some helpful tips about meeting new people.
5. Writers learn a lot from asking questions. Interview your classmates. Find out where they were born, where they've lived, what their family is like. Write a poem or a story using what you've learned about one of your classmates.