

# AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE FOR

Written by  
**DARSHANA KHIANI**

# I'M AN AMERICAN

Illustrated by New York Times  
bestselling illustrator

**LAURA FREEMAN**





# ABOUT *I'M AN AMERICAN*

A breathtaking, eye-opening look at the patchwork of cultures that make up our nation and the many ways we define what it means to be an American.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AMERICAN?

A classroom of children across many races, cultures, and origins explores the concept of Americanness as they each share bits of their family history and how their past has shaped their own personal American experience. Whether as new immigrants, or those whose family came to this country generations ago, or other scenarios, these children's stories show some of the broad range of cultures and values that form the history and identity of our nation.

A beautifully depicted, thought-provoking look at the vast expanse of cultures that exists in America, the values that bring us together as one people despite our differences, and the many ways we define what it means to be an American.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *DARSHANA KHIANI*

Darshana Khiani is an author, engineer, and advocate for South Asian children's literature. She is infinitely curious about the world and enjoys sharing her findings with young readers. If she can make a child laugh, even better. Her debut picture book, *How to Wear a Sari* (Versify), was an Amazon Editors' Pick. She enjoys hiking, solving jigsaw puzzles, and traveling. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her family and a furry pup. Learn more at her website, [www.DarshanaKhiani.com](http://www.DarshanaKhiani.com).

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR: *LAURA FREEMAN*

Originally from New York City, Laura Freeman now lives in Atlanta with her husband and their two children. She received her BFA from the School of Visual Arts and began her career working for various editorial clients. Freeman has illustrated over thirty children's books, including *Hidden Figures* written by Margot Lee Shetterly, the *Nikki* and *Deja* series by Karen English, and *Fancy Party Gowns* by Deborah Blumenthal. In addition to illustrating books and editorial content, her art can be found on a wide range of products, from dishes and textiles to greeting cards. Learn more at her website, [www.LFreemanArt.com](http://www.LFreemanArt.com).

# DEAR EDUCATOR,

This beautiful book, *I'm an American*, is an invitation to inquiry, a cause for reflection, and a gateway to conversation. The crafted collection of origin stories, paired with rich and layered art, highlights what has drawn immigrants to America and qualities Americans have showcased in the face of injustices and hardship. As readers witness the stories of the children in this book and their ancestors, they will begin to reflect on similarities and differences with their own origin stories and recognize common feelings of pride and patriotism, of determination and optimism.

Like the young Venezuelan in this book: I, too, believe in hope and that life can be better. And, I believe young people will lead us there. Sharing the vision of *I'm an American*—a nation of people united by values and ideals that bring us together more than our differences and what divides us—will spark conversation and make space for our young readers to grow into more compassionate and empathetic leaders—now and in the future.

*Melissa Guerrette*

NBCT, M.ED.

GRADE 5 TEACHER

## ABOUT THIS EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

*I'm an American* is a picture book for elementary-aged and middle grade students. This guide includes a range of activities and discussion ideas that can be used as written or with slight modification across elementary and middle-school classrooms. The activities and discussion ideas included relate to these Common Core standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.8  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7  
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8



# FOR DISCUSSION

## BEFORE READING

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Begin with the question on the back cover of the book, “What makes you American?” Elicit and chart student responses to what makes someone American. Revisit this chart after reading together.

Talk about ancestry. Ancestors are those in our family who came before us. Who are the students’ ancestors? What do they know about their lineage?

What is a “value”? What does it mean to say we “value” something? How does someone learn or find out what they value?

## WHILE READING

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The text begins with a note from the author regarding the representation of cultures in this book. This note can lend itself to an age-appropriate conversation about intersectionality and the reality that no one is only one part of their identities.

- ★ Discuss with students why Darshana Khiani might want readers to remember that these featured children are only one representative of their respective cultures. What do we risk when we hold one individual’s experience as our only idea about an entire group of people?

On each spread, a child states a belief, naming a quality, value, or action that they believe is American. Help students understand and define the vocabulary of these qualities, values, and actions with examples in the corresponding narratives. Note that in some cases the narrative is an example and, in other cases, it is a non-example. For example:

- ★ The German American child names “diligence” as a trait of being American. What does the child share about his ancestors that portrays diligence or hard work?
- ★ For the Japanese American child, justice is explained with a non-example, or the injustices experienced by her ancestors. How do these experiences with injustice, the opposite of justice, help explain what justice means?

Pause to notice the way the illustrations represent both the child whose narrative you are reading and symbols and vignettes of the past. What does Laura Freeman accomplish by including both the past and the present on the page together? How do the layers of art contribute to the overall message of the text?





# FOR DISCUSSION (CONTINUED)

## AFTER READING

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The last spread says, “Our beliefs are the threads that tie this country together.” What does it mean that our beliefs—like the beliefs declared by each child throughout the text (hope, equality, safety, following dreams, etc.)—tie this country together? Is it possible that we can identify differently from one other and still share the same values and ideals? How might this help us to achieve a better America?

Revisit the chart you co-constructed before reading together. What ideas from the chart about being American were confirmed by reading the book? What would students add to or revise about the chart after reading and reflecting?

One of the children says, “I don’t feel American yet.” Why do you imagine someone might not feel American “yet” or American “enough”? Where would that message or idea come from? What can we do to help everyone feel welcome and that they belong?

How is “being American” as much (or more) about what someone does and how they live as it is about where they live, how they look, and their traditions and customs? What does it mean to be a good citizen or patriotic?

What is “diversity”? How might you define this word for someone else? How does diversity make the fabric of our country richer and more vibrant?

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## TEACH WITH BACK MATTER

Share the map which represents each child from the book and the country their ancestors originated from. Be sure to talk specifically about groups that are not classified as immigrants:

- ★ Indigenous peoples—represented by the Muscogee child—the only people who originated on the land that was claimed as the United States
- ★ Enslaved people who were captured and brought by force to America

In the Author’s Note, Darshana Khiani mentions the history of naturalization laws. Who can be naturalized, and what does the process of naturalization entail? How would someone in your community begin the process of naturalization? How can you participate in naturalization and/or help welcome new Americans?

Why did people come to America in the past? Are these the same or different reasons as why people come to America now? Why are these reasons classified as “push” and “pull” factors?



# GO DEEPER:

## ENRICHMENT AND EXTENSIONS

### IDENTITY

Develop an identity chart (inspired by [Facing History and Ourselves](#)) for yourself. Share with students to help them create their own. Some identity factors to consider include (but are not limited to): age, gender, ethnicity, religion, roles, hobbies, family, responsibilities. Then, facilitate drawing similarities and differences between students' identity charts and those of their classmates. How do these individual differences support your classroom community's collective strength?

### SYMBOLISM

Draw students' attention to the cover of the book. What symbols of America are represented on the cover? Traditional symbols of America include the bald eagle, the Statue of Liberty, and the colors of the flag. Support students in investigating the origins of these symbols.

What more modern symbols might represent America? What ideas do students have of a symbol to represent our country and what it means to be American? Illustrate or construct models of their chosen symbols.

What other symbols do readers spot across the internal pages of the text? What do those symbols represent, and how are they related to the theme of this text?

### QUILTS AND QUILTING

Notice the motif of the illustrations in the book, fashioned with geometric shapes, resembling the piecing of a quilt.

- ★ Learn more about the role quilts and other cloth-based art forms have played in American history to preserve family/community stories and traditions.
- ★ Compare and contrast similarities in quilts and other cloth-based art from various cultures.
- ★ Explore "[Stories in Quilts](#)" (Resources from National Endowment for the Humanities)





# GO DEEPER:

## ENRICHMENT AND EXTENSIONS (CONTINUED)

### PAST AND PRESENT

Encourage students to interview family members to learn more about their own ancestors and ancestry. Design artwork in the style of Laura Freeman, giving students paper sectioned off into patchwork pieces. In the background, have students use details from stories they learned about their families' past to illustrate. Use lighter colors or colored pencils. Overlay a self-portrait by each student, created with bolder colors and materials, like markers or paint. Include a belief about being American on one side of the page, and a short narrative of the students' past on the opposite side, like the pages of the text.

### ON THE SHOULDERS OF IMMIGRANTS

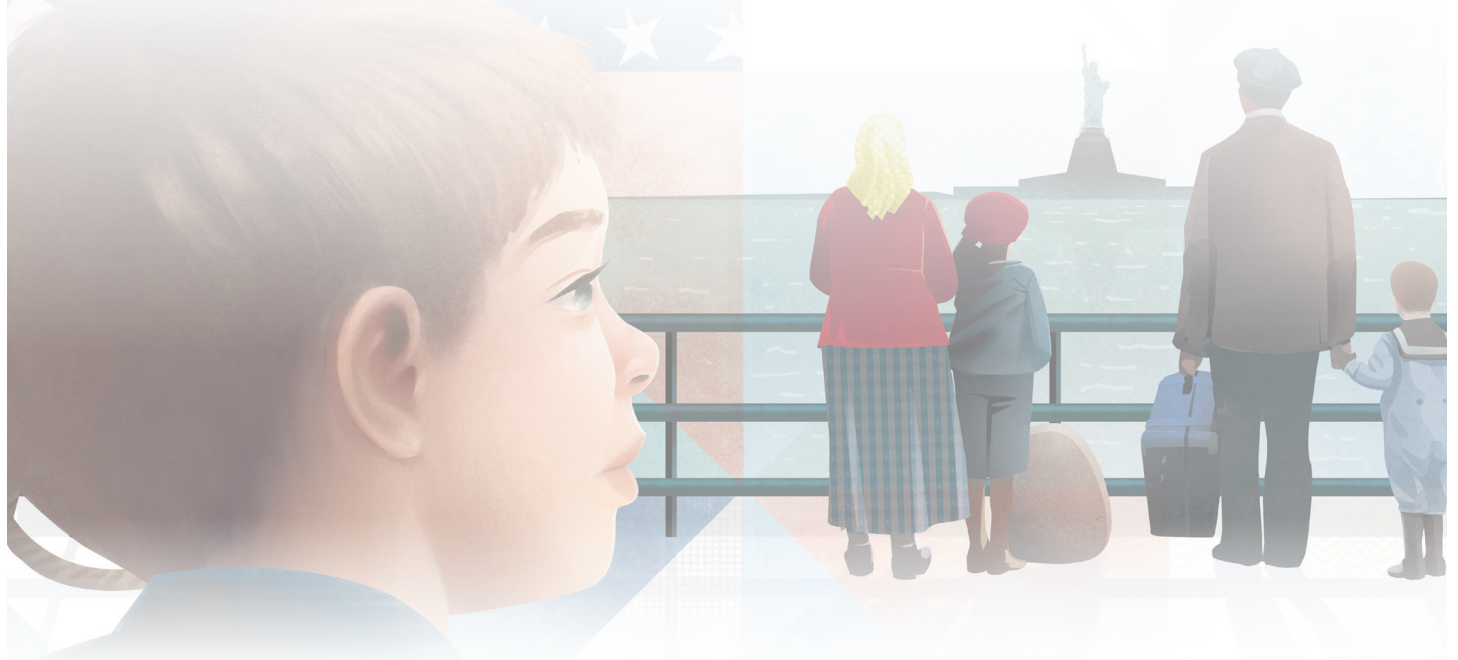
Revisit the pages near the end of the book with the image of America pieced together with symbols for arts, science, and industry and other contributions of the Indigenous people and immigrants who have built America (*"We believe in diversity..."*). For each category of contributions, brainstorm with students some of the notable leaders and creators of that field. What can students discover about the identities of these Americans? How are their stories similar and different?

### SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Developing empathy is an important component in social-emotional learning. How do the vignettes of the children in this text help us be more empathetic to others?

How might the histories and lived experiences of the children in this text influence their perspective about their schools? Community? Country? How might their perspectives be similar to or different from your own?

What are some ways to approach others respectfully when we want to learn more about their identities and cultures?



# SPEAKING UP, SPEAKING OUT

*I'm an American* is about representing and respecting the diverse people who comprise our country. While the intent of the book is not to address racism, conversations about race and racism are likely to surface in the reading and discussion of this text. Naturally, educators are at various levels of comfort with this conversation. However we encourage you to embrace a positive, pro-student stance when engaging in the discussion.

While home and classroom conversations will vary depending on the age of readers, grown-ups can take a developmentally appropriate path toward equipping children with a voice for allyship. Young readers can engage in conversations from the stance of curiosity about and appreciation for others' cultures. Even the youngest readers can be encouraged to seek help from a grown-up when someone's unkind words or actions give them an uncomfortable feeling. Older readers can relate this to developing empathy, or the social-emotional skill of trying to understand what someone else's experiences and feelings might be. They can engage in inquiry-based work about stereotypes, biases, and microaggressions. Coach students to be critical consumers of information, making them more discerning about how they interpret the messages they hear about individuals and groups of people.

When encountering racist sentiment and/or language in the school setting, adopt a teaching stance. Presume the student does not know the weight of the words or phrases used. Explain in a matter-of-fact way that the words or phrases are not okay. You might try something like, *"I don't think you know that what you said is insulting (unkind, racist). That word/phrase is actually rooted in a stereotype (bias, wrong information). I know that now that you know, you'll stop using that word/phrase."* Trust that the student will do better. Likely, with your respectful approach and teaching, they will.

Empower young people to be allies when encountering racist language. Some responses you might offer students include:

- ★ *I don't find that funny.*
- ★ *What you just said is harmful.*
- ★ *It's not okay to talk about people like that.*
- ★ *That's not a kind thing to say. You're better than that.*

Rehearsing options of how to address the comments others make that are hurtful, cause discomfort, and/or that they recognize are wrong will increase the likelihood that they will have the confidence to do so when a situation arises. Remind them that while they can speak up about incidents of racism, they should also share these situations with a trustworthy adult for more support.





# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## FOR EDUCATORS & FAMILIES

[10 Tips for Teaching and Talking to Kids about Race](#) from EmbraceRace

[Let's Talk: Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students](#) from Learning for Justice

[Speak Up at School: How to Respond to Everyday Prejudice, Bias, and Stereotypes](#)  
from Learning for Justice

[Resources For Talking about Race, Racism and Racialized Violence with Kids: A Curated List](#)  
by The Center For Racial Justice Education

[Responding to Hate and Bias at School](#) from Learning for Justice

[Responding to Hateful Speech in Schools](#) from Association for Supervision and Curriculum  
Development (ASCD)

