

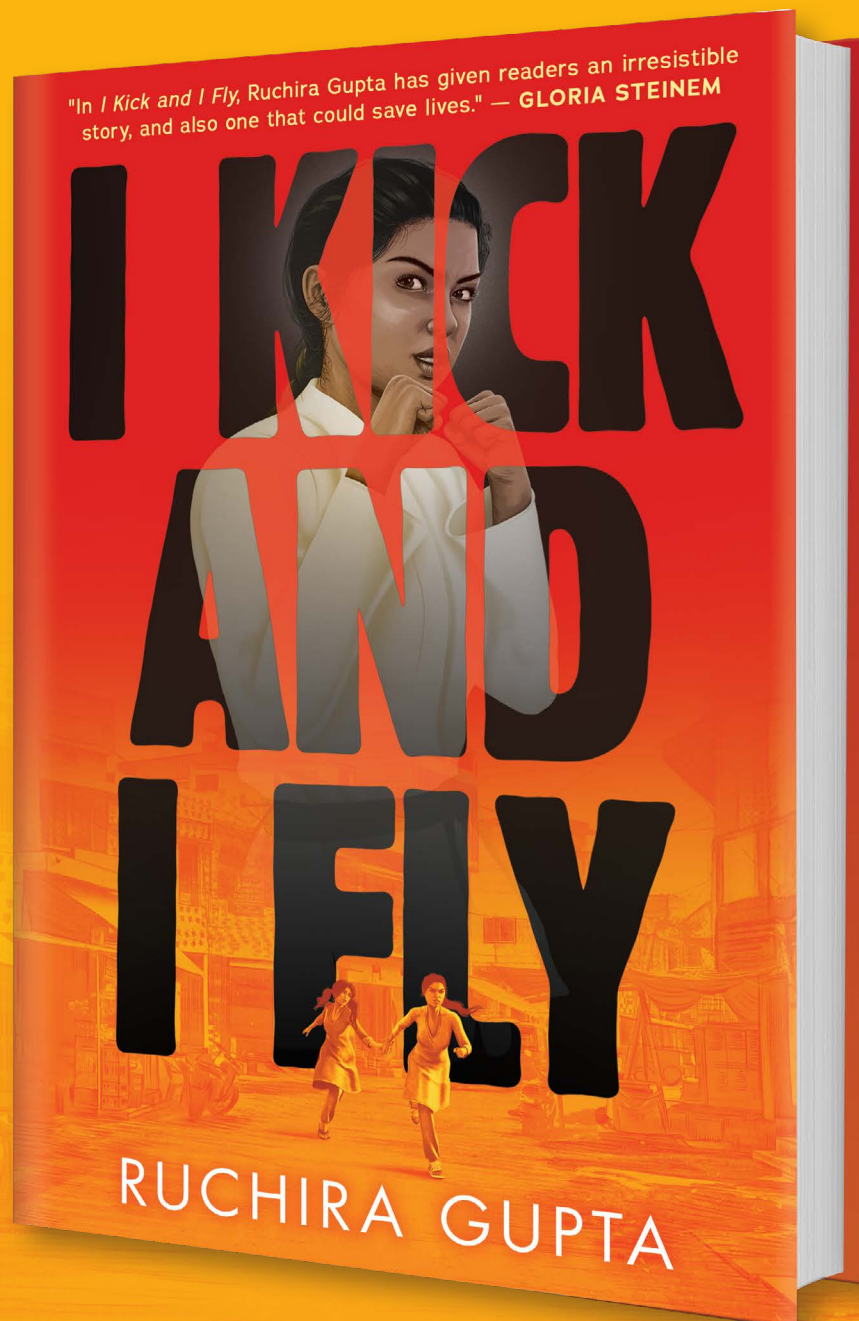
DISCUSSION GUIDE

I KICK AND I FLY

BY RUCHIRA GUPTA

AGES
12 & UP
GRADES
7 & UP

Includes
resources for
younger and
older readers



The
Power
of Story

Building Equitable
Bookshelves

 SCHOLASTIC

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

I started writing this story when a fourteen-year-old girl just like Heera won a gold medal in a karate competition in Forbesganj. She was being groomed for prostitution along with other girls in her lane. A lane just like Girls Bazaar.

An annual cattle fair used to claim girls from that lane every year. When my NGO, Apne Aap, opened a community center and hostel there, we were constantly attacked by men like Gainul and Ravi Lala. They would stalk the mothers, their daughters, and me, hurling abuses, throwing stones, stealing from our offices and even kidnapping girls.

We built higher walls around the hostel to prevent traffickers from jumping over. I posted guards outside my home, hired lawyers, filed police complaints and cases in court. Just like Mai, some mothers in the lane disobeyed their husbands, even though they were beaten up. Their daughters were the first batch of girls in our hostel.

A lot happens over the course of this book—abduction, escape, competition, feuds, the complicated relationships between friends and family members . . . between male and female roles, between people of different castes. You will see an entire community change, characters transform, and the impossible is achieved. I actually saw this happen. I end the book with what has happened.

The change was both internal and external. We turned red-light areas into non-red-light areas across the country, put traffickers in jail and children in school. We started karate and kung fu classes for the girls to help them rediscover their bodies. They began to break burning tiles and win championships. They gained the respect of the town and their families and found new confidence in themselves. Women have taken over the huts and turned them into real homes and small businesses. Seventy of the seventy-two brothels in the lane this story takes place in are now closed.

The truth is that there is not one, but many Heeras. Girls Bazaars still exist in many parts of our world, including the US. I wrote this story because I wanted to share with you that someone somewhere of your age fought back and won. I wanted you to know that change is possible. I have witnessed it in my own lifetime.

Heera's story is a story of hope in spite of great odds. It's about our bodies—who they belong to and the command they can give us. It is the story of a community that resolves to make change contagious and succeeds. I hope you find a friend in Heera who will give you some clues to making the changes you would like in your own life.

The martial arts classes continue in Forbesganj.

Yours sincerely,
Ruchira



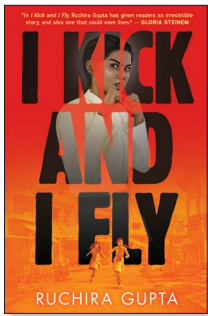
ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Exploring issues of social justice through young adult fiction can enable young readers to connect a story to real-world issues and to their own lives. It allows readers to locate themselves in current events, social and cultural systems, and global context, and can also provide readers with a mentor text for representing complex experiences and uplifting marginalized stories.

This guide provides resources for supporting students as they grapple with complicated and painful topics and consider their own responses and connections to *I Kick and I Fly* by Ruchira Gupta. Use the activities and resources suggested here in whatever combination best supports your students' needs and engages their interests. Consider partnering with your school or public librarians both to provide students with access to the book and to help them conduct further research into the information set forth in the text and in this guide.

NOTE: *I Kick and I Fly* addresses the heavy subjects of sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, familial and intracommunity violence, anti-indigenous violence, poverty, severe food and housing insecurity, violence against women and girls, and more. Taking time to confront and counter your own biases, consulting with your school counselor or social worker, and building flexible options into your lesson planning are great ways to promote psychological safety and support students' engagement with the material.

ABOUT THE BOOK



On the outskirts of the red-light district in Bihar, India, fourteen-year-old Heera is living on borrowed time until her father sells her into the sex trade to help feed their family and repay his loans. It is, as she's been told, the fate of the women in her community to end up here. But watching her cousin, Mira Di, live this life day in and day out is hard enough. To live it feels like the worst fate imaginable. And after a run-in with a bully leads to her expulsion from school, it feels closer than ever. But when a local hostel owner shows up at Heera's home with the money to repay her family's debt, Heera begins to learn that fate can change. Destiny can be disrupted. Heroics can be contagious. It's at the local hostel for at-risk girls that Heera is given a transformative opportunity: learning kung fu with the other girls. Through the practice of martial arts, she starts to understand that her body isn't an object to be commodified and preyed upon, but a vessel through which she can protect herself and those around her. And when Heera discovers the whereabouts of her missing friend, Rosy, through a kung fu pen pal in the US, she makes the decision to embark on a daring rescue mission to New York in an attempt to save her.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In Chapter 1, Heera says that her “full stomach is a heavy burden to bear” (p. 7) after eating the school lunch. What do you think she means by this?
2. The red-light district where Heera lives isn't far from several of her classmates' homes, yet their home lives are starkly different. In what ways do Heera's classmates and their families distance themselves from the suffering that awaits girls like Heera? What are some reasons that community members might distance themselves from the brothels, rather than intervene? Use specific examples from the text to support your answer.
3. After Chotu's death, Heera nearly resigns herself to giving up school and to being sold into the sex trade if it means her family will have enough money to afford more food and better shelter. What do you think of her reasoning? What eventually changes her mind?
4. Consider the meaning of womanhood in India, in the Nat community, and in Heera's life specifically. What is her relationship with the concept of womanhood, both as it relates to physical changes and as it represents a role in her community?
5. Over and over, prostitution and the violence that comes with it are described as Nat girls' destiny or fate. Where does this idea of inevitability come from? Who stands to benefit from this notion? How is it enforced, or what other beliefs or structures enable it? How does Heera push back against this fate and create other choices and paths forward for herself?
6. When she first visits Rini Di, Heera notices a photo with a caption that says “Courage Is Contagious” (p. 51). What does this mean? How is courage contagious in *I Kick and I Fly*? Use specific examples from the text as evidence.
7. Describe the relationships Heera has with the adult women in her life. Are they positive? Negative? What role does each woman play in Heera's growth and development as a character? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
8. Rini Di tells Heera that “Self-esteem is essential to any battle. You have to know you are worth fighting for” (p. 53). What do you think of this statement? In what ways does Heera know she's worth fighting for? When does that certainty falter, and how does she reclaim it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Continued)

9. What is control? Define it in your own words. What does control look like in Heera's life? In what ways does Heera have or take control?
10. Choose two of the Bruce Lee quotes included in *I Kick and I Fly*. Describe what you think each quote means in your own words. How does each quote connect to Heera as a character, or to her story? How might you connect each quote to your own world and life?
11. Discuss what you know about the caste system in India from the text—research it further for more information. How does the caste system impact Heera's life and story? What parallels can you draw between the experiences of marginalized castes and those of marginalized groups in the United States?
12. In Chapter 18, as she prepares for her second kung fu competition, Heera says both that “she is not a Nat girl” (p. 199) and that her excellent balance and flexibility are “attributes we learned as Nat babies” (p. 200). What do you think of these two seemingly contradictory statements? How does Heera reconcile the ways in which her identity as a Nat girl confines her with the ways in which it empowers her?
13. Why do you think Mira Di refuses the same help that she so strongly encourages Heera to take? What differences does Mira Di see between herself and her cousins?
14. What do you think of Heera's plan to rescue Rosy? Why does she confide in Azra and ask for her help, but not Rini Di? Do you agree with her choices and reasoning? Why or why not?
15. Trust is a major theme in Heera's story. What is needed for trust to develop between people? How does Heera begin developing trust, and with whom? How does Heera's life change once she finds people she trusts?
16. After Heera performs in the final competition in the US, Master Yi tells her that her greatest opponent has always been herself. What does he mean by this? How does the statement apply to more than Heera's journey with kung fu?
17. What would justice look like for girls like Heera, Mira Di, Azra, and Rosy? Is there justice for them over the course of the events in *I Kick and I Fly*? Why or why not?
18. In the Letter from the Author at the back of the book, Ruchira Gupta says she wanted to “share with you that someone somewhere of your age fought back and won.” What is something from Heera's story that you don't want to forget? How can you build on what you've learned reading the novel? What are some ways to “fight back” and/or “win” in your own life?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Choose a conversation between Heera and another character and rewrite the scene from the other character's point of view. Consider their relationship with Heera and how they might regard her at different points in her story. Consider the ways that Heera grows over the course of the story and how others' reactions to her might change as a result.
2. In small groups, research information about sex trafficking in the US and globally. Start by watching Ruchira Gupta's documentary, *The Selling of Innocents*, and reviewing the resources from the back of the book. From your compiled research and notes, create a tool to educate the public about this issue and to tell them how to get involved, take action, and support the work of advocacy organizations. The tool could be a pamphlet, presentation, Instagram post, TikTok video, podcast episode, or something else.
3. Every past and present social justice movement has relied on youth activism. The global movements to end sex trafficking and human trafficking are no different. Choose a social justice issue that interests you and research youth activism in that movement. Share your findings in a presentation or report.
4. Heera encounters the concept of mindfulness in her kung fu training and in Bruce Lee's book. Research some ways to practice mindfulness and grounding. Choose a practice or practices that interest you and try to do them every day for a week. Record your observations and notes about the experience in a mindfulness journal.
5. Ruchira Gupta wrote a letter to readers at the end of *I Kick and I Fly* to share the real-life inspiration for Heera's story and the author's own anti-sex-trafficking advocacy. Write her a letter in return. Consider what you've learned about Heera as a character, about her story and experiences, and about her culture. What connections might you make between Heera and yourself, your life, and your culture—both positive and negative? What can you share about the social justice issues you care about, or the experiences and stories you want to uplift as an activist or creator? End the letter by describing a concrete action you plan to take in support of an issue you care about.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Ruchira Gupta | Resources ruchiragupta.com/resources

Ruchira Gupta | *The Selling of Innocents* Documentary vimeo.com/761128163

Nouvelle ELA | Teaching Social Justice with Literature Circles teachnouvelle.com/teaching-social-justice

National Education Association (NEA) | How Schools and Educators Can Combat Human Trafficking nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/how-schools-and-educators-can-combat-human-trafficking

Baylor University | How to Talk About Human Trafficking with Children and Adolescents onlinegrad.baylor.edu/resources/conversations-human-trafficking-children-teens

United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) | Secondary Teaching Guide: Human Trafficking unodc.org/e4j/zh/secondary/teaching-guide-human-trafficking/index.html

The NO Project | Lesson Plans: Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery thenoproject.org/lesson-plans

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) | Child Trafficking: A Middle School Unit unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/6-8_Child_Trafficking_MS_2016.pdf

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) | Child Trafficking: A High School Unit unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/9-12_Child_Trafficking_HS_2016.pdf

FURTHER READING

FICTION

Internment by Samira Ahmed (Ages 12 & up; Grades 7 & up)

Monday's Not Coming by Tiffany D. Jackson (Ages 13 & up; Grades 8 & up)

Sold by Patricia McCormick (Ages 10–14; Grades 5–9)

Traffick by Ellen Hopkins (Ages 14 & up; Grades 9 & up)

The Life I'm In by Sharon G. Flake (Ages 14 & up; Grades 9 & up)

NONFICTION

Girls Like Us: Fighting for a World Where Girls Are Not for Sale: A Memoir by Rachel Lloyd (Adult)

Hidden Girl: The True Story of a Modern-Day Child Slave by Shyima Hall (Ages 14 & up; Grades 9 & up)

We Are Displaced: My Journey and Stories from Refugee Girls Around the World by Malala Yousafzai (Ages 14 & up; Grades 9 & up)

ANTI-TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

Dressember Foundation
dressember.org

ECPAT-USA
ecpatusa.org

FAIR Girls
fairgirls.org

Love146
love146.org

National Human Trafficking Hotline
humantraffickinghotline.org/en

Polaris Project
polarisproject.org

Rescue Foundation
rescuefoundation.net

Safe House Project
safehouseproject.org

Survivor and/or BIPOC-led Programs Supporting Sex Trafficking Survivors

Apne Aap (New York and India) apneaap.org

Asian Women for Equality (Canada) asianwomenequality.org

Breaking Free (St. Paul, MN) breakingfree.net

Courtney's House (Washington, DC) facebook.com/officialCourtneysHouse

EVA Center (Boston) evacenter.org

GEMS (Girls Educational & Mentoring Services) (New York, NY) gems-girls.org

LIFT (Living in Freedom Together) (Worcester, MA) liftworcester.org

Mentari (Queens, NY) mentarius.org

MISSEY (Oakland, CA) misssey.org

More Too Life, Inc. (Miami, FL) moretoolife.org

My Life My Choice (Boston, MA) mylifemychoice.org

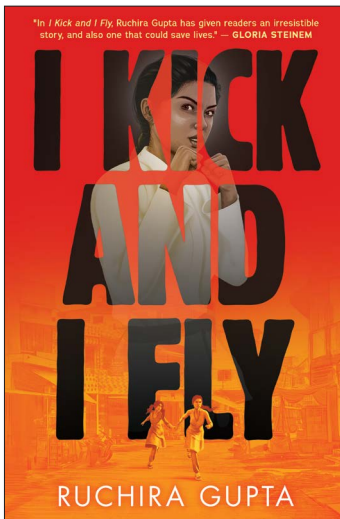
OPS (Organization for Prostitution Survivors) (Seattle, WA) seattleops.org

Stop Trafficking Us (Maine) stoptraffickingus.org

Thistle Farms (Nashville, TN) thistlefarms.org

YouthSpark (Atlanta, GA) youth-spark.org

PRAISE FOR *I KICK AND I FLY*



HC: 9781338825091 • \$18.99
Ages 12 & up • Grades 7 & up
Also available as an ebook and
as an audio download

“Heera’s narration contains vivid sensory descriptions that, along with the Hindi words scattered throughout, bring the setting to life, quickly immersing readers in her world. The depth of the story’s details and its themes of bodily autonomy, community, and women’s empowerment reflect Gupta’s experience as the founder of Apne Aap, an NGO working to end sex trafficking. A triumphant debut.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Debut author Gupta renders Heera’s perseverance amid grueling circumstances via straightforward prose and imbues this searing tale with an ominous ambiance that complements its dark themes.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“In *I Kick and I Fly*, Ruchira Gupta has given young readers an irresistible story, and also one that could save lives. This book is a gift.”
—**Gloria Steinem, Journalist and Social Political Activist**

“*I Kick and I Fly* is a powerhouse of a debut. Ruchira Gupta has crafted a page-turner of a read, steeped in place and full of indelible characters, managing to be at once propulsive and enlightening, infuriating and inspiring. But maybe most important, Heera’s story is a beacon of hope to a generation of young people trying to transform an unjust world.”
—**Gayle Forman, New York Times bestselling author of *If I Stay* and *We Are Inevitable***

Watch author Ruchira Gupta introduce *I Kick and I Fly* at bit.ly/IKickAndIFlyPreview



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruchira Gupta is a writer, feminist campaigner, professor at New York University, and founder of the anti-sex-trafficking organization Apne Aap Women Worldwide. She won the Clinton Global Citizen award in 2009, the Sera Bangali Award in 2012, and an Emmy for outstanding investigative journalism in 1996. She has helped more than twenty thousand girls and women in India exit prostitution systems. She has also edited *As If Women Matter*, an anthology of Gloria Steinem’s essays, and written manuals on human trafficking for the UN Office for Drugs and Crime. Ruchira divides her time between Delhi and New York. *I Kick and I Fly* is her debut novel.

This guide was prepared by Anastasia Collins, MA, MLIS, librarian, youth literature scholar, anti-oppression educator. Follow her at [@DarkLiterata](https://twitter.com/DarkLiterata).

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