
REPRESENTATION AND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES IN *LAST NIGHT AT THE TELEGRAPH CLUB*

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Abstract

The author reviews multi-award-winning YA novel *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) by Malinda Lo, providing a summary, essential questions, and teaching ideas.

Keywords: historical YA fiction, Malinda Lo, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, LGBTQ+ identities, Chinese-American identities, Red Scare, Lavendar Scare, STEM

Winner of the 2021 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, Malinda Lo’s *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* (2021) is set in 1950s Chinatown with McCarthyism running rampant. The novel follows 17-year-old Chinese American Lily Hu, who dreams of becoming an astronaut or a computer at the Jet Propulsion Lab. While her academic and professional dreams are encouraged by her aunt Judy and her newfound Caucasian friend Kathleen (Kath) Miller, they are mocked by Lily’s longtime friend Shirley Lum, who dreams of getting married and having kids after winning the Miss Chinatown contest. The central conflict of the novel emerges as Lily begins to recognize within herself a desire to see a male impersonator perform at a lesbian bar called the Telegraph Club and read lesbian pulp fiction (even though obscenity laws at the time required tragic endings for LGBTQ+ characters). Although she instinctively knows it’s forbidden, she wonders if her friend Kath is “like the girls in the book too? Because I think I am” (p. 100). As she and Kath share their interest in STEM fields, they also develop a romantic relationship without their families’ knowledge—until the Telegraph Club is raided, and Lily must decide whether to embrace her authentic self or remain “a good Chinese girl” (p. 328), as her parents demand.

In terms of author craft, Lo has organized the novel into six parts, each of which features a title from a 1950s “crooner” song (e.g., “I Only Have Eyes for You”) and is dated with the month/year of Lily’s senior year at Galileo High School from August 1954 through January 1955. Each part ends with a flashback from the perspective of Lily’s mom Grace, her aunt Judy, or her father Joseph, as well as a historical timeline from which the interlude occurs (2-20 years earlier). Additionally, Lo provides an in-depth author’s note to help readers contextualize her use of multiple Chinese dialects in the novel, 1950s U.S. and San Francisco history, Chinatown and Chinese Americans, and LGBTQ+ history.

This novel would appeal to readers in grade 10 and up, as well as readers with interests in sapphic representation/romance, Chinese American history, American history, LGBTQ+ history,

and/or women in STEM fields. Lo's *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* prompts readers to consider the following essential questions:

1. In what ways do you feel seen/represented in your communities and in mainstream media? In what ways do you feel unseen/unrepresented in these spaces?
2. Moving beyond yourself, what identities or groups are missing in your communities and/or in the mainstream media you consume? What changes can you make to your media consumption or daily routines that would expand your understanding of diverse identities and experiences?
3. How do you determine when to "fit in" to your various communities (e.g., family, friends, neighborhood, teams, clubs, congregations) and when to stand out/away from those groups?
4. What expectations/pressures do you feel to "fit in"? How do you stand up to those expectations/pressures when fitting in is not the right choice for you?

In English language arts classrooms, teachers could use these questions to prompt discussion for a whole-class reading of the novel, or to encourage individual students to select this book for book clubs, literature circles, and/or their independent reading.

In addition to these essential questions, Lo's novel will inspire further inquiry with learning activities such as these:

1. **"I Can Dream, Can't I?":** In Part I of the novel, we learn that Lily dreams of becoming an astronaut or a mathematician, but she is mocked by her long-time friend Shirley. What are your dreams (professional, academic, personal)? Where do you find support for your dreams? Where do you find a lack of support? What steps will you take to achieve your dreams regardless of the support you have? Reflect, write, discuss.
2. **Implicit Bias Reflection:** At the Telegraph Club and outside of Chinatown, Lily is often the only Asian American present, and people wrongly assume that she does not speak English and call her patronizing names like "China Doll." Pay attention to your initial thoughts when you encounter someone who is different from you, and capture them in your writer's notebook. If you are 18 or older, consider taking an implicit bias test via Harvard's Project Implicit at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/aboutus.html>. Bring your observations and reflections to class for continued inquiry.
3. **Musical Inquiry:** Research your choice of the six songs that serve as titles for each part of the novel. Do a close read of the lyrics; listen to different artists perform the song; analyze how effectively it connects to that specific part of the novel and the novel as a whole.
4. **Historical Inquiry:** After reading the novel and the author's note, choose any person, event, place, or issue depicted in the novel to research and then present your findings during a roundtable "conference" session. Potential topics include but are not limited to the Red Scare, Lavender Scare, Senator Joseph McCarthy, Dr. Hsue-shen Tsien, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Chinese language and dialects, lesbian pulp novels, M.E. Kerr, Chinatown, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and/or his wife Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, Chinese Exclusion Act, McCarran-Walter Act, Chinese Confession Program, cross-gender impersonation, Daughters of Bilitis, Forbidden City, Dr. Margaret Chung.

As Lo reminded listeners in her 2021 National Book Award winning acceptance speech, representation matters. She implored listeners to resist book censorship and efforts to remove books by and about LGBTQ+ people and people of Color, urging readers and teachers to keep these books on the shelves: "Don't let them erase us" (National Book Awards, 2021, 1:20:30). *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* is yet another captivating and important YA book by Malinda Lo, and I highly recommend it!

References

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Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is in her 17th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools. She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.

