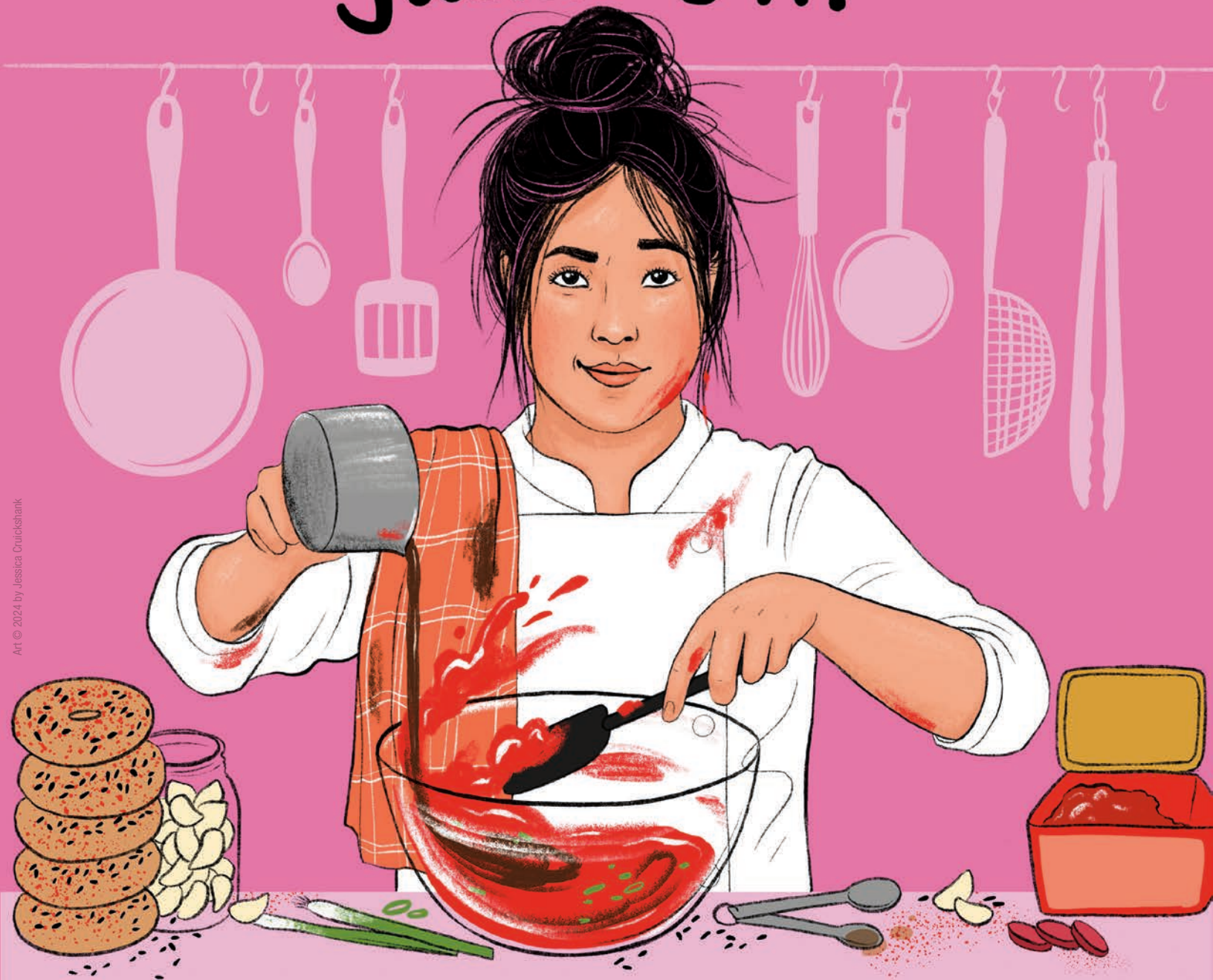


"Park's novel delivers authentic characters who will make you laugh . . . and cry. Not to be missed!" —Ellen Oh, author of *The Colliding Worlds of Mina Lee*

WHAT'S EATING Jackie Oh?



PATRICIA PARK

DISCUSSION GUIDE
RHTeachersLibrarians.com

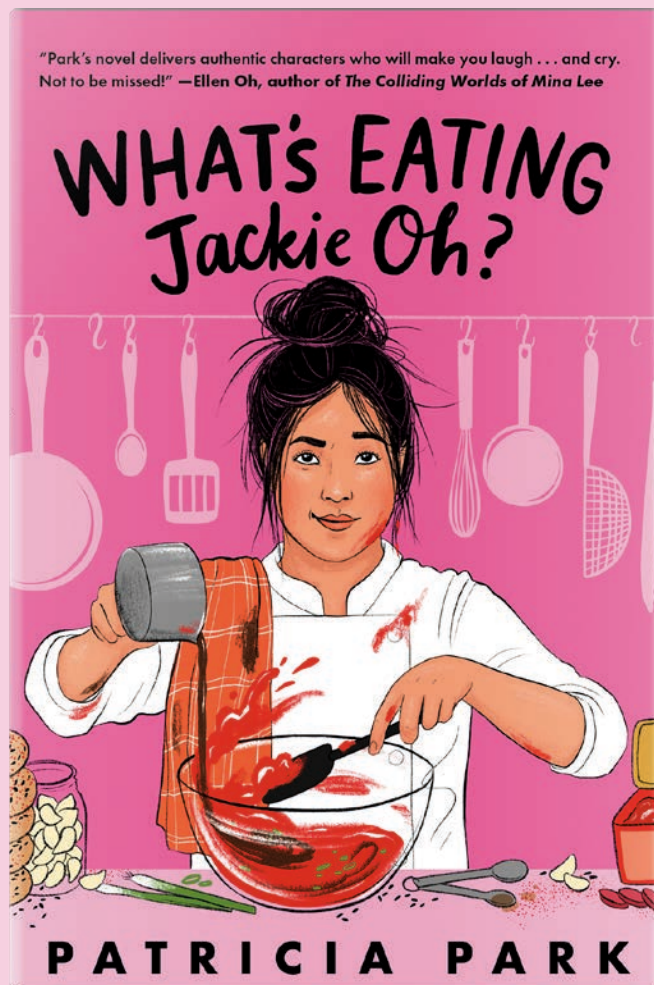
She's tired of perfect GPAs, PSATs, SATs, all of it. Jackie longs to become a professional chef. But her Korean American parents are Ivy League corporate workaholics who would never understand her dream. Just ask her brother, Justin, who hasn't heard from them since he was sent to Rikers Island.

Jackie works at her grandparents' Midtown Manhattan deli after school and practices French cooking techniques at night—when she should be studying. But the kitchen's the only place Jackie is free from all the stresses eating at her—school, family, and the increasing violence targeting the Asian community.

Then the most unexpected thing happens: Jackie becomes a teen contestant on her favorite cooking show, *Burn Off!* Soon Jackie is thrown headfirst into a cutthroat TV world filled with showboating child actors, snarky judges, and gimmicky “gotcha!” challenges.

All Jackie wants to do is cook her way. But what is her way? In a novel that will make you laugh and cry, Jackie proves who she is both on and off the plate.

Patricia Park's hilarious and stunning *What's Eating Jackie Oh?* explores the delicate balance of identity, ambition, and the cultural and societal expectations to perform.



Themes: Cultural Diversity, Contemporary Issues/ Social Problems, Racism & Prejudice, Family, Friendship, Justice & Equality

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Ars Magna

Patricia Park is a tenured professor of creative writing at American University, a Fulbright Scholar in Creative Arts, and a Jerome Hill Artist Fellow. Her debut YA novel, *Imposter Syndrome and Other Confessions of Alejandra Kim*, received starred reviews from Kirkus Reviews and School Library Journal and was an NPR Book of the Day. Patricia's newest novel, *What's Eating Jackie Oh?* is inspired by her love of watching competitive TV cooking shows and creating

somewhat edible meals from leftovers. It was also inspired by Patricia's New York Times op-ed, “I'm Done Being Your Model Minority.” Patricia's writing has also appeared in the New Yorker, the New York Times, the Guardian, Salon, and others. A native of Queens, she lives in Brooklyn, New York. Visit her online at patriciapark.com

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Before reading the novel, discuss ways that immigrants have strengthened the U.S. historically and are still doing so. What areas of our national culture have immigrant groups enriched? If you have immigrant ancestry, find out and discuss information about how your family came to be in the U.S., recently or in the past.
- Bring in a favorite recipe to share, if you have one. How important is cooking or baking in your life? Do you know teenagers who consider it important? What makes it important to people?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

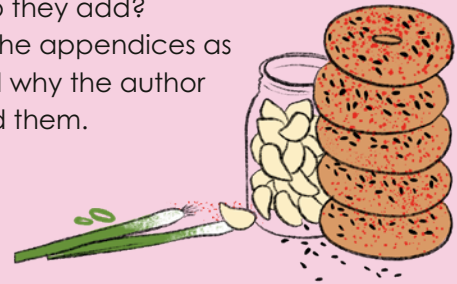
1. What is Jackie like? What are her strengths? What obstacles does she face? What does she like and dislike? Talk about why she cares so much about cooking. What effect does her Korean heritage have on her life? What influence does living in New York City have on her? What shows how Jackie has changed by the end of the novel?
2. Discuss Jackie's parents, their personalities, their backgrounds, and their work. Why do you think professional and financial success is so important to them? What effect does that emphasis on success have on Jackie's life? How do her parents and her relationship with them, especially her mother, change during the novel?
3. Why does Jackie's mother say to her, "*Do you want to end up like your brother?*" (p. 38) Where is Justin and why? What's his relationship like with his parents and his grandparents? Why don't his parents visit him until late in the story? What happens on that visit? Why does Jackie's father cry in the car going home? What impact has the fact that he's in prison had on their social lives?
4. Why does Justin himself write to Jackie, "*Dont end up like me lol*"? (p. 42) What is Jackie's relationship with him like? Describe how she feels about him. What kind of letters do they exchange? What interests do they share? What does she mean by saying Justin "*internalized*" his bad grades "*as a measure of his self-worth*"? (p. 39)
5. The title of the first chapter is "Not Your Model Minority." What does the phrase mean in Jackie's life? Why does she refer to drinking the "model minority Kool-Aid" in the past? (p. 15) What attributes does she feel many people expect her to have because of her Korean heritage? When does the concept feel oppressive and why?
6. What is the role of her grandparents and their deli in Jackie's life? How do they treat Jackie? How do they balance her parents' role? What important incidents in the story come about because of her grandparents? Give examples of what her grandparents value. What is their background and how has it affected their current life?
7. How did Jackie and KT meet, and why did they become friends? What do they like about each other? Which parts of their lives are similar, and which are different? What important aspects of their lives have they hidden from each other? Why do they grow apart? How do they end up reconciling?
8. Who is Stephen Min and how does Jackie know him? How does Jackie perceive him? How does she think he perceives her? Why is it hard for Jackie to understand and then believe that Stephen likes her?



9. Give an overview of *Burn Off! High School Edition*. Why did Jackie get chosen to be on it? How does the contest work? Describe the other contestants that are important in the story. What are the judges like? Discuss Jackie's sense of competition and the role it plays in how she interacts with other contestants.
10. Describe Jackie's menu for the "Final Exam" of the show. How does it reflect her own life? How does it reflect New York City? What do the judges say about it? Do you think she should have won the contest? Why or why not?
11. Discuss Jackie's comment after she's made her mind map: "I research like I've never researched anything in my life. I never studied this hard for school or hagwon. Certainly not for Mr. Doumann's class. Who knew history was so useful?" (p. 186) Why is studying now

important to her? Relate this to the kitchen drills her mother puts her through and Jackie's observation, "It never feels like homework—even though it totally is." (p. 151)

12. How does the title suit the book and foreshadow its content? Talk about the voice and format of the novel. What is the effect of having a first-person, present-tense narrative? The narrative is interspersed with texts, taped interviews, excerpts from performances, a web chart, menus, and more. What do they add? Discuss the appendices as well and why the author included them.



ACTIVITIES

- Jackie makes a mind map relating food and immigrants in NYC, shown on page 186. Create your own mind maps of food in your life—cooking or baking, at home or school, eating out, what you like, what you don't like, and related topics. Decorate them with color and drawings and share with the group.
- At the end, one of Baja's followers gives the website for the author's op-ed piece in the *New York Times* (p. 239). Read it and do additional research about violence against Asians and Asian Americans during COVID-19. Hold a discussion about the op-ed, relating it to the novel including the attack on Jackie's grandfather, and to your life or the lives of people you know. ("I'm Done Being Your Model Minority")



Kathleen Odean was a school librarian for seventeen years and now gives workshops for educators on young adult books. She chaired the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and served on earlier Newbery and Caldecott committees.



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