

# EDUCATORS' GUIDE

S. J. LAIDLAW

# FIFTEEN LANES

"...Laidlaw doesn't flinch from the horrifying details of the desperate and dangerous lives of Mumbai's poorest women.

**Noor's strength and determination are inspiring....**

This heartbreaking and hopeful novel will appeal to readers of gripping contemporary stories..."

– Starred Review, *Booklist*

"...Laidlaw brings Kamathipura, a poor neighborhood in Mumbai, to life with her detailed prose. The author handles the delicate subject matter with care, balancing the desperate living conditions with glimpses of Noor's joys and aspirations....

The alternating points of view force readers to compare the two girls....

Full of complicated characters from across Mumbai's social classes,

**the novel challenges readers' expectations."**

– *Kirkus Reviews*

"...S.J. Laidlaw lives in Mumbai and volunteers herself at a shelter for children of sex workers, and so she illuminates this world so carefully and honestly that it comes alive in the pages."

– *Bustle.com*



TUNDRA BOOKS

[www.penguinrandomhouse.ca](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca)



**NOOR HAS LIVED** all of her fourteen years in the fifteen lanes of Mumbai's red light district. Born into a brothel, she is destined for the same fate as her mother: a desperate life trapped in the city's sex trade. She must act soon to have any chance of escaping this grim future.

Across the sprawling city, fifteen-year-old Grace enjoys a life of privilege. Her father, the CEO of one of India's largest international banks, has brought his family to Mumbai where they live in unparalleled luxury. But Grace's seemingly perfect life is shattered when she becomes a victim of a cruel online attack.

When their paths intersect, Noor and Grace will be changed forever. Can two girls living in vastly different worlds find a common path?

Award-winning author S.J. Laidlaw masterfully weaves together their stories in a way that resonates across class and culture. *Fifteen Lanes* boldly explores the ties that bind us to places and people, and shows us that the strongest of bonds can be forged when hope is all but lost.

Teachers can use the text in a number of ways including:

- Exploring concepts and themes such as bullying, hope, friendship, family, survival and fate
- Conducting an in-depth study of narrative structure and character development
- As a springboard for discussions about difficult topics such as poverty, human rights and gender equality

The activity guide that follows includes discussion questions and prompts to elicit a meaningful understanding of the text for students fourteen years of age and up. Students will be encouraged to ask and answer questions to clarify and monitor their understanding, identify important ideas, and synthesize information for a broader understanding. Links to Common Core State Standards have been made where applicable.



Photo credit: Liz Scyznkowski

**Born in Philadelphia, S.J. Laidlaw** spent most of her childhood in Toronto. After completing an undergraduate degree in English, she ventured to Africa as a volunteer teacher. There she discovered that her students needed as much guidance and support outside the classroom as in it, so after three years, she returned to Canada to complete a graduate degree in clinical social work. Since then, she has worked as a counselor in many countries and led workshops for parents and educators on raising and working with third-culture children. Her first book, *An Infidel in Paradise*, won the IODE Violet Downey Book Award, and her second book, *The Voice inside My Head*, was chosen as a 2015 CLA Young Adult Book Honour Book, was shortlisted for the Arthur Ellis Award and was a finalist for the 2015 Silver Falcion Award. When she is not writing, S.J. Laidlaw currently volunteers at a night shelter for the children of sex workers in Mumbai. For more information, please visit [www.sjlaidlaw.com](http://www.sjlaidlaw.com).



# PRE-READING DISCUSSION

- What is your understanding of the concept of “fate?” Do you feel that people are powerless against fate? If so, why? If not, what do you believe?
- Do you consider yourself to be a hopeful person? Explain your thinking.
- The author’s dedication at the beginning of the book reads, “How can I dedicate a book to girls who may never have the freedom, education or leisure to read it? How can I not?” Before reading the book, what scenario can you imagine or you have learned about in which a girl may not have the freedom, education or leisure to read something?
- What is the difference between empathy and sympathy?
- A general and open discussion about Mumbai’s red light district and sex trafficking will help set the tone and prepare the students for some of the difficult material they will be reading.

**The subject matter in this book may be challenging for some students. Encourage students as they read to make note of any questions that occur to them about either the language or subject matter. Visit these questions frequently while reading.**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1

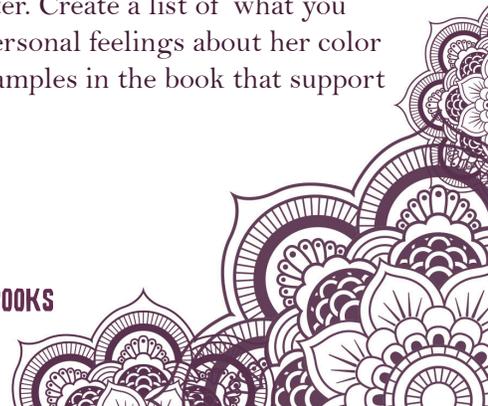
## 1. MEETING NOOR AND GRACE

- After reading the first two chapters, pause and reflect on what we have learned about Noor and Grace.
- At this point, can you make any connections between the two girls and their lives? Imagine a situation in which these two girls’ paths will cross. Write a short story, written in third person narrative, that describes this situation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3  
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3

## 2. CHARACTER

- In partners, small groups or independently, study Noor as a character. Create a list of what you consider to be her defining characteristics and try not to let your personal feelings about her color your description. Complete a similar exercise about Grace. Find examples in the book that support your thinking.



## 2. CHARACTER (CONTINUED)

- After having considered Noor and Grace separately, compare and contrast the two girls. It is easier to identify their differences but focus on what the two girls have in common. If these girls were to have met up under different circumstances (i.e., not from their participation in an NGO-sponsored program), do you think they would have made a connection? Why or why not?
- Think about your personal connection to the characters. Was there one character that you more strongly identified with? Consider the defining characteristics you identified in the previous exercise, and not necessarily the circumstances under which the girls lived. Identify one situation in the book in which you empathized with the character.
- If Noor had grown up in an economically and emotionally safe environment, do you think her list of defining characteristics would be much different? Explain your thinking.
- In Chapter 25, Noor tells a male character, “The boy I knew was a fighter. He would not have given in to a fate he didn’t choose.” In Chapter 28, this same character aids Noor’s escape. Along with VJ, which male character helped her escape the brothel? What does he say to Noor that shows he too may have hope of escaping his fate?
- There are few positive male characters in the story and women are shown to not be valued members of Noor’s community. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from the perspective of two female characters? How would introducing a male voice, positive or negative, have influenced the telling of the story? Are there any male characters in the story that you would have liked to have heard from? Why?
- What role does Noor’s friend Parvati play in the novel? Do you consider her to be a hopeful character? Why or why not?
- Noor’s school friend Gajra states, “I want to live in an India that isn’t held back by the prejudices of caste and color.” This is a simple statement but full of hope. How did Noor work throughout the novel to achieve this goal?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3

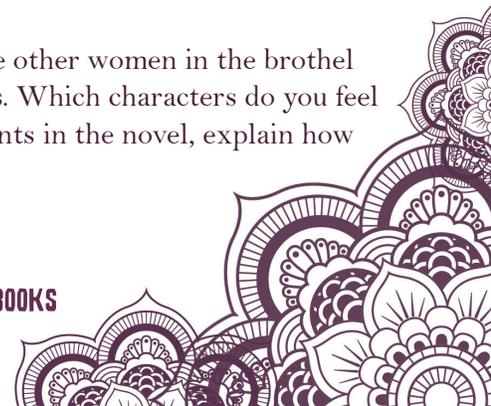
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5

## 3. NOOR

- India’s caste system is a social ranking structure. To fully understand the life Noor and her family have been born into, it is helpful to more deeply understand this system. Further research the origins and meaning of this system and reflect on how this changed your understanding of Noor’s family’s life.
- When we first meet Noor, she is a young girl living in a brothel. Explain how she came to live in this situation and why it was so difficult to escape this life.
- Noor is an important caregiver for her brother and sister. There are other women in the brothel that she treated as family even though they were not blood relatives. Which characters do you feel Noor felt closest to at the brothel? Making reference to specific events in the novel, explain how her feelings and actions could be considered familial.



### 3. NOOR (CONTINUED)

- Select five words that you feel best describe Noor. Explain your choices, making direct reference to the novel.
- How did meeting Grace affect or change the way Noor considered her own situation, if at all?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

### 4. GRACE

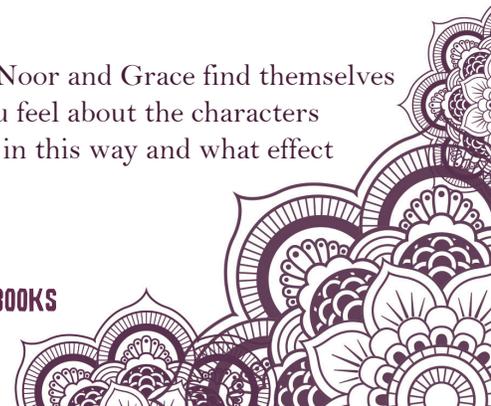
- The daughter of a wealthy CEO, Grace attends a private international school in Mumbai. She has loving, supportive parents and a kind brother. Yet Grace is very unhappy. Why is she so unhappy?
- Revisit the night Grace referred to as “the Apocalypse.” Other than not sharing pictures of herself, what could she have done differently that night to prevent all of the heartache that followed? What are some basic rules to follow when communicating via text messages or online to protect yourself from a similar situation?
- When confronted with the consequences of sharing the picture, Grace says, “I felt mortified, apologetic, betrayed, frightened.” Explain why she may have been feeling each of these emotions.
- Grace felt very lost when her best friend Tina moved away. How might these feelings of loss and loneliness have influenced her decision to send the picture?
- Grace felt that she couldn’t be honest with her family about everything she was going through. Why did she feel like she had to hide her feelings? What was it about Noor that made her feel like she could be honest?
- Why do you think some people are bullies? What prevents people from standing up for others? In Chapter 10, Grace thinks, “Every one of them, whether bully or bystander, was enjoying my humiliation. They didn’t care that I’d had thoughts of suicide, or felt so ashamed that I’d carved into my own flesh. I was nothing more than a moment’s entertainment. I’d never felt so alone.” Do you believe that nobody cared?
- What are your impressions of VJ Patel? Do you think he was a good friend to Grace? Why or why not? Refer directly to events in the novel to support your answer.
- How did meeting Noor affect the way Grace considered her own problems?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

### 5. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

- The novel does not follow a typical linear narrative structure. Describe the narrative structure the author employs.
- Re-read the first two chapters of the book. Describe the situations Noor and Grace find themselves in. Do you see any connection between their dilemmas? How do you feel about the characters at this point? Why do you think the author chose to open the story in this way and what effect did it have on you as the reader?



## 5. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE (CONTINUED)

- In Chapters 22 and 23, the reader can interpret the scene of the girls at the coffee shop from two perspectives. For what reasons were both girls uncomfortable? How does this provide a deeper understanding of each girl's character?
- Which scene or event would you consider to be the climax or crisis point of the novel? How do both Noor and Grace's lives change after this event?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5

## 6. FAMILY

- Write a description of Noor's family. Consider who is a part of her family, the types of relationships she has with the people in it, and her role. How would you describe Noor's feelings about her family? Complete a similar exercise for Grace. If you had to identify one person as the leader of each of their families, who would it be? Explain your thinking, referring directly to the novel.
- Noor's relationship with her mother is complicated. She always felt that Aamaal was the favored child in her family and her mother often treated Noor harshly. What evidence is there in the novel that her mother loved Noor and was, in spite of what she said, somewhat hopeful for her future?
- Noor and her family's births were never registered. What is the significance of this?
- Grace struggled to maintain a strong relationship with her mother after the texting incident. Why did her mother feel that somehow the incident was her fault?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1

## 7. FATE

- A running theme throughout the novel has to do with one's fate and the ability (or inability) to escape it. Noor's mother tells her that, "You were born into your fate, Noor. I may forestall it but you can't escape it. We can only hope your next incarnation will be more forgiving." What was Noor's fate according to her mother? Why was it significant that Noor's mother sent her to a fee-based school?
- To gain further insight into the devadasi system, read the following article:  
<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/21/devadasi-india-sex-work-religion>
- At the end of the story, an unlikely character thanks Noor for her influence. "He said I'd taught him that if the future was not written as you wanted it to be, then you must write your own story." Who was the character and what did he mean?
- Did the novel change or influence the way you think about the concept of fate? Why or why not? Refer to the novel directly when explaining your thinking.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2



# EXTEND YOUR THINKING

- What would Noor think of your home and classroom? Is there anything you think she might not be familiar with?
- If you could ask Noor a set of five questions, what would they be? How might you think she would answer?
- Why were Noor and her community leery of NGOs and the work they do? Research NGOs that work in the region in which the novel is set and learn more about the ways in which they try to help members of the community.
- When Grace goes to see Mr. Donleavy about her community service, he has written a quote from Leo Tolstoy: “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” What are your thoughts about this quote and how might its meaning relate to the novel?
- Do you feel that one character, either Noor or Grace, was responsible for saving the other? Why or why not?
- Read the Author’s Note at the end of the novel. How important do you think the author’s experience was to writing a novel in two authentic voices?
- If you had to select one theme as being the most predominant in the text, which one would it be? Write or discuss why this theme is significant in the text and select at least five significant events or characters that are representative of this theme.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2

# COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

## READING: LITERATURE

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

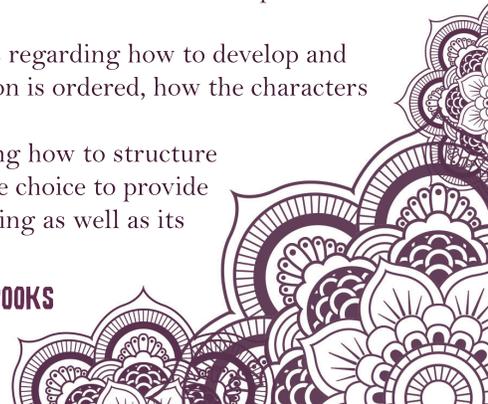
**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2** Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3** Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.



# COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS CONTINUED

## WRITING

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

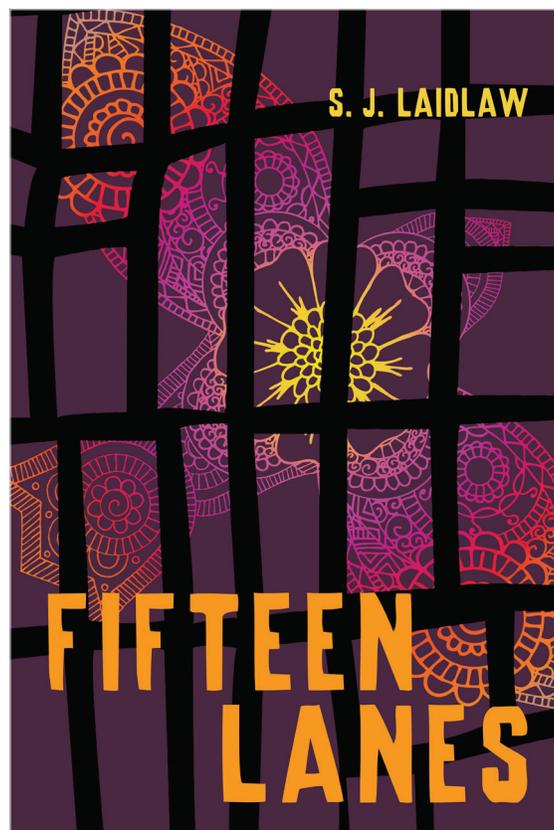
**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.7** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

## SPEAKING AND LISTENING

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.



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