

Isabel in Bloom

MAE RESPICIO



EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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About the Book

In this beautifully written novel-in-verse, author Mae Respicio explores the challenges and joy of new beginnings, emphasizing a theme of growth in its many forms.

Isabel, a twelve-year-old girl, moves to San Francisco with her mother after many years of living with her grandparents in the Philippines. She finds it hard to adjust to her new surroundings, and her relationship with her mother has become distant. At school, Isabel decides to join a gardening and cooking club, which helps her make friends and find her way in the new country. The story follows Isabel as she discovers a special garden that bridges her homes in the Philippines and the United States.



About the Author

Mae Respicio writes novels full of hope and heart. Her debut, *The House That Lou Built*, received the Asian/Pacific American Library Association Honor in Children's Literature and was an NPR Best Book of the Year. She's also the author of the acclaimed *Any Day with You* and *How to Win a Slime War*. Visit her at maerespicio.com and on Instagram at [@maerespiciobooks](https://www.instagram.com/maerespiciobooks).

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Dear Reader,

People often ask me: How do you start writing a book? I don't quite have a formula . . . though it might be easier if I did! I usually start with a few images or words, or a few themes or feelings I hope might (magically?) turn into a story.

When I was brainstorming *Isabel in Bloom*, I pictured a girl on a plane, a dried-up school garden, and a balikbayan box. I wanted to write about creative kids, the intricacies of mother-daughter relationships, and the search for home. And I knew I wanted all of this to be carried by hope. The spark I ended up with was about a girl who has only seen her mom five times in five years, since her mom left to become a nanny in the United States to give her daughter a better life.

Like many Filipino American kids, I grew up with the ritual of my family sending balikbayan boxes to our loved ones, filled with household goods, from California to the Philippines. This box has become a symbol of love and sacrifice; it is sent across oceans by countless Filipinos and has a long, complex history. The Philippine labor diaspora is one of the largest in the world, and it's often mothers who leave their children to work in service jobs abroad. Yet their journeys go largely untold (I have certainly not heard about it in any middle-grade books). And so, the idea of a girl in a new country, reuniting with the mom she barely knows, was the emotional landscape I wanted to explore—and what helped me begin writing this book.

What's happening in our world also affects my writing process. While I was drafting, there was a surge of unprovoked attacks on Asian American elders, which weighed heavy on my mind. It became important for me to include how we learn from and honor the generations who came before us.

After (magically!) weaving everything together, what bloomed is the book in your hands—told through poetry. I hope that Isabel's story will inspire young readers to see that they are resilient—and that they have the wonderful power to grow their own ideas.

I experienced both deep tenderness and joy in writing this book, as I hope you will in reading it.

With gratitude,

Mae



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BOOKS

Pre-Reading Questions and Activities

1. Spend some time with the cover of the novel. Point out to students that several items from the Philippines appear on the cover: the sun from the Philippine flag, sampaguita, and calamansi. Ask students to use their senses to discuss what Isabel might be hearing, smelling, seeing, or touching in the garden. National Geographic Kids is one nonfiction resource that could be used to help readers build their background knowledge of the Philippines:
kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/philippines.
2. Isabel is about to travel over 7,000 miles alone from the Philippines to California to join her mother. What thoughts or emotions might she be having?
3. Families related by blood and chosen families are both important in Filipino culture. Who are the people who make up your family? Who are the people you feel closest to in your family? How did those relationships come to be? How do you feel them changing as you get older?
4. Read Mae's author's note at the end of *Isabel in Bloom*. She mentions that what is happening in the world influences her as a writer. What is happening in your world that you might use as inspiration for your writing?
5. The author uses garden-related words for each section title. Notice that all of these words can have multiple meanings. (Teachers, you might create a word wall with these terms and their meanings to refer to while reading the book.) Why might Mae have chosen these gardening terms as metaphors for Isabel's story? How might these metaphors be applied to your life?
6. Create a visual glossary of Filipino words that readers will encounter in the novel. Add to it while reading. For younger students, this might be teacher-led throughout, but for older students who have devices, students can take over this job after the teacher models it. Some words to include:
 - balete tree
 - calamansi
 - chicken afritada
 - jeepneys
 - lolo and lola
 - parols
 - sampaguita
 - titas and titos



Example:

Word	Image	A definition or background information providing context
balete tree (p. 10)		Balete trees can grow to be very old and large. Some grow as tall as 200 feet and live for hundreds of years. In some areas of the Philippines, they are believed to be the home of mythical creatures like engkantos and tree fairies.

Questions and Activities

1. Novels-in-verse are excellent read-aloud and read-along books. *Isabel in Bloom* could be a short daily read-aloud during a poetry unit. Writers could return to certain poems as mentor texts for student writing. For example, students could write a "Yesterday/Today" poem (p. 35) or a synonym poem using "Words for Invisible" (p. 270) as a model after reading these poems.

Instructions for Yesterday/Today Poem

Line 1: Time of day

Line 2: Location

Line 3: Two items at the location

Line 4: Name and physical attribute of town

Line 5: Building description

Line 6: Time of day/item

Line 7: Items and descriptive adjective

Line 8: Fill in this phrase: Everything so ____

Line 9: Action past tense and present tense

2. Isabel says she has only seen her mother "five times in five years" (p. 22). In what ways do you think this has impacted their relationship? What are some conflicts you anticipate might arise as Isabel moves and lives with her mother after all this time?
3. Isabel thought she could handle traveling alone from the Philippines to California, but she begins to doubt herself (pp. 27-29). She does some self-talk to help herself get through this frightening experience. Have you ever had an experience when doubt crept in? What did you do to deal with it? What advice would you give Isabel?
4. When Isabel arrives in the United States, she says, "My grandparents said look for familiar things but there is nothing here I recognize" (p. 40). Think about a place you visited for the first time. How did you feel? What were your thoughts and feelings? What details do you remember from that first visit to that new place?
5. Isabel packs photos of her friends and grandparents to bring with her to the United States. If you were moving a long distance, what photos would you take with you?
6. Jasmine sampaguita is a scent that helps Isabel remember her home in the Philippines. Just smelling this scent makes her feel happier. What scents make you happy?
7. Isabel's words sometimes contradict her feelings. Why do you think she can quickly tell her mom everything is fine even when her feelings might be conflicted?
8. When Nicolette calls, Isabel does not tell her mother. Why does Isabel tell her mom that the call is a wrong number? (pp. 137-138)
9. As we read through the poems, we can gain a deeper understanding of Isabel's character from the lines at the beginning or end of each poem. For instance, in "After Homework" (p. 148), the line "I'll try again" shows that Isabel is not afraid of facing difficult situations. Keep a record of lines that offer valuable insights into Isabel's personality.
10. Isabel does not show others the jasmine plant she has been nursing back to health right away (pp. 170-171). Why do you think she keeps it to herself for a while?
11. Isabel says of her mom: "She doesn't see my sadness" (p. 182). Why doesn't Isabel's mom see her sadness? What does her mom mean by "I can't believe we did it"?
12. What makes Isabel realize that her mom is trying hard? How does this realization influence Isabel's actions?
13. Melissa has two dads, and it brings up sad thoughts for Isabel about her lack of a relationship with her dad (pp. 221-223). When we're feeling down, it is easy to think that our family does not measure up to others' families. What advice might you give Isabel to help her see the beauty and value of her family? What beauty and value do you see in your family?

14. What does Isabel mean when she says “I guess we all have our own stories”? (p. 231) What is your story? Write about it.
15. Isabel says, “Maybe I should make my home wherever I am” (p. 253). How is this a shift from her previous thoughts and feelings? What do you think this means for her?
16. Isabel worries that her mom may be planning to move back with the family she worked for in New York (pp. 321–322). What are some ways to possibly handle things you feel are out of your control?
17. The garden makes the kids’ school a better place. What would make your school better? Design a new area or describe an idea that will make your school better.



Post-Reading Questions and Activities

1. **Filipino Americans:** Research famous Filipino Americans. The list might include activists like Larry Itliong, entertainers like Bruno Mars, Olivia Rodrigo, and H.E.R., and scholars like Dr. Kevin Nadal or Dr. Noreen Rodriguez.
2. **Filipino Settlements:** Research Filipino settlements such as Morro Bay, the Sakadas, the Alaskeros, and the Manilamen of St. Malo or Manila Village in Louisiana. Two resources to explore include the Filipino American National Historical Society (fanhs-national.org/filam) and History Channel’s “The First Asian American Settlement was Established by Filipino Fisherman” (history.com/news/first-asian-american-settlement-filipino-st-malo).
3. **Filipino Community Resources:** Many regions have local Filipino associations. Reach out to the closest association and host a guest speaker in person or via Zoom. Speakers could share immigration stories, Filipino history and culture, or how their families celebrate being Filipino. Have students generate questions for guests before and during their presentation.
4. **Filipino Populations:** Filipino Americans are the second-largest Asian American group after Chinese Americans, and populations can vary widely among US states. Research the population of Filipino Americans in each state and discuss how daily life might be different for Filipino Americans living in areas with larger populations of Filipinos versus Filipino Americans who may be part of a smaller population.
5. **Filipino Experiences:** There is no one way to be Filipino. It is why the multiple stories written by authors like Mae are so important. Read one of Mae’s other books and compare those characters’ experiences to Isabel’s and her mom’s experiences.
6. **Filipino Foods:** Isabel eats rice for breakfast. Rice might not be a dish you associate with breakfast, but it is a common breakfast food in many parts of the world. Research rice and its importance to the world. National Geographic’s What the World Eats provides interactive graphs to show the differences in diets across the globe: nationalgeographic.com/what-the-world-eats
7. Prepare a scent collection that students could choose items from for descriptive writing. A collection could include hot sauce, modeling clay, a scented candle, a jar of baby food, and other items that might bring up memories for your students. This collection can be used for a variety of writing, including poetry, quick writes, and longer descriptive writing.
8. Research your school’s policy for creating a new club. What clubs do you think might be good additions to your school?

STEAM Connections

Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math connections can be made before, during, or after reading *Isabel in Bloom*. For example, a class might plant a garden as a pre-reading activity but care for and monitor it throughout their reading of the book.

Start or Design a Classroom Garden

The scale of this activity depends on the resources you have available. If limited space is available, consider planting in small cups or egg cartons. Some classes might have hydroponic gardens. Other classes might find an outdoor space to start a classroom garden. If no resources are available for planting, consider having students design a garden on paper.

Garden Resources

- **Grow Seedlings in an Egg Carton** (PBS Kids): pbs.org/parents/crafts-and-experiments/grow-seedlings-in-an-egg-carton
- **Learning Through the Garden** (Rutgers: New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station): njaes.rutgers.edu/fs1211
- **Start a School Garden—Here's How . . .** (US Department of Agriculture): usda.gov/media/blog/2013/08/13/start-school-garden-heres-how
- **What Do Plants Need to Grow** (Generation Genius): generationgenius.com/videolessons/plant-growth-conditions-video-for-kids

Design Your Dream Bedroom

Isabel takes a quiz about her likes and dislikes while she is flying to the United States. List and discuss your answers to the quiz. Then use your answers to design your dream bedroom. You could create a floor plan or use magazine or internet photos to design your dream room.

Career Exploration

Choose one of the jobs the author mentions to research and share with your class.

Explore the Science and Math of Baking

The Royal Institution has a video and activity sheet to make Cakes in a Cup using six ingredients and baking in a microwave.

- **Video:** rigb.org/learning/activities-and-resources/cakes-cup
- **Activity Sheet:** rigb.org/sites/default/files/attachments/cakesinacup_infosheet_v2_0_0.pdf

Collect and Deliver a Community Balikbayan Box

Mae Respicio emphasizes the importance of the balikbayan box to keep Filipino immigrants connected to family back in the Philippines. Isabel and her friends work together to support the Asian American Senior Center in their town. Partner with a nearby senior center (or other local organization) to collect items their members might need. Plan a celebration where the class might meet virtually or in person with members of the partner organization.

Grow a Poetry Garden and Print Copies for the Entire Class

The author provides an excellent resource to inspire young writers to create a variety of poem types (pp. 360–362). Have writers practice their design and art skills by adding illustrations to their poems before printing and binding into books for students to keep.



Writing Activity

Isabel's story is filled with descriptive language. How might you illustrate her story? Use the comic page below to retell or extend a scene in Isabel's story. For example, you might illustrate Isabel's day with her mom, ending with the surprise Isabel's mom presents to her (pp. 336–343). Students who prefer writing prose rather than graphic writing may choose to do so.



*This guide was prepared by **Anna Gotangco Osborn**. Anna is a reading specialist at Jefferson Middle School: A STEAM Academy in Columbia, Missouri, and a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri, Columbia. Her research interests include young adult literature with Filipino and Filipino American characters, graphic novels, and social justice.*

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An Interview with Author Mae Respicio

When did you start writing? Which parts of the process do you find easiest, and which are the most challenging?

If you were to open my desk, you'd find a whole row of journals from as far back as the third grade, all the way up through today. I've always loved writing, and have known from a young age that I wanted to be a writer. Around third grade is when my mom, a teacher, made me start keeping a journal to practice my spelling. (The horror!) I didn't like it at first, but I soon found out how good it felt to express my feelings and process my world through words. That's what writing has always given me, whether it's writing in a journal or writing a book. And the easiest and most challenging parts? The blank page! It's always daunting at first, but once I find a flow, that's the best feeling.

How much research did you have to do while writing this book? Did you anticipate this at the outset?

"Research" can sound scary, but when you think of it as just learning a bit more about something new, it takes away the pressure. For this book, I did some research on gardening and on the 1990s (even though I lived through that era!). And since so much of Isabel's story is emotional, I tried to dig into my own experiences around belonging, which included reading through some of my old journals. That's a type of research, too—looking inward to see how you can connect your experiences and feelings to a character's.

How did you develop the character of Isabel, and why did you feel she was the character who needed to tell this story? Was there something that you felt only Isabel could teach or convey?

When I'm developing characters, I usually start with a list of qualities I think they should have. Since the book is based on a big and unexpected life change, I wanted the character to be open to seeing possibilities—the type of kid who could also find joy along such a challenging journey. That's how I came to the hobby of gardening . . . and that's how Isabel bubbled up! Once I got a sense of who Isabel

was inside, and once I knew she was a gardener, I could picture her in her garden right away. I tried brainstorming other characters, just to have some options, but this story was meant for Isabel!

What about Isabel's story made you feel it should be written in verse? Did you find this process more complicated than writing in prose?

I love how poetry goes straight to the heart, even in just a few words or lines. Isabel's backstory is deeply layered, and instead of writing it in prose and taking many chapters to paint her history, I wanted to evoke an immediate emotional response. Poetry ended up being the best format for that. I don't think that writing a verse novel is any more complicated than writing a prose novel. Both forms take a lot of time, hard work, and revision—and the only way to tackle any book is to write your way through! Since I was new to the format, it definitely felt complicated at first, but luckily, the best way to grow as a writer is to try new things in your craft.

What advice would you give middle schoolers who are aspiring writers?

Two easy things: read and write! Read whatever inspires you, but take that one step further and try to read like a writer. When you find a book you love, ask yourself why. What exactly did you like about it? Analyzing what you think makes a book work or makes you feel something is one tool to better understand the craft of writing. I read a bunch of verse novels before I even started trying to draft *Isabel in Bloom*. It was like a verse novel boot camp that taught me so much about the format. And, of course, just write! Write whenever you feel inspired . . . and even when you don't! Any time you're playing with words, you're exercising your writing muscles. Like any muscles, the more you work them, the stronger they get.

Praise for Mae Respicio



"Genuine and heartfelt, *Isabel in Bloom* will resonate with every reader who has ever felt torn between two homes. This book deserves a spot in every library."

—Andrea Beatriz Arango, Newbery Honor-winning author of *Iveliz Explains It All* and *Something Like Home*

"I cried and cheered for Isabel, and so will you. This novel-in-verse is straight from Mae's heart!"

—Kelly Yang, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Front Desk series

"*Isabel in Bloom* is a sensitive portrayal of the culture shock endured by immigrant children. I especially loved the garden club, where optimism blooms!"

—Margarita Engle, Young People's Poet Laureate Emeritus and Newbery Honor-winning author of *The Surrender Tree*

"Written in language as lush as the garden Isabel longs for, Respicio expertly captures the poetry of small moments."

—Padma Venkatraman, award-winning author of *The Bridge Home*

"A timely story about the power of putting down roots—wherever we find ourselves."

—Laura Shovan, award-winning author of *The Last Fifth Grade of Emerson Elementary*



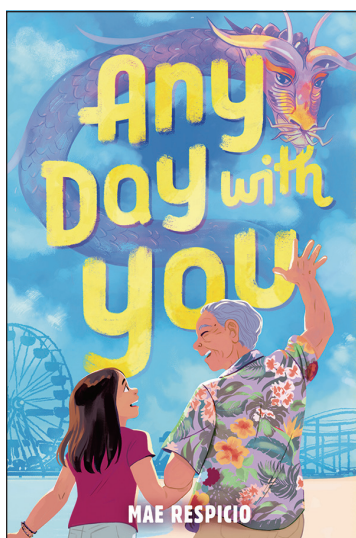
★ "Slime aficionados and newbies alike will enjoy the recipes for slime at the beginning of each chapter. Highly recommended for all collections."

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

"An exciting, fast-paced story of friendship, family, and community." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"A solid recommendation to any budding entrepreneur or slime enthusiast." —*Booklist*

Praise for Mae Respicio



★ “An authentic, gentle tale of family and the meaning of home.” —*School Library Journal*, starred review

“Inspiring and heartfelt, this book will leave readers with smiles on their faces and tears in their eyes.” —*Booklist*

“A tale of family relationships and transitions told with plenty of heart.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“A heartfelt story about family, embracing change, and the meaning of home.” —*Publishers Weekly*



Recipient of an Asian/Pacific American Honor for Children's Literature

★ “This delightful debut welcomes readers in like a house filled with love.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Cheerful and hope-filled.” —*School Library Journal*, starred review

“Readers will enjoy rooting for her as she finds out exactly what makes a house into a home.” —*Booklist*

“Readers may get inspired by her to pick up a hammer themselves.” —*The Bulletin*

“Respicio organically weaves details of Filipino culture into the narrative.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“A sweet treasure for any budding reader.” —*Shelf Awareness*

“Essential.” —*The Horn Book*

“Warm, funny, and affirming.”

—Lisa Yee, Newbery Honor-winning author of *Maizy Chen's Last Chance*



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