



# Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet: A Novel

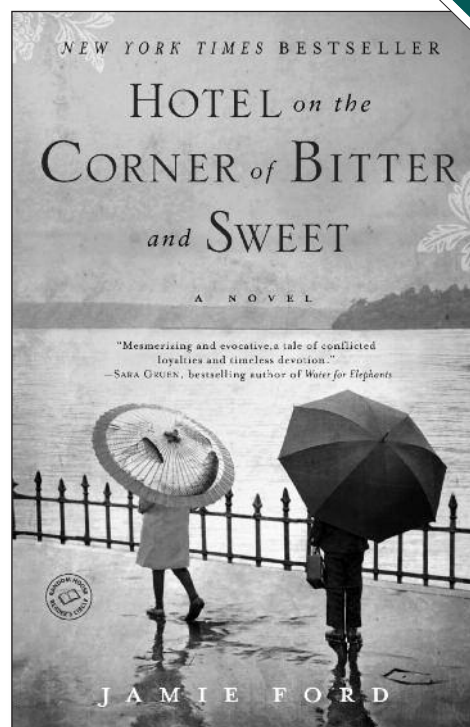
Written by Jamie Ford

Ballantine | TR | 978-0-345-50534-7 | 320pp. | \$15.00/\$18.95 Can.

Audio CD: 978-0-7393-8283-7 | \$39.95/\$45.00 Can.

e-Book: 978-0-345-51250-5 | \$9.99/\$10.99 Can.

READING LEVEL: 7th Grade



To read the author's message to educators, go to: <http://tinyurl.com/ce5nabe>

"A timely debut that not only reminds readers of a shameful episode in American history, but cautions us to examine the present and take heed we don't repeat those injustices."

—Kirkus Reviews

"Ford expertly nails the sweet innocence of first love, the cruelty of racism, the blindness of patriotism, the astonishing unknowns between parents and their children, and the sadness and satisfaction at the end of a life well lived. The result is a vivid picture of a confusing and critical time in American history."

—Library Journal

"Jamie Ford's first novel explores the age-old conflicts between father and son, the beauty and sadness of what happened to Japanese Americans in the Seattle area during World War II, and the depths and longing of deep-heart love. An impressive, bitter, and sweet debut."

—Lisa See, bestselling author of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

## • note to teachers •

In *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, debut author Jamie Ford depicts the heartwarming friendship between Henry Lee and Keiko Okabe, a Chinese American boy and a Japanese American girl—both American citizens—whose ethnic backgrounds impact their destinies in drastically different ways during World War II. When the United States government orders all persons of Japanese ancestry to evacuate their homes and submit to voluntary internment, Keiko and her family are forced to leave Seattle and live in an internment camp in rural Idaho. In Keiko's absence, Henry must come to terms with what it means to be Chinese, an obedient son, a trustworthy friend, and a loyal American.

This guide offers instructors the opportunity to consider questions of ethnicity, race, and social obligation in the wider context of a deeply troubling period in American history, and includes information on the book's support of Common Core State Standards.

## • about this book

Author **JAMIE FORD** characterizes his interest in Seattle's historic Nihonmachi and Chinatown as a "fascination." The central idea for *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* grew out of a conversation Ford had with his father about an "I Am Chinese" button that his father wore as a child in the 1940s. In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, many Chinese families in Seattle feared for their safety, as respected members of the Japanese American community were being interrogated by the FBI regarding the nature of their connections to Japan, a declared enemy of the United States during World War II. Ford's interest in his father's "I Am Chinese" button inspired him to write a short story of the same name, which eventually became a chapter in *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*. In the course of his historical research for another story, Ford encountered an article about the belongings of interned Japanese families found in the basement of the Panama Hotel in Seattle. After an on-site visit to Seattle in which he was able to see these relics firsthand, Ford expanded the story in *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* to one about a Chinese boy and his Japanese friend who confront the specter of internment at an especially poignant time in their young friendship.

In the 1980s, a middle-aged Henry Lee encounters a crowd gathered outside the Panama Hotel in Seattle. The new owner is displaying some of the remarkable finds recently discovered in the hotel's basement—the abandoned belongings of some 37 Japanese families interned by the government during World War II. These forgotten remnants instantly transport Henry to the 1940s, when, as a young Chinese American scholarship student at Rainier Elementary, he befriended Keiko Okabe, a Japanese American classmate.

Amid the chaos of blackouts, curfews, and FBI raids, Henry and Keiko forged a bond of friendship—and first love—that transcended the prejudices of their Old World ancestors. But after Keiko and her family were swept up in the evacuations to the internment camps, she and Henry were left clinging to the hope that the war would one day end and that they would be able to see one another again.

As Henry searches through the items in the Panama Hotel for vestiges of Keiko and her family, including an extremely rare jazz record of the performer Oscar Holden, he is aided by his son, Marty, and Marty's fiancée, Samantha. Through his conversations with Marty, Henry finds himself revisiting his childhood: his intractable conflicts with his father, a Chinese nationalist who refused to accept the innocence of Japanese Americans in his neighborhood; his own struggle to accept his identity as a Chinese American; and the choices he made years ago that prevented him from fulfilling his promises to Keiko.

## • about the author

**JAMIE FORD** is the great-grandson of Nevada mining pioneer Min Chung, who emigrated in 1865 from Kaiping, China, to San Francisco, where he adopted the Western name, "Ford." Ford grew up in Oregon and near Seattle's International District, studied as an illustrator at an art school in Seattle, and found professional success as an art director and copywriter before turning his attention to fiction. An award-winning short story writer, an alumnus of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and a survivor of Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp, Ford is presently at work on a second novel. He lives in Montana with his family.

**Author website:** [www.jamieford.com](http://www.jamieford.com)

## • teaching ideas

Set in the richly detailed and researched milieu of the Asian American community in Seattle during World War II, and narrated alternately by a young and impressionable Chinese American boy and the middle-aged man he grows up to be, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* offers an engrossing coming-of-age historical fiction narrative that will appeal to young and mature readers alike. Its unique perspective on the internment of Japanese Americans affords a fascinating glimpse into such important issues as race, ethnicity, immigration, assimilation, and prejudice in a fictional context that will appeal to diverse groups of students.

As a work of historical fiction that examines with great subtlety many of the pressing social issues affecting its Chinese American and Japanese American protagonists, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* would make an excellent addition to a social studies or history class that examines World War II and the impact of the internment on American culture and society.

## • discussion & writing

- 1) The narration of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* shifts between Henry Lee's perspective as a 56-year-old retiree in the mid-1980s, and his perspective as a school-boy living in Seattle during World War II. Why do you think the author chose to write a novel from two different periods in his protagonist's life, spanning some 40 years? What does the adult Henry have in common with his younger self, and in what ways does his character change over the course of the novel?
- 2) Why does Henry's father refuse to allow his son to speak Cantonese at home, but require him wear a button that reads "I Am Chinese" whenever he is out of the house? To what extent are Henry's father's attitudes toward his Japanese American neighbors determined by his view of Japan as an enemy of China? How does Henry's father's identity as a Chinese nationalist come into conflict with his desire to have his son, Henry, live life as an American?
- 3) How does Keiko Okabe's arrival as a fellow scholarship student at Rainier Elementary change Henry's feelings about his job in the school kitchen? What accounts for their unusual bond? What do the unkind comments made by their classmates reveal about the mistrust many Americans felt toward Asian Americans during World War II?
- 4) Keiko surprises Henry when she reveals to him that she doesn't understand or speak Japanese; like Henry's parents, her parents want her to speak only English. What do the aspirations the Okabes and Lees have for their American-born children suggest about the collective desire of immigrants from all walks of life to assimilate or "fit in" to their new homelands?
- 5) When Henry and Keiko attend Sheldon Thomas's jazz performance at the Black Elks Club, Henry observes patrons of different races mingling together. What does jazz represent to Henry and Keiko, individually, and how do their families feel about their appreciation for it? What is it about jazz, specifically, that allows Henry and Keiko to bend rules in their own lives?
- 6) When Chaz Preston's father needs Henry's father's support to advance his plans for developing Japantown, why does Henry intentionally deceive his father? What does the internment of ethnically Japanese U.S. citizens threaten to do to the character of Seattle's Nihonmachi? What does Henry's behavior reveal about his loyalties to his father and to his classmate Keiko?
- 7) Why does Henry agree to conceal the Okabe family's photo albums in his parents' apartment? Why are the Lees worried about their son's possession of hidden mementos belonging to an interned Japanese family, and to what extent can you understand this

## • discussion & writing (continued)

concern? When Henry justifies his actions on the grounds that Keiko is an American, why does his father disagree?

- 8) “If you walk out of that door *now*, you are no longer part of this family. You are no longer Chinese. You are not part of us anymore,” so speaks Henry’s father (p. 185). Compare and contrast Henry’s mother’s and father’s treatment of him in the wake of his concealment of Keiko’s family’s photographs. Why do Henry’s actions threaten his very identity in the eyes of his family?
- 9) What do the conditions Henry witnesses at Camp Harmony suggest about the government’s treatment of the Japanese American internees? Why does Mrs. Beatty recruit Henry to accompany her on her trips to the camp? How sympathetic does Mrs. Beatty seem to Henry and Keiko’s plight? How does your understanding of her character change over the course of the novel?
- 10) How does Henry’s physical appearance enable him to gain access to parts of Camp Harmony that would normally be off-limits for civilians? How does he benefit from this same confusion to gain access to the belongings of Japanese families in the Panama Hotel? To what extent do you think his acts of deception are justified?
- 11) Given their different ages, races, and occupations, what accounts for Henry’s unusual friendship with Sheldon Thomas? What does Sheldon’s willingness to journey with Henry on a bus to Minidoka, Idaho, reveal about his feelings for Henry? How is the nature of this friendship borne out over the course of the novel?
- 12) Compare and contrast Henry’s relationship with his son, Marty, to the relationship he had with *his* father. In what ways is Henry’s relationship with his father healed by his engagement to Ethel Chen? How does Marty’s engagement to Samantha impact his relationship with his father?
- 13) “Grafted the night his son was born, from a Chinese tree in a Japanese garden, all those years ago” (p. 85). How is the *ume* tree that Henry tends in his back garden emblematic of his involvement in both Chinese and Japanese communities of Seattle? How do you interpret the symbolism of Henry having grafted the *ume* as a sapling from a scion in old Japantown? Why does he do this on the occasion of Marty’s birth?
- 14) Why does Henry’s father make a deathbed confession about preventing the delivery of Henry’s letters to Keiko? To what extent is his father’s interference indirectly responsible for Henry’s relationship with Ethel? What does Henry’s decision to go to China in spite of his father’s dishonesty reveal about his sense of filial obligation?
- 15) “His father had said once that the hardest choices in life aren’t between what’s right and wrong but between what’s right and what’s best.” (p. 204) How does this statement apply to some of the choices Henry makes in his behavior toward Keiko and her family during the war?
- 16) Food plays an important role in *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, from the miso soup that Mrs. Beatty introduces into the camps to improve the internees’ quality of life, to the dragon’s beard candy that Samantha learns how to make, to the Chinese *hum bau* that Henry procures for his son, Marty. How is food linked to powerful associations and memories in this novel?
- 17) What is the significance of the missing 78” record, *Oscar Holden & the Midnight Blue*, for which Henry spends 40 years searching? Why do Henry and Sheldon Thomas both long to hear “The Alley Cat Strut” again? When Henry eventually retrieves the broken record from the basement of the Panama Hotel, what does its damage represent to him?
- 18) What does Henry’s persistence in searching for proof of Keiko’s family and evidence of his past relationship with her, reveal about the nature of his feelings? Why does he conceal some aspects of his past with Keiko from his wife, Ethel, and avoid discussing

## • discussion & writing (continued)

Keiko's existence with his son, Marty, until he is asked directly about his obsession with the belongings in the Panama Hotel? What accounts for his reticence in revisiting this period of his life?

- 19) How does Henry experience Keiko's transformation into Kay Hatsune? What does her gesture at the end of Sheldon Thomas's life reveal about her feelings for Henry? Given the intensity of their early history together, and their complicated past, how likely is it that Keiko and Henry will resume their friendship as adults?
- 20) What is the significance of the Panama Hotel in *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*? In what ways does the Panama Hotel function like a character in its own right in the novel? How does the hotel participate in both the "bitter" and the "sweet" of the book's title over the course of Henry's life?

## • suggested activities

- 1) After reading the book, students will be familiar with the Japanese American internment camp experience from Jamie Ford's fictional portrayal of Keiko Okabe and her family at Camp Minidoka. Ask students to research a nonfiction account of internment camp life during World War II to learn more about the government's treatment of internees. Compare and contrast the fictional representation with real-life accounts. In researching real-life accounts, consider the following: How did the internment experience vary from one camp to another? What were some of the worst privations internees faced? Given that many of the internees were minors and United States citizens, to what extent were their legal rights violated?
- 2) Ask students to imagine that they and their families are going to be evacuated from their homes the following day on order of the United States government. They have 24 hours to get their affairs in order and to pack a small suitcase of belongings for their stay in an internment camp. How would they feel? What would they do to prepare? Whom would they contact, and what would they be forced to leave behind? Encourage students to make lists of what they would want to bring with them, and to share their lists with one another in small groups. What do these lists reveal?
- 3) Divide the class into four groups. Ask each group of students to prepare for a debate that addresses whether or not Japanese Americans should have been interned by the United States government during World War II. Half of the students will prepare arguments that support internment; the other half will identify arguments that reject internment as a solution. Students should marshal key evidence from the book and outside texts wherever possible to prepare their arguments, and should work collaboratively to write three-minute opening statements that identify key points in support of their positions. Following opening statements, a five-minute question-and-answer period should begin, followed by brief closing arguments from both sides. The instructor may want to open up these mini-debates to broader classroom discussion, possibly examining the internment in the wider context of the United States government's response to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

## • vocabulary

Some Cantonese and Japanese words and phrases used throughout *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* include:

<i>baak gwai</i> , “white devil”	<i>Nisei</i> , second-generation American citizens of Japanese ancestry
<i>chop</i> , a stamp of one’s name	<i>Oai deki te ureshii desu</i> , How are you today, beautiful?
<i>domo</i> , thank you	<i>Saang jan</i> , stranger
<i>issei</i> , first generation of Japanese immigrants	<i>shoyu</i> , soy sauce
<i>jook</i> , thick rice soup mixed with preserved cabbage	<i>tamago</i> , hard-boiled eggs
<i>konichi-wa</i> , hello; good day	<i>tongs</i> , gangs
<i>lai see</i> , red “lucky money” envelope	<i>siu beng</i> , baked sesame buns
<i>Nihonmachi</i> , Japantown	<i>ume</i> , plum tree whose flowers are the national flower of China

## • beyond the book

### 1) Pearl Harbor and Executive Order 9066

*Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* takes place in the wake of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and this act of Japanese military aggression on American soil determines many of the central events in the novel. Students will want to research the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, to better understand the circumstances that led to the United States government’s decisions to enter World War II and to mandate the internment of American citizens and residents deemed threats to national security. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942.

<http://tinyurl.com/ye9n2v4>

Students should read the full text of the executive order to grasp the magnitude of the law. Ask students to research which communities were most widely impacted by the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the issuance of this executive order. They may be surprised to learn that Japanese Americans were not the only community specifically targeted. Students will want to consider reasons why only Japanese Americans and, say, not Italian Americans and German Americans, were forced into internment camps. They can also research other historical examples of the government’s mistreatment of whole groups of people, and consider the government’s current stance and continued grievances. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation that formally apologized for the U.S. government’s role in the internment, and stated that government actions were based on “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

### 2) Racial Inequality and Discrimination

When Henry and Keiko illegally help procure alcohol for Oscar Holden, he explains to them that “they don’t let us have a liquor license in the colored clubs” (p. 52). When Henry travels with his African American friend, Sheldon Thomas, to visit Keiko at Camp Minidoka, the driver asks them to sit at the back of the bus. Because he is Asian in appearance, Henry is regularly labelled with derogatory slurs by classmates at his school. Keiko is interned with her family at Camp Harmony and Camp Minidoka despite her legal status as an American citizen. As depicted in *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, how does the treatment of

## • beyond the book (continued)

African Americans during World War II compare to the treatment of Japanese Americans? Students may want to consider how physical appearance relates to racial and ethnic discrimination in America in the 1940s and today.

### 3) Jazz

Keiko Okabe describes Sheldon Thomas's musical performance with Oscar Holden at the Black Elks Club, as "swing jazz ... too crazy for white people." Ask students to research the origins of jazz in America. Why is jazz historically associated with the African American community? To what extent has it crossed over as music that appeals to people of all ethnicities and races? In their essays, students will want to address how jazz has changed from its humble beginnings over time. Students may also want to address the significance of the author's choice of jazz as the music that appeals to Keiko and Henry.

## • other works of interest

*The Colonel and the Pacifist*,  
Klancy Clark de Nevers

*Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, Yoshiko Uchida

*Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston

*In Defense of Our Neighbors: The Walt and Milly Woodward Story*,  
Mary Woodward and David Guterson

*Journey to Topaz: The Story of the Japanese American Evacuation*,  
Yoshiko Uchida and Donald Carrick

*Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, Erica Harth

*Looking Like the Enemy: My Story of Imprisonment in Japanese American Internment Camps*,  
Mary Matsuda Gruenewald

*Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*,  
Edited by Lawson Fusao Inada

*Remembering Manzanar: Life in a Japanese Relocation Camp*,  
Michael L. Cooper

*Snow Falling on Cedars*, David Guterson

*What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?*, Alice Yang Murray

*When the Emperor Was Divine*,  
Julie Otsuka

### MOVIES:

*Come See the Paradise*  
*Day of Independence*

## • about the teacher's guide writer

This guide was prepared by **JULIE COOPER**, a writer from Bainbridge Island, Washington, where the first Japanese Americans were forced to evacuate during World War II. A graduate of Harvard University, Oxford University, and the University of Washington, Julie has taught fiction writing at the University of Washington, and works as a freelance writer of educational materials and reading group guides.

## • common core state standards

*Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, as a work of American historical fiction, supports high school Common Core English Language Arts Standards for Literature, grades 11 and 12. The standards at this level emphasize American literary works. When utilizing the guided “Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion” (included as an appendix to the paperback edition) and the comprehensive teacher’s guide located at <http://tiny.cc/2k3ikw>, the book also supports grades 11–12 Common Core English Language Arts Standards for both Informational Text and for Writing. Essentially, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, is an appropriate inclusion in either an 11<sup>th</sup>- or 12<sup>th</sup>- grade literature course, or a high school American history course.

As a work of literature, *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, supports the following themes: coming of age; ethnicity; family relationships; friendship; integration; love; nationalism; old world versus new world perspectives; prejudice; and racial profiling. All of these themes are the subjects of literary works traditionally used at the high school level (*Beloved*, *The Crucible*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Scarlet Letter*, etc.). As a work of historical fiction, the book deals with the social, political, and economic issues faced at home by United States citizens during World War II.

The novel can readily be utilized in other middle school/high school grade levels. However, since the Common Core State Standards emphasize American literature and informational text in grades 11 and 12, those appropriate grade level standards (literature, informational and writing) are listed below. Go to <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards> for a complete accounting of the Common Core State Standards.

## • reading: literature—grade 11–12

### Key Ideas and Details

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.

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).

### Craft and Structure

RL. 11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

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.



## • reading: informational text—grade 11–12

### Key Ideas and Details

RI.22-23.3. Determine two or more 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 provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

### Craft and Structure

RI. 11-12.5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing and engaging.

RI. 11-12.3. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

## • writing—grade 11–12

### Text Types and Purposes

W.11-12.1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

- Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.
- Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.
- Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.
- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports and supports the argument presented.

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.

- Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful in aiding comprehension.
- Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

## • writing—grade 11–12 continued

- Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.
- Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.
- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

## • research to build and present knowledge

W.11-12.9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

- Apply grades 11–12 Reading standards to literature (e.g., “Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics”).
- Apply grades 11–12 Reading standards to literary nonfiction (e.g., “Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning—e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court Case majority opinions and dissents—and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy—e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses”).

## • about the writer of this common core state standards guide

**JUDITH TURNER** is a longtime educator at Terrace Community Middle School in Tampa, Florida. She has held Subject Area Leader positions in language arts and social studies. She has also served the school as an assistant principal. Ms. Turner received her B.A. in Literature from the University of Wisconsin—Green Bay and her M.A. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of South Florida—Tampa.

• notes



RANDOM HOUSE, INC.