

This guide was created by Tracie Vaughn Zimmer,
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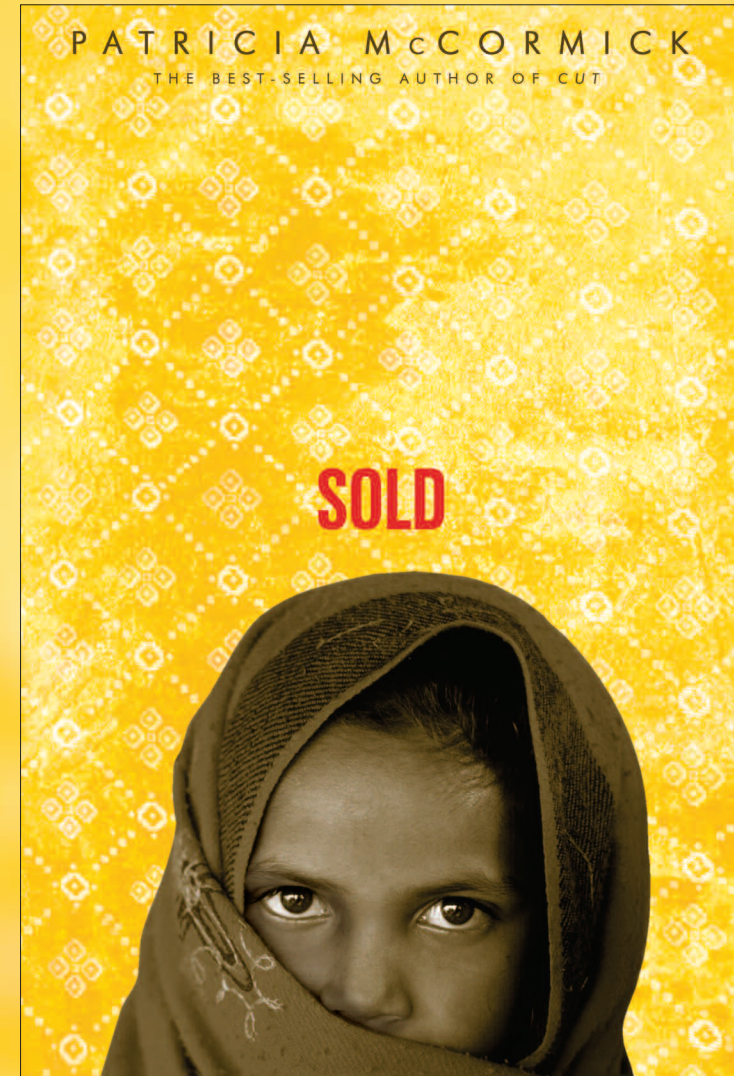
MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

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"In *Cut*, Patricia McCormick's debut novel, the narrator cuts herself in order to feel something. . . . Her second novel, *My Brother's Keeper*, cuts even more deeply."
—*New York Times Book Review*

HYPERION

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

HYPERION

ABOUT THE BOOK

Lakshmi is a thirteen-year-old girl who lives with her family in a small hut on a mountain in Nepal. Her family is desperately poor, but her life is full of simple pleasures, like raising her black-and-white speckled goat and having her mother brush her hair by the light of an oil lamp. But when the harsh Himalayan monsoons wash away all that remains of the family's crops, Lakshmi's stepfather says she must leave home and take a job to support her family. Lakshmi is sold to a brothel and is trapped there by cruelty and cunning, unable to leave until her debt is paid.

Written in spare and evocative vignettes, this powerful novel renders a world that is as unimaginable as it is real, and a girl who not only survives but triumphs.



DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1 What is Lakshmi's life like in her Nepal mountain home? What events create the need for her to go into the city?
- 2 Discuss the vignette entitled "Everything I Need to Know Now." What do you think of the cultural mandates that she must live by? Compare it to the vignette of the same title that appears later when she is in the city. How does it represent all the changes in her life?
- 3 Did you suspect bad intentions on the part of the "auntie" and "uncle" who escorted Lakshmi? Why do you think Lakshmi herself was not suspicious? What does this show you about her character?
- 4 What things does Lakshmi wonder about on her journey? What ordinary objects fascinate her? How does this innocence help seal her fate?
- 5 How does Mumtaz gain control over Lakshmi? What tactics does she use to own her both physically and emotionally? What punishment does she exact on girls who disobey or betray her?
- 6 Describe the other girls and women in the brothel. How do they accept or rail against their lives there? What does Lakshmi learn from them? In the end, what happens to them?
- 7 For the festival of brothers and sisters, Harish gives Lakshmi a new pencil. This small act of kindness undoes her. Why do you think this "undoes" her? How do others reach out to help one another at the brothel?
- 8 What does despair look like? How does Lakshmi prevent her own despair from destroying her hope? Is it destroyed in others? How?
- 9 What happens when Monica leaves the brothel to return to the family she has supported? Do you think Lakshmi's own ama would treat her the same way upon her return? What about her stepfather? What makes you think so or not?
- 10 What was the most disturbing part of this story for you? What facts crawled under your skin and continue to haunt you? Do you think there is anything you can do to help? What?

PROJECTS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Go to The *New York Times* online archives www.nytimes.com/2005/01/19/opinion/19kristofcambodia.html?ex=1147233600&en=f69e12d839fa55f7&ei=5070 and read columns by Nicholas Kristof, a writer who literally bought the freedom of two prostituted girls in Cambodia and who proposes some solutions to the trafficking problem. Then write a letter to Kristof (nicholas@nytimes.com) or to your local paper.

Visit a few anti-trafficking Web sites, such as:

- www.satyamag.com/jan05/gupta.html, which includes an interview with filmmaker Ruchira Gupta, the director of *The Selling of Innocents*, a documentary about the marketing of women into the sex trade, or visit www.apneaap.org the Web site for Apne Aap, Gupta's anti-trafficking organization.
- www.ijm.org, which details what the International Justice Mission is doing to rescue and rehabilitate trafficked girls.
- www.friendsofmaitinepal.org, which describes how people from all over the world are working to help stop trafficking in Nepal.

Then, write a letter to the editor of your local paper, your senator, congressperson, or other political figures to ask for their help in preventing the sex trade from continuing. Demand that funds to support the children and women who are rescued from the industry be allocated immediately.

Or write a letter imagining you have been trafficked, and this is your one chance to communicate with the outside world.

MATH

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world; the annual per capita income is about \$300—roughly the same cost as an iPod. Compare the gross national product of Nepal to that of the United States and other countries. Compare the countries' literacy rates and infant mortality rates. Make a graph showing the differences.

Lakshmi was initially sold for about 800 Nepali rupees. Determine the current

exchange rate between U.S. dollars and Nepali or Indian rupees and calculate the amount for which she was sold. Bring this amount to life by making a list of things you and your family routinely buy for that amount.

Hold a fundraiser for Maiti Nepal or Apne Aap. It can be of any form you prefer—bake sale, car wash, walkathon, read-a-thon, etc. Break into small groups and compete to see whose idea nets the most donations. Graph your results and discuss which strategies were most successful.

Organize a toy and book drive for the children of the red-light district and donate your contributions to Maiti Nepal or Apne Aap. Ask local businesses for contributions and donations.

ART

Create a piece of art inspired by the book. The form—sculpture, painting, musical performance, etc. is entirely up to you. Chronicle your experience in a brief journal.

Imagine that you are going to leave home for a year to support your family. What would you pack? What items would be indispensable? Work those items into some kind of art form—collage, sculpture, poem, song. How does your list compare with what Lakshmi carried?

Draw a map of Lakshmi's travels.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Research the issues from the novel and create a poster, Web site, or pamphlet about what you learned. Be sure to include information for those who may be interested in getting involved.

Investigate various Web sites (including www.ecpatusa.org) to find out about the trafficking of children that is currently taking place here in the United States.

Show a film at your school: *Born Into Brothels* or *The Day My God Died*. Invite a speaker to your school, or find out how to organize a student group to push for change. (www.ecpatusa.org/ECPAT-USA_StudentGuide.htm)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To research *Sold*, Patricia McCormick traveled to India and Nepal, where she interviewed the women of Calcutta's red-light district and girls who have been rescued from the sex trade. She is the author of the acclaimed novels *Cut* and *My Brother's Keeper*.

To hear Patricia McCormick reading an excerpt from *Sold*, visit hyperionteens.com

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

1 What inspired you to tell this story?

In the past year or so, the trafficking of children has gotten a good deal of media attention. But nearly five years ago, when I had a chance meeting with a photographer who was working undercover to document the presence of young girls in brothels overseas, I knew immediately that I wanted to do what no one else had done so far: tell this heartbreaking story from the point of view of one individual girl.

I believe that young adults want to know what's happening to their peers on the other side of the world, but that media accounts, by their very nature, cannot usually go beyond the surface. To me, there is nothing more powerful—or permanent—than the impact of a book.

2 What did your travel to India and Nepal bring to your story?

I spent a month in India and Nepal tracing Lakshmi's steps—going from a poor, isolated village in the foothills of the Himalayas all the way to the teeming red-light district of Calcutta. Trained as an investigative reporter, I took notes and photos observing the sights, smells, foods, sounds, and the customs—details to give the book authenticity. I also interviewed women in the red-light district, girls who had been rescued, and a man who had sold his girlfriend in exchange for a motorcycle. It helped that I was a foreigner in the busy streets of Kathmandu and Calcutta, because I was as bewildered and awestruck by these places as Lakshmi is in the novel.

3 What were the challenges of bringing Lakshmi's story to life?

Perhaps the biggest challenge was not to let the sadness of the situation overwhelm me. When I first came home from India, I fell into a despair unlike anything I'd ever felt before—something I now understand was a delayed reaction to the suffering I'd witnessed. Moreover, I felt inadequate to the task of doing justice to the stories the women had entrusted to me. But when I thought about the young girls who might be recruited to take their places as the women became ill or died, what I felt was urgency—urgency that their experiences be known and understood by the outside world. And I began to write.

It was also a challenge to keep the book from being too grim, and to keep Lakshmi's humanity alive in a believable way. It was important to remember that, in even the grimmest of situations, there is kindness as well as cruelty, terror as well as boredom, and even, surprising as it may seem, humor.

4 Why did you decide to tell the story in a series of vignettes?

I started writing the book in small scenes because, initially, it was too daunting to imagine that I could tell Lakshmi's entire story. Once I had a handful of these scenes, the book began to take shape. Eventually, vignettes seemed to be the right way to tell a story that is inherently so fractured—if not shattering. I also think the “white space” between vignettes calls on the reader to engage his or her imagination in the story-telling process to fill in the blanks.

5 How can we help?

Educate yourself by visiting the Web sites in this guide, then work to raise awareness among your friends and family members, your church or school. Write an essay for your school paper or a letter to your local paper or your congressman. Organize a student group at your school, then show a film about trafficking, invite a speaker, and raise or donate money. The cost of living in countries where trafficking takes place is very low; one week's allowance, for instance, could go a long way toward providing medicine, toys, or books for the children of the red-light district, or could contribute to the work of organizations that stop trafficking and provide safety for victims.

As Eli Weisel said, “Let us remember: what hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander.”