



**Classroom Guide for
SIXTEEN YEARS IN SIXTEEN
SECONDS**

by **Paula Yoo**
illustrated by **Dom Lee**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grade 4 up

Interest Level: Grades 2–6

Guided Reading Level: S

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.2/.5

Lexile™ Measure: 880AD

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Self-esteem, Achieving Goals, Education, Sports (diving, Olympics), Famous Asian Americans, Asian American Interest

National Standards

LANGUAGE ARTS: Reading for Perspective; Participating in Society; Multicultural Understanding; Understanding the Human Experience

SOCIAL STUDIES: Culture; People, Places, and Environments; Individual Development and Identity

Synopsis

On a summer day in 1932, twelve-year-old Sammy Lee watched enviously as divers catapulted into the public swimming pool. Sammy desperately wanted to try diving himself, but the Korean American boy—like any person of color—was only allowed to use the pool one day a week.

This discrimination did not weaken Sammy's newfound passion for diving, and soon he began a struggle between his dream of becoming an Olympic champion and his father's wish for him to become a doctor. Over sixteen years Sammy faced numerous

challenges, but he overcame them all and fulfilled both his dream and his father's. Through hard work he became a doctor in 1946. In 1948 Dr. Sammy Lee dove into Olympic history. A matter of seconds after his final platform dive, the scores appeared and Sammy Lee became the first Asian American to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States.

BACKGROUND

Sammy Lee studied medicine at Occidental College. Due to the outbreak of World War II, an urgent need for doctors arose. Sammy enrolled in an accelerated program and received his MD from the University of Southern California Medical School in 1947. He was a Major in the U.S. Army Medical Corps. During his education and service to his country, Sammy would squeeze in diving practice when he could.

A few years after participating in his second Olympics, Dr. Lee turned to coaching, helping several other divers win Olympic medals themselves. He also represented President Eisenhower, President Nixon, and President Reagan to the 1956, 1972, and 1988 Olympic Games. The 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China, marked the 60th anniversary of Dr. Lee's gold and bronze medal wins at the 1948 Games in London.

Dr. Lee turned 90 on August 1, 2010. He lives in Southern California and leads a very active life with his wife, their children, and their grandchildren. He swims laps every day.

Author Paula Yoo stumbled upon Sammy Lee's story while doing research for an MFA in Creative Writing. She was captivated by what she learned and soon she was spending time researching Sammy Lee instead of working on her thesis. Yoo wants her readers to "realize that persistence and hard work are key to making your dreams come true."

Teaching Tip

Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds is an excellent choice to use in May when Asian American Heritage Month is observed. The story also makes a great read aloud before summer break. Talk to students about their summer hobbies and how they might practice these hobbies *and* work on academics over the summer months. In this way they can be like Sammy Lee.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Can people be good at sports and also get good grades? How might they do this?
2. What are some sports you like to play? What other sports would you like to try?
3. What is discrimination? Give some examples.
4. What is a biography? What can you learn from a biography?

Exploring the Book

Write the title *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* on the chalkboard. Talk about the title. Ask students what they think it means. What do they think the book is about?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: dedication, title page, illustrations, backmatter, and back cover photograph.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to:

- find out if Sammy Lee accomplishes all the goals he set for himself and that others hoped he would obtain.
- understand the problems that Sammy encounters in seeking his dream.

VOCABULARY

Choose five important illustrations in the book. Have students decide on three emotions Sammy might be feeling in each picture. Let students work individually and write down their answers, or have the whole class work together. Record students' ideas on the chalkboard and have a discussion in which students support their responses.

Have students work in pairs to create sentences for each of the following words that appear in the story. Have students work with a dictionary to make sure they have used each word correctly. Some of the words have more than one meaning. Accept all sentences that illustrate a meaning of a word.

permit
soared
somersault
attend

exhausted
reputation
graceful

angry
competition
murmur

AFTER READING**Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop understanding of the content. Encourage students to refer back to the text and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

1. How did Sammy first realize he wanted to learn to dive?
2. Who was the first person to help Sammy with his diving? How did that person help?
3. What was Sammy's father like? What did he want for Sammy?
4. How did Sammy meet coach Jim Ryan?
5. Why did Sammy practice in a sand pit? Why did he take a gymnastics class?
6. What was Sammy's experience in school? What were his activities besides diving?

7. What deal did Sammy and his father make about his education and diving?
8. What did Sammy's father keep in a shoe box? Why?
9. When Sammy went to the Olympic Games in London, what medals did he win? For what events?
10. Why is the book called "Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds"?
11. What kind of discrimination did Sammy face? How did he overcome that discrimination?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might find places in the story that show how Sammy felt about diving, both when he was learning and when he was competing at the Olympics.
- The **Illustrator** might make a collage of images that symbolize important events and places in Sammy's life. (e.g. swimming pools, report cards, trophies, and so on.)
- The **Connector** might find information about other athletes of color from the United States who broke Olympic barriers for his or her racial or cultural group.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the life of Sammy Lee.
- The **Investigator** might find out more about some of the Olympic athletes that Sammy mentored after he stopped competing himself.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion.

1. What are some of Sammy's personal traits and characteristics? How did these help him succeed?
2. Do you think Sammy appreciated his father pushing him to become a doctor? Why or why not? How did being a doctor keep Sammy from achieving his Olympic goal? How did it help him?

3. Do you have a dream or goal which you are willing to work really hard to reach? How do you hope to accomplish your dream or goal?
4. What would you tell someone who has not read *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* about the book? Why?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. Have students create a list of questions they would ask Sammy Lee in an interview.
2. Pretend you are creating a movie about Sammy Lee's life. Who would you cast as each main character and what would you want the sets to look like? Make notes about these items and then lines for the opening scene of the script.
3. Have students research one of Sammy's Olympic competitions and then create a news story about him. This could be a written story only, or it could be combined with images and graphics for an online report.

ELL Teaching Activities

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Have students write a caption for each illustration in the book. This can be done individually for more advanced students or as a class if more guidance is needed.
2. With students working in groups, have them read and then explain one or two passages from the story that you have chosen based on their progress with English.
3. After reading the story, have a group discussion about overcoming obstacles. What obstacles do students face each day? How might they overcome them?

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Social Studies

1. Work with students to create a timeline of Sammy Lee's life from facts in the story. If you wish, additional information may be added based on research students can do online about Sammy Lee.
2. Provide students with a map of the world or a globe, and have them compile a list of countries/cities where the modern Olympic Games have taken place. Then working as a class or in small groups, have students identify and mark the locations on the map or globe. This activity could be extended as an art project, with students creating a large mural wall map of the world on which they indicate the locations of all the places where the Olympics have taken place

(both summer games and winter games). Information could also be added about record-breaking achievements at each Olympics and/or notable world events at the time.

Language Arts/Sports

1. Sports provides a great opportunity to interest students in poetry. There are many books of poetry with sports themes or about sports. Have students look through a selection of such books for poems they can relate to and enjoy. After students have had a chance to find and read some poems about sports, discuss the different types of poetry and techniques the authors used to convey information, action, and excitement. Then challenge students to write their own sports poems.
2. Review *Sixteen Years In Sixteen Seconds* with students to discover the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Also, discuss the conflicts and climaxes that keep the story interesting. Have the students research one or more sports heroes of their own choosing and write a biography with a beginning, middle, and end as well as conflicts and climaxes. Students may work individually or in small groups.

Art

Connecting to the water theme in the story, have students use watercolor paints to create pictures depicting their favorite sports or sports heroes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Yoo is a children's book author, TV drama screenwriter, and musician. *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* was her first picture book. Since then, she has also written a biography of pioneering Chinese American actress Anna May Wong and is currently working on a story based on the life of Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus. Yoo is a graduate of Yale University and Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She earned her MFA in creative writing from Warren Wilson College. Yoo's TV writing credits include *The West Wing*, *Tru Calling*, and *Eureka*. A classically trained violinist, she has also performed, toured, and recorded with a number of national rock band acts. Yoo and her husband live in Los Angeles, California.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Dom Lee is the illustrator of numerous award-winning books, including *Baseball Saved Us*; *Heroes*; *Journey Home*; *Passage to Freedom*; and *Be Water, My Friend*, all published by Lee & Low Books. He was born in Seoul, South Korea, and received his MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Lee's unique style of art, which combines techniques of painting and scratching details in encaustic wax, creates haunting yet accessible images. He lives with his wife, artist Keunhee Lee, and their children in Sugar Hill, Georgia.

Awards and honors *Sixteen Years In Sixteen Seconds* has received include:

- Lee & Low New Voices Award Winner
- "Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)
- Texas Bluebonnet Masterlist, Texas Library Association (TLA)
- Best Children's Books of the Year, Bank Street College
- Notable Books for a Global Society, International Reading Association (IRA)
- Children's Book Award Notable, International Reading Association (IRA)

- Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People, National Council for the Social Studies/Children's Book Council (NCSS/CBC)

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds* at:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/109/hc/sixteen_years_in_sixteen_seconds_the_sammy_lee_story

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Guided Reading Level: S

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.2/.5

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Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/109/hc/sixteen_years_in_sixteen_seconds_the_sammy_lee_story

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