

A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO



A DISCUSSION-WORTHY
HISTORICAL NOVEL IN VERSE



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by Christina Chung

★ “A
POWERFUL STORY
of personal growth as well as an
affecting historical narrative.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, starred review

★ “**RIVETING . . .**

The book is many **remarkable**
things: a **harrowing history** lesson
on an often-overlooked war, an
incredible account of the love and
tension held in a family, a **coming-
of-age story** about a girl bursting
with questions and passions,
and a **sympathetic spotlight**
on the plight of refugees.”

—*BOOKLIST*, starred review

★ “An emotional exploration
of the realities of displacement . . .

A TRIUMPH.”

—*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL*, starred review

“A rallying cry to
**‘BUILD EMPATHY,
CURIOSITY, AND
AWARENESS.’”**

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*



ABOUT *the* AUTHOR

V.T. Bidania was born in Laos and grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota. She has an MFA in creative writing from The New School and is a McKnight Artist Fellow. She is the author of the Astrid and Apollo series, the first children’s book series to star Hmong American characters, and *A Year Without a Home*, a fictionalized memoir in verse about her family’s escape from Laos at the end of the Vietnam War.

ABOUT *the* BOOK

A poignant novel in verse about a Hmong girl losing and finding home in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. For fans of Jasmine Warga and Veera Hiranandani.

This guide was written by AmazeWorks. The mission of AmazeWorks is to champion equity and belonging for all. We believe that everyone should see their families, identities, and lived experiences reflected in positive mirrors and have access to windows into the lives of others who are different from them. AmazeWorks is happy to partner with Penguin Random House to offer this discussion guide because we all believe in the power of stories to inspire, educate, and connect us all.

NOTES *for* EDUCATORS

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE READING

Hmong people are an ethnic group without a country of their own who have traditionally lived in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and China. Following the Vietnam War, in which many Hmong fought alongside the US, the Hmong people were forced to abandon their homes to escape persecution by the communist Vietnamese government. Many sought refuge in Thailand.

The Nam Phong Refugee Camp in Thailand was originally built as a US military base during the Vietnam War. Living conditions at Nam Phong were rough, as the camp was put together quickly, and there weren't enough resources to go around. It served as a temporary camp for many Hmong families who were the first to flee Long Cheng, Laos, before they were moved to other camps or they resettled in other countries. The Ban Vinai Refugee Camp was on the Thai-Lao border and operated until 1992. At its peak in 1986, Ban Vinai had 42,868 residents. Many Hmong refugees began coming to the US during the 1970s, and there are over 300,000 Hmong in the United States today.

NOTE

As the adult facilitating lessons and discussions around this book, which follows the end of the Vietnam War, you'll need to provide students with context about the war and its aftermath, including the exodus of the Hmong people from Laos. The back of the book contains helpful information in the **author's note** and **timeline**. A **map** is included at the front of the book to help students further understand the setting. Additional topics for exploration may include:

- ✦ Hmong culture and history
- ✦ The Royal Lao Armed Forces, or Noble Army of Laos (and its relationship with the US military)
- ✦ The Nam Phong and Ban Vinai Refugee camps
- ✦ Geography of Laos and Thailand
- ✦ The refugee process, including the difference between the laws of 1975 and the current laws

NAVIGATING COMPLEX CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH

When reading and discussing this book with young people, they will likely have questions, especially after reading the author's note and timeline in the back of the book. The topic of immigration has sparked division among adults in the US, and you may see or hear bias from young people as you read and discuss this book. The following tips may help you navigate the conversation:

- ❖ **Listen carefully.** Ask questions and listen to find out what young people know and understand. Allow them to share their thoughts and name their feelings.
- ❖ **Respond to questions with accurate, developmentally appropriate answers.** Tell the truth and respond in a calm tone. With older kids, you can discuss what's happening in the context of history and connect to other humanitarian crises throughout the world and history. If you have your own stories that relate, you may talk about them. This will be easier if you identify and manage your own feelings about the immigration debate in advance.
- ❖ **Check for understanding.** Observe their body language and behavior for cues about what they understand and are feeling.
- ❖ **Be mindful of the news you consume and what you expose young people to.** Think about the news sources you follow. Model how to look for credible sources as well as boundaries around social media usage.
- ❖ **Reinforce the importance of empathy, dignity, and respect for all.** What young people may see in the news or on social media may be alarming, and your conversations must maintain a respectful tone and uphold the inherent dignity and humanity of all.
- ❖ **Reject stereotypes.** Point out the multiple contributions immigrants and refugees make to America. Keep learning yourself, so you can be better prepared for supportive conversations with your readers.
- ❖ **Take action.** Reach out to your representatives, donate to a reliable organization supporting immigrants and immigrant rights, support immigrant-owned businesses, and volunteer if you are able.

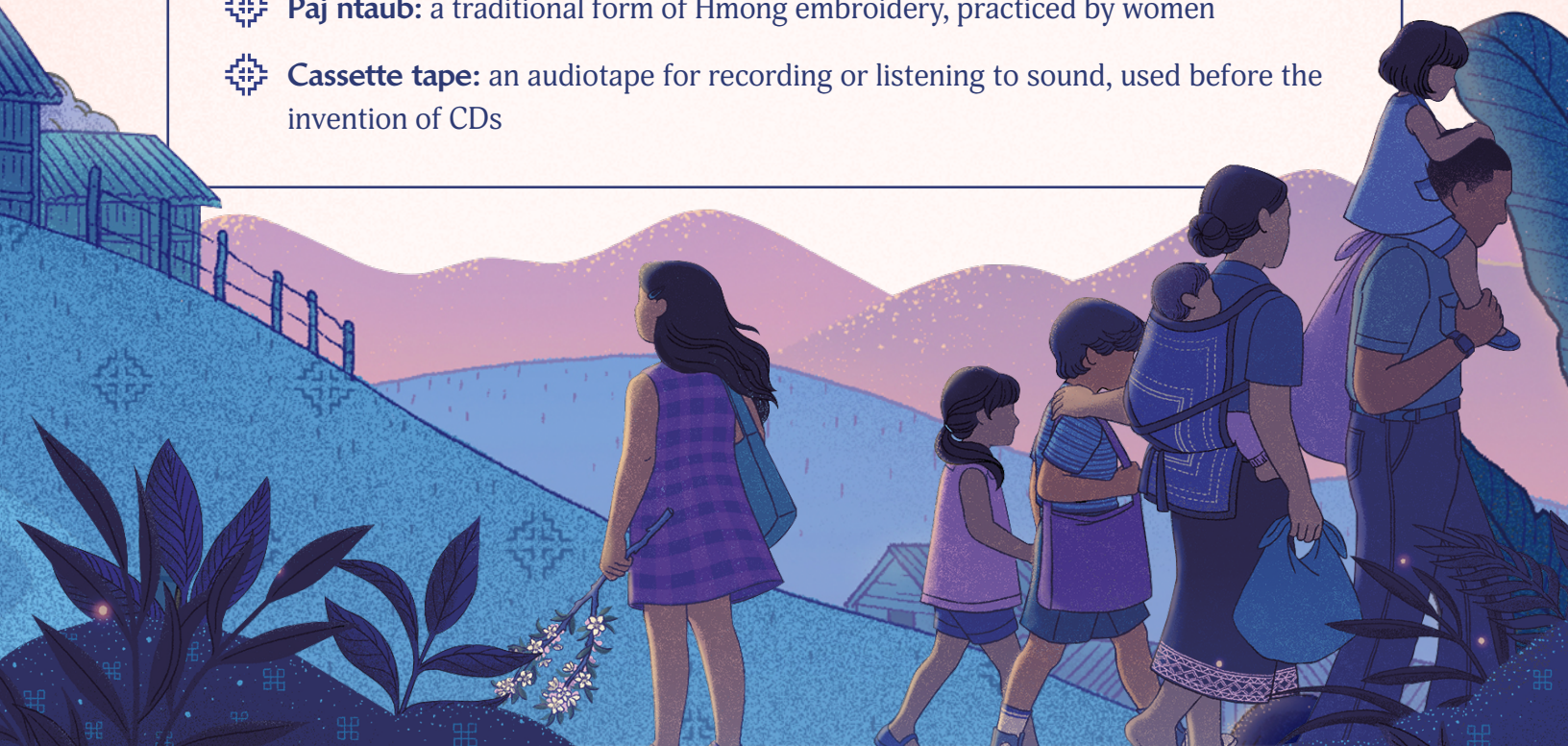
NOTES *for* EDUCATORS *Continued*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR ADULTS

1. What are your beliefs and potential biases regarding immigrants, refugees, and our immigration system? (Who gets to come here? Who gets to live and work here? Who gets to become a US citizen?)
2. In the book, Gao Sheng finds herself in conflict with the expected roles a “good daughter” must play. As a young person, what expectations cause conflict within yourself or with the adults in your life? How did you navigate those expectations, especially if they didn’t feel right to you? Why?

KEY VOCABULARY

- ❖ **Refugee:** a person who has been forced to leave their home because of danger, like war or violence
- ❖ **Refugee camp:** a temporary place where people who have had to leave their homes because of danger, like war or violence, can stay
- ❖ **Hmong:** an ethnic group who traditionally lived in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and China. The name “Hmong” means “free.”
- ❖ **Paj ntaub:** a traditional form of Hmong embroidery, practiced by women
- ❖ **Cassette tape:** an audiotape for recording or listening to sound, used before the invention of CDs



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PART I: *Home*

1. What do readers learn about Gao Sheng in the first part of the book?
 2. What can readers learn about traditional Hmong culture in the first part of the book?
 3. Why do you think the author chose to write this story in verse (using short poems) instead of narrative chapters?
 4. Look at the poem “Peaceful Sky” on page 33. How do changes in text size, line breaks, and the shape of the poem impact your experience as a reader? (Encourage readers to notice these aspects in other poems throughout the book, too.)
 5. What do you learn about what it was like to live through war in Laos from a child’s perspective? Why is this an important perspective?
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PART II: *Waiting*

6. As Gao Sheng’s family prepares to leave, she and her siblings have many questions for the adults. Nobody answers them. When was a time when you asked questions to adults, and they didn’t answer? How did that feel? Why do you think your questions went unanswered?
7. How do you think Gao Sheng feels when she sees Zer again after so long? How can you tell?
8. Gao Sheng wants to talk to Zer, but she can’t bring herself to say anything. Why do you think that is?
9. When they are about to leave their home, Gao Sheng leans down to pet Ao Ka and wishes she could say goodbye to him, the peach trees, the house, the hill, etc. For some reason, she can’t, so she whispers it in her head and promises to remember every part of home. Why can’t she say goodbye? Have you ever struggled to say goodbye to someone or someplace?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS *Continued*

PART III: *Escape*

10. Why do you think Gao Sheng keeps her peach seeds a secret and doesn't tell anyone about taking them from their home?
 11. In what ways was Gao Sheng given more responsibility after her family left their home? How does she feel about this? What does she wish her parents knew?
 - a. When have you been given responsibility that you didn't want or didn't feel ready for? What did you wish adults knew?
 12. How is the city of Vientiane different from their home on the hill? How did Gao Sheng feel about the city? What evidence can you find to support your thinking?
 - a. When have you experienced a new place? How did it feel?
 13. The poem "Whole" on page 190 says, "I know now my heart can break into pieces and feel whole at the same time." What does Gao Sheng mean by this, and how does this line represent her experiences since the start of the book?
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PART IV: *Nam Phong Refugee Camp*

14. How is the camp different from how Gao Sheng imagined it would be?
15. In what ways do the adult women in Gao Sheng's family treat her like she's not a kid anymore? How does she feel about this?
16. Why is getting to sew paj ntaub significant for Gao Sheng?
17. How do Gao Sheng, her family, and others find joy despite the conditions of the refugee camp? Why is this important?
18. Why do you think Gao Sheng didn't speak up more about going to say goodbye to Choua?
19. How does Yia's leaving affect Gao Sheng's sense of hope?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS *Continued*

PART V: *Ban Vinai Refugee Camp and Epilogue*

20. How was Ban Vinai similar to and different from Nam Phong?
21. Why is Grandmother's story about fire and farming significant, and why was it important for Gao Sheng to hear it?
22. Why do you think Gao Sheng asked her father if she could help build the house? What changes for Gao Sheng after she helped build the house?
23. When Gao Sheng's family leaves Ban Vinai, she is excited, but she also admits to feeling a little sadness. Why do you think that is?
24. By the end, what does Gao Sheng learn about the meaning of home?



ACTIVITIES *for* DEEPER CONNECTION

1. WRITE AND REFLECT

Have students choose one of the following quotes from the book to use as a writing prompt. Students may journal about the significance of the line and how it connects to their own lives.

- a. “I wish I could mean more than just a vegetable picker.” p. 50
- b. “Family means home. When Buatong sees us, he knows it’s time to come back, for you never forget home.” p. 60
- c. “I don’t want to keep every feeling, every tear, thought, and question inside like always, but that’s what good daughters do.” p. 159
- d. “They are trying to be helpful, but their words don’t help at all.” p. 326

2. FOUND POEMS

As students read each section, encourage them to collect words and phrases from various poems to create their own found poem that summarizes or represents the main plot points and theme of each section. Invite students to retell the story by sharing their found poems. Be sure to give whatever guidelines you wish, such as length and whether they can add any of their own words.

3. FINDING AWE

Research suggests that finding awe in our everyday lives can make us happier and healthier. As students read each section, encourage them to identify places where Gao Sheng finds awe in seemingly ordinary things. Encourage students to notice awe in their own daily lives and write short poems about their observations.

4. THEME COLLAGE

Talk with students about the themes of the book, and work together to identify major themes such as home, family, grief/loss, growing up, expectations around gender roles, finding your voice, etc. Have students use images, words, or small objects to create a theme collage. In the collage, encourage them to pull phrases from the book that speak to the theme they choose to represent.

5. POEMS FOR TWO VOICES

Have pairs of students choose one of the poems from the book, and have them write their own poem describing the scene from another perspective (such as one of Gao Sheng's family members). Invite pairs of students to read the two poems together (the one from the book and the one they wrote), alternating lines or stanzas to show the two perspectives.

6. SIMILES AND METAPHORS

In the book, the author uses a variety of similes and metaphors to help us imagine important details. For example, she describes the color red by comparing it to many things. Examples from the book include:

- a. "I look away, my face turning as red as a fresh-bloomed poppy flower." p. 23
- b. "So embarrassing my whole face is now redder than the seedy inside of a bright red dragon fruit." p. 43
- c. "A bird the color of red-pink guava flesh zips fast between the trees." p. 56

Invite students to choose an adjective and write as many sentences as they can using similes and metaphors to describe it. To take this exercise even further, collect the sentences students write and use them as free-writing prompts in the future.

