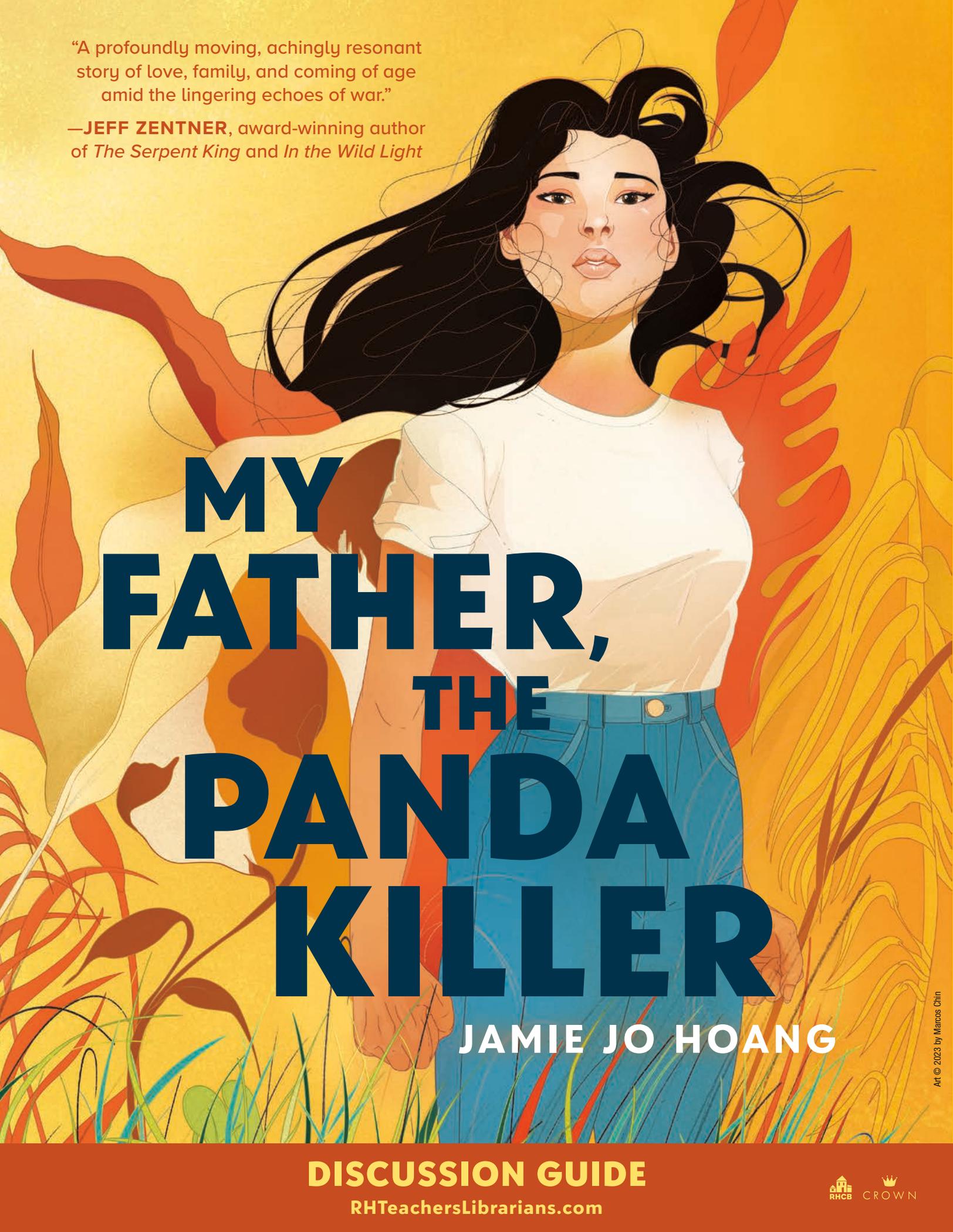


“A profoundly moving, aching resonant story of love, family, and coming of age amid the lingering echoes of war.”

—JEFF ZENTNER, award-winning author of *The Serpent King* and *In the Wild Light*



MY FATHER, THE PANDA KILLER

JAMIE JO HOANG

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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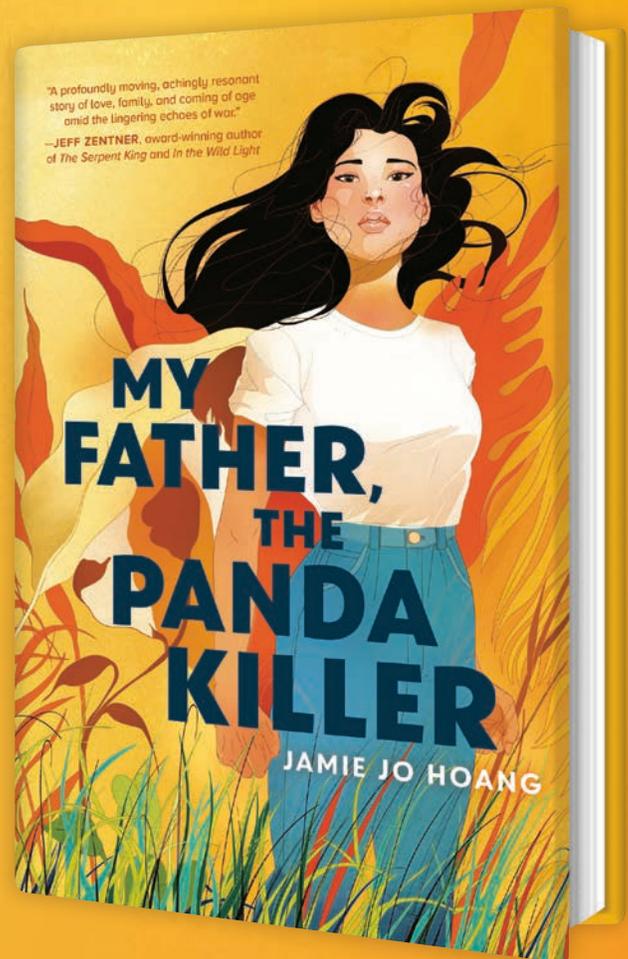


About the Book

San Jose, 1999. Jane knows her Vietnamese dad can't control his temper. Lost in a stupid daydream, she forgot to pick up her seven-year-old brother, Paul, from school. Inside their home, she hands her dad the stick he hits her with. This is how it's always been. She deserves this. Not because she forgot to pick up Paul, but because at the end of the summer she's going to leave him when she goes away to college. As Paul retreats inward, Jane realizes she must explain where their dad's anger comes from. The problem is, she doesn't quite understand it herself.

Đà Nẵng, 1975. Phúc (pronounced /foōk/, rhymes with duke) is eleven the first time his mother walks him through a field of mines he's always been warned never to enter. Guided by cracks of moonlight, Phúc moves past fallen airplanes and battle debris to a refugee boat. But before the sun even has a chance to rise, more than half the people aboard will perish. This is only the beginning of Phúc's perilous journey across the Pacific, which will be fraught with Thai pirates, an unrelenting ocean, starvation, hallucination, and the unfortunate murder of a panda.

Told in the alternating voices of Jane and Phúc, *My Father, the Panda Killer* is an unflinching story about war and its impact across multiple generations, and how one American teenager forges a path toward accepting her heritage and herself.



Art © 2023 by Marcos Chin

Photo credit: Ryan Eslinger



About the Author

Jamie Jo Hoang, the daughter of Vietnamese refugees, grew up in Orange County, CA—not the wealthy part. She worked for MGM Studios and later, as a docuseries producer. Now she writes novels and blogs full-time. When Jamie's not writing, she's wandering, pondering, and chasing experiences. Her self-published first novel, *Blue Sun, Yellow Sky*, was named a Best Book of the Year by *Kirkus Reviews*.

How to Use This Guide

In *My Father, the Panda Killer*, Jamie Jo Hoang explores the complexities of refugee and migrant experiences, intergenerational trauma, and coming of age.

This guide is sectioned into pre-reading questions, activity ideas, and discussion prompts that are presented in chronological order by chapter so that a block of chapters can be assigned each week. Discussion prompts are grounded in direct quotes from the story. You may use these quotes to bring readers back to the text and to develop individual and group responses to each prompt.

We recommend that the group review the Pre-Reading Discussion Questions and the Additional Activities and Resources sections of this guide before reading the book together.

Audience

While reading and leading a discussion about this book, it is important to keep in mind that many aspects of this book will be read differently by different audiences. Before starting this book, it is helpful to consider both your students' and your own familiarity with its cultural and historical content. It is also worth examining the variety of experiences that may not be present in your class and how the different experiences that your students bring to the table may mix and interact with each other and affect their understanding of the text. For students with predominantly refugee and immigrant backgrounds, discussion may center more around personal connections to and reflections on the content. Students who have lived in the US for multiple generations may focus more on processing previously unknown historical information and cultural perspectives.

This book deals with the subject of domestic abuse. It is important to prepare for the possibility that a student might also have experience with abuse. Before leading a discussion about this book, share information about local community groups that can support and provide counseling and resources to anyone who may need them.

**“Lush storytelling. . . .
A riveting
intergenerational drama.”**

—Publishers Weekly

Pre-Reading Discussion Questions

1. What does your name mean? Where does it come from? Why did your parents give you that name? How do you feel about it?
2. Have students share where their families came from prior to settling in the United States. This can be done in pairs and then students can present and share what they learned from their partner with the rest of the class.

Additional Activities and Resources

These suggested resources provide more context for the events that the author recounts in Phúc's story. All these resources can be reviewed before reading the book. We also encourage educators to revisit these resources as you read and relate them to specific moments in the book.

Related Multimedia

This section includes materials that will prepare readers by providing context for some of the events in the story. It also offers readers a chance to hear about the experiences of Vietnamese Americans in their own words. We recommend teachers assign one piece of media for each student to explore in depth.

- [Friends of Little Saigon Oral History Interviews](#)
- [Vietnamese Boat People Podcast](#)
- [Second Wave Podcast](#)
- [Critical Refugee Studies Archives](#)
- [Time To Say Goodbye Podcast](#)—Buddhism, writing, and mixed martial arts with Ocean Vuong

Other Related Resources

This is an extensive but not all-inclusive list of related materials available online. We recommend having students explore the plethora of materials available.

Books

- [*Butterfly Yellow*](#) by Thanh Hà Lại
- [*Inside Out and Back Again*](#) by Thanh Hà Lại
- [*The Magic Fish*](#) by Trung Le Nguyen
- [*A Phở Love Story*](#) by Loan Le
- [*She Is a Haunting*](#) by Trang Thanh Tran
- [*Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*](#) by Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III
- [*When Stars Are Scattered*](#) by Victoria Jamieson, Omar Mohamed, and Iman Geddy

Online Resources

- [Size and Geographic Locations of Vietnamese American Population | Learning for Justice](#)
- [Vietnamese Americans: Lessons in American History | Learning for Justice](#)
- [AANHPI Resources | California Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander American Affairs](#)
- [Southeast Asian Archive at UC Irvine](#)
- [Vietnam Center Archive at Texas Tech University](#)
- [Friends of Little Saigon Cultural History Project](#)
- [diaCritics Essays published by DVAN \(Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network\)](#)
- [diaCritics Poetry published by DVAN](#)
- [ACCENTED: Dialogues in the Diaspora / Author Talk Series](#)

Project Ideas

These are semester-long project opportunities which center on text from *My Father, the Panda Killer* while asking readers to conduct personal research to contextualize the story.

1. Create a map identifying and connecting the dots of relationships between your family and community.
 - Who is who?
 - What role does each person play?
 - What is their relationship to you?
 - Note proximity, roles, expectations, and accountability
2. Interview a family member about a historically significant moment they experienced.
 - Using your interview as inspiration, create a painting, drawing, poster, video, diorama, or collage. Write a paragraph explaining the event and how your piece relates to it.
 - Imagine you lived through this event. How would you have reacted? What would you have felt and experienced?
3. After reading chapter 15, conduct oral histories with elders and community members. In pairs or small groups, readers will interview one person who has a connection to the Vietnam War. The objective of this oral history is to learn about Vietnamese people and the diaspora from the lens of someone who has a firsthand connection to the people of Vietnam or the war.
4. Consider versions of family history through storytelling.
 - There is no way to know one's full and entire origin story. There will always be pieces to learn about and fill in across generations. Write a speculative fiction diary/journal entry about a significant migration that your family or an influential adult in your life experienced in the US or coming to the US. (Remember, this can be made up!)
 - Retell this story to a peer. Have the peer recount the story back to the original storyteller.
 - Reflect on what changed, what stayed the same, and any other interesting patterns that came in the retelling of the story. Why do you think certain moments stuck while others did not?
5. Discuss domestic violence as a social issue.
 - Students will work in pairs or small groups to identify a local resource center that works to address domestic violence and write a guide about what the organization does, what resources they offer, how people can access the resources, and how individuals and the community can support these spaces.
 - Are there any issues in your community for which there is little support or resources? Identify the problem and outline a plan for the community to address this issue.

Discussion Prompts

CHAPTERS 1–5 (pp. 1–48)

Vietnamese Heritage

In some chapters, sections of Vietnamese dialogue is untranslated. Why do you think the author chose to write this way? Do you think the choice was effective?

Activity: Watch a clip of a TV show in another language. First, watch it with no English translation. Watch it again with subtitles. And finally, watch a version where English is dubbed in. How do these clips feel different? How does your understanding change?

Generational Trauma

In the first few chapters, we are introduced to Jane and her family. How does she feel about her mother, her father, and her brother? Does anything in her life feel familiar? Is there anything that feels uncomfortable? How do you think you would feel if you were in Jane’s shoes? As a reader, do you have any predictions for how the family dynamics might change? Is there anything you want to know more about?

Language Devices

Compare and contrast the chapters written from Jane’s point of view with the chapters from Phúc’s. How do they feel different? What techniques does the author use to distinguish the two? What do you think the author is trying to convey with these techniques?

Comprehension and Reflection

What are your first impressions of Jane and of Phúc?

CHAPTERS 6–9 (pp. 49–96)

Vietnamese Heritage

Jane’s story is set in the late 1990s, in San Jose, California, where the demographics used to be 63 percent white, 19.6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 26.1 percent Hispanic or Latino. How do you think Jane’s experiences at her school and family store would be different if the story was set at your school and in the modern day? Are there certain attitudes or dynamics that you think have changed, for better or for worse? Is there anything that has stayed the same?

Generational Trauma

“On some level, I always understood that her tendency toward suffering came from something more profound. Because she had suffered, there was honor in suffering. The more difficult a task, the higher the achievement, even if an easier way leads to the same result. Like every boat person, things happened to her that I could only guess because she, like my dad, never talked about the past unless she was yelling at us for being spoiled or ungrateful. Maybe she had a valid reason for leaving us. Maybe she wanted me to learn how to pick fish, but she was also telling me something else. Maybe she wanted to teach me something about humanity and choosing glassy-eyed, fresh people to surround myself with. Because that was what she had planned to do. Maybe, in a way, she was telling me to leave too. Or maybe she was just a selfish bitch.”
(pp. 88–89)

- What do you think about there being “honor in suffering”? Do you think Jane’s mother really believed such a thing?

Comprehension and Reflection

Have these chapters changed your opinion on Jane or her parents? Do you think the dynamic between them has changed?

Vietnamese Heritage

At the beginning of chapter 10, there is a folktale about the Man on the Moon. How does this tale relate to the rest of the chapter and the greater themes of the book?

Vietnam War and Migration

“Not all the Việt Cộng found it easy to execute people. Not all of them were murderers. Some of them were worse. Some were cowards.” (p. 104)

- Why does Phúc insist that being cowardly is worse than being a murderer?

Comprehension and Reflection

“I look up expecting both of them to laugh, but they don’t. I’m so confused. Is he seriously lamenting the fact that he should’ve been an astronaut? My whole life he’s told me to ‘know who you are,’ as in *know my place*, and here he is thinking he could’ve been one of like three people in the world to walk on the moon? Is he for real?” (p. 121)

- What do we learn about Phúc when he’s with his peers and family? Do these new insights change your opinion of him?
- Is Jane’s understanding of her parents changing? Why?

Vietnamese Heritage

“I like Chú Quang because he usually lets me choose my own music. I bring the song and he quickly simplifies it into beginner chords and notes. . . . Chú Quang doesn’t have a lot of rules, but one of them is if I miss, skip, or play a wrong note, I have to begin again.” (pp. 157–158)

- How does Jane’s experience and relationship with Chú Quang compare to her relationships with other elders she has interacted with in this story?

Vietnam War and Migration

“Because Vietnam is such a poor country, I just assumed my parents fled for a chance at a better life. I never considered that maybe the refugees never wanted to leave.” (p. 159)

- Where do Jane’s assumptions about refugees in America come from? How does Jane’s understanding of refugees’ wants and needs change in these chapters?
- Discuss how America approaches immigration. How does the national conversation about immigrants and refugees affect people’s understanding of these people’s lives and reasons for moving? How does it affect people’s attitudes toward both the people who move and the places they are moving from?
- How has the United States helped and hampered refugees throughout history?

Generational Trauma

“Like ghosts with unfinished business, these memories wanted something from him. He tried to tell them that he had nothing to offer. He tried to explain that he could not be the keeper of their presence. He begged them to please just go away. But they refused.” (p. 172)

- What role do ghosts play in Phúc’s experiences, memories, and trauma?
- What do ghosts mean to you, if anything? Do they have a special meaning in your culture?

Languages Devices

“Obviously, I know that the journey was horrible, and a lot of people died, both American and Vietnamese, but something about that song. . . . Listening to it felt like being trapped in a cage during a flash flood. I was anchored and engulfed as I choked on all the raw emotion.” (p. 159)

- What does this image-driven simile do to this moment in the story?

Comprehension and Reflection

- What is Deacon Chuyên’s role, and how does he behave in relation to his role?
- Compare and contrast Chú Lâm’s relationship to Jane and Chú Lâm’s relationship to Phúc.
- Have these chapters changed your opinions on Jane and her parents?

CHAPTERS 22–23 (pp. 223–255)

Vietnamese Heritage

“Mày nghĩ mày đang làm gì vậy?” the other one said. He was shorter than his colleague and about a decade older with a pockmarked face and a scruffy, half-gray beard. It took Phúc a moment to realize he was speaking in stunted Vietnamese because the accent was garbled. But then he saw something flicker across the younger one’s face. Not much larger in stature than Phúc and only slightly older, his stiff demeanor and icy eyes held something far more sinister and dangerous than his partner—jealousy.” (p. 243)

- What role does jealousy play in this interaction? How and why does it impact Phúc? Why is the man jealous?

Vietnam War and Migration

“Tell him that your age is seventeen?” Deacon Chuyên translated. It was an instruction framed as a question.

‘I one seven,’ Phúc said, gesturing the number 17 with his fingers. He was scrawny for a seventeen-year-old, but so were actual seventeen-year-olds—malnourishment had that effect.

‘You want to work?’ The Chinese man sized him up.

Phúc nodded emphatically as he remembered Bà Nội’s words: *If someone asks you to work, you work. It doesn’t matter what. You do it.* Bà Nội knew Phúc could be lazy, so she made sure to remind him to say yes to any job.” (p. 253)

- How do the Vietnamese count age?
- Why is Deacon Chuyên instructing Phúc to say that he is seventeen years old?
- “*If someone asks you to work, you work. It doesn’t matter what. You do it.*” How do you see this attitude passed down to Jane and Paul?

Generational Trauma

“Inside, they were stripped of their clothes. Their dignity was less of a concern than the health risks they posed to the larger population of Hong Kong. As Phúc stood naked, a man on a step ladder combed his hair for lice, then made him raise his arms spread like Jesus on the crucifix while he checked his armpits, his nose, and pubic area. Once it was determined that he didn’t have lice, Phúc picked up his clothes and carried them to the next station.” (p. 250)

- Imagine you are enduring what Phúc did. Write a paragraph exploring the feelings and sensations you experience.
- How can one regain their sense of self after such an ordeal?

Comprehension and Reflection

Have these chapters changed your opinions on Jane and her parents? Do you think between her and her parents has changed with new information?

Vietnam War / Migration

“After passing through security at the San Francisco International Airport yesterday morning, we stopped in a secluded corner where my dad gave me two gold bars to tuck into my zipper, and he placed the other two bars inside Paul’s underwear.” (p. 257)

- Why did Jane’s dad place gold bars in her and Paul’s clothing? Does this relate to Phúc’s experience with gold chains in the hems of his clothes? How and why?

Comprehension and Reflection

“I got sidetracked by what I thought would be a quick Yahoo! search of the Vietnam War because my uncle was right. Everything about the war seemed to be from the American perspective. Every article was about Vietnam veterans who were not Vietnamese but rather American. I speed-read through articles about how unpopular the war was and how famous people like Jane Fonda drew criticism for visiting North Vietnam and being quite vocal against the war. Whatever their stories, I didn’t care—I wanted to find something about Vietnamese people, my people, who lived amid the chaos, fought in the war, or fled like my dad.” (pp. 293–294)

- Research the Vietnam War. What happened? Which countries were involved. Why? Reflect with a partner on what each of you find. What are the similarities and differences between both of your searches and Jane’s reported search? What would you like to have seen?

Vietnamese Heritage

“If she wanted to stick around to do things for him, Phúc wasn’t going to stop her, but he knew, in turn, that he would give her nothing. Phúc made no effort to comfort her or apologize. There was no need. Vietnamese men didn’t do that. At dinner that night, when he was done eating, he simply wiped his lips with the napkin she provided and left his tray for her to clean—dishes were a woman’s business.”

- The book starts with Jane not knowing why her mother left, but now that we have learned about how Jane’s parents met and seen their dynamic throughout the book, can you draw parallels between Jane and her mom?



Generational Trauma

“I think war breaks people. And to overcome it, strength manifests itself in strange and sometimes ugly ways.

There is so much about my family’s history that will die with my parents’ generation because we kids don’t know how to ask, and they wouldn’t know how to answer. And even if I somehow gained the superhuman power of gentle yet incisive questioning, I still wouldn’t understand their responses. I don’t know what the Vietnamese words for rape, murder, or insufferable claustrophobic conditions even are. But there’s also something else that’s stopping me.” (p. 357)

- How does Jane’s understanding of her father and her Vietnamese identity change over the course of the book? What is stopping Jane from questioning and investigating her family’s history?
- How do you think domestic violence and abuse was handled throughout this story? How does it tie into Jane’s reflection on herself, her father, and her identity? What is her response to the abuse?

Comprehension and Reflection

- Looking back at the book, why do you think the author chose the title “My Father, the Panda Killer”?
- How has your understanding of the Vietnam War, its aftermath, Vietnamese people, and Asian American people changed after reading this book?

This guide was created by Sarah Nguyễn, a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington Information School, and Helen Li, a teen librarian at the Kansas City Public Library. Both Nguyễn and Li are University of Washington Master’s of Library and Information Science alumni and members of the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association. Nguyễn has been co-chair of the Family Literacy Focus Committee, leading the Talk Story Grant and Li has served as a member of the YA Literature Award Committee. Their works center the practice of disaggregating information when representing Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander peoples through community-centered, intergenerational, information, media, and data literacy practices created in collaboration by and for community members.



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