Inside Out & Back Again

THANHHAA LAI
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Inside Out & Back Again
by Thanhha Lai

About the Book

Ha’s life in Saigon isn’t perfect: Her father’s missing and war makes things more expensive each day, plus she’s the youngest child (and a girl!) in a family of boys. But she loves Vietnam, with its tastes and smells, and loves the promise of growing things like her papaya tree. When her family joins the refugees to travel to America, Ha has to pretend to like other people’s food, learn English with its inexplicable plurals, and fight off other kids on the playground. Inside Out & Back Again is the poignant story of her year full of changes, hardships, and small victories.

Questions for Discussion

1. Ha’s story is told in a series of poems. What do you think about that? Find examples of different types of poems: For instance, find one that tells a story and another that paints a picture. Some of the poems have a specific date at the end, but others say “every day.” Why do you think that is?

2. What did you know about Vietnamese culture before reading the story? What are some of the things you learned as you read?

3. Sometimes Ha is angry about being a girl. Why does she make sure to tap her big toe on the floor before her brothers wake up on the morning of the new year? When she thinks about that moment a year later, what does she say?
4. Why does Mother lock away the portrait of Father after chanting in the morning (p. 13)? What do you think you would do if you were Ha or one of her brothers and someone close to you passed away? What would you say to Mother?

5. What does Ha mean when she talks about “how the poor fill their children’s bellies” (p. 37)? What is Mother trying to do when she talks about how lovely yam and manioc taste with rice? Why do you think Mother finally decides to leave Saigon?

6. Why does Ha love papaya so much? What might the fruit represent for her? How is that the same as or different from what the chick means for Brother Khoi?

7. On the ship, Ha touches the sailor’s hairy arm and Mother slaps her hand away (p. 95). Why does Ha take a hair? How is her behavior on the ship similar to or different from that of the kids at school in Alabama when they notice Ha’s features?

8. Ha describes her American town as “clean, quiet loneliness” (p. 122). How is life in Alabama different from Saigon? Describe each setting and the differences between the two. Are there any similarities?

9. What do you know about the cowboy who sponsors the family? Who do you think he is, and what are some reasons why you think he might have become a sponsor? What about Mrs. Washington: Why might she have volunteered to be a teacher for Ha?

10. Ha says that the cowboy’s wife insists they “keep out of her neighbors’ eyes” (p. 116). Why would she do that? Why would neighbors slam their doors when Ha’s family comes to say hello (p. 164)?

11. Why would sponsors prefer applications that say “Christians” (p. 108)? Do you agree with Ha’s mother that “all beliefs are pretty much the same” (p. 108)? Do you think she did the right thing by saying that the family is Christian?
12. Why is it so important to Ha’s mother that her children learn English? If your family moved to a foreign country right now, would you be eager to learn the language? Why, or why not?

13. Ha struggles to learn English and hates feeling stupid. She asks, “Who will believe I was reading Nhật Linh?” and then, “Who here knows who he is?” (p. 130). What do you think is behind her frustration? What does she want people to understand about her and her family?

14. Brother Quang says that Americans’ generosity is “to ease the guilt of losing the war” (p. 124). What is he talking about? Why doesn’t he take their generosity at face value?

15. What does Mother mean when she tells Ha to “learn to compromise” (p. 233)? Is she talking about dried papaya or something else? Give an example of a compromise that Mother has made.

**Extension Activities**

1. **Happy New Year!** Have your students look up Tết. When is it celebrated? What are some traditional activities that are part of the celebration? Are there Tết celebrations in your town that they could attend? Ask students to make posters inviting classmates to a party for Tết, explaining what they should expect and helping them get excited for the event.

2. **Market Day.** Ha loves Vietnamese food and describes the tastes she loves. To name a few, there are crunchy mung bean cookies, glutinous rice and fish sauce, and, of course, papaya. Ask students to visit an Asian market nearby and try a new food. Have them write poems to describe the experience for their classmates.

3. **Papaya Trees and Baby Chicks.** Both Ha and Brother Khoi love to watch things grow, and Ha eagerly anticipates the day when she’ll be able to eat her papayas. Ask students and their families to start growing food plants. Have them keep journals with notes and drawings of their plants as they grow, and write poems about how it feels to wait patiently before you can taste your food for the first time.
4. Two Pictures of Vietnam. Have students look up pictures of the fall of Saigon or the “burned, naked girl” crying and running down a dirt road (p. 194). Then ask them to find pictures of papayas and Tết. Have them ask friends and family which set of pictures they recognize, and if they remember when they first saw them or what they thought. Discuss with the class: Why would Ha say that Miss Scott should have shown pictures of papayas instead of the pictures of war? How are the war pictures different from the pictures in Mrs. Washington’s book (p. 201)?

5. Telling Stories. In the Author’s Note, Thanhha Lai says she hopes that “after you finish this book that you sit close to someone you love and implore that person to tell and tell and tell their story” (p. 262). As a class, generate a list of questions for students’ families. Have each student choose a family member and interview him/her about what life was like during the Vietnam War or another conflict that had an impact on his/her life. Ask students to share stories with their classmates and discuss the similarities and differences of what they learned from their family members.

About the Author

Thanhha Lai was born in Vietnam. At the end of the war, she fled with her family to Alabama. There, she learned English from fourth graders. She then spent the next decade correcting her grammar. She started her writing life as a journalist, then switched to fiction, getting her MFA from New York University. She has published short stories in numerous journals and anthologies, and this is her first novel. Lai lives with her family in Kansas and teaches writing at The New School.
Dear Reader:

Much of what happened to Hà, the main character in Inside Out & Back Again, also happened to me.

At age ten, I, too, witnessed the end of the Vietnam War and fled to Alabama with my family. I, too, had a father who was missing in action. I also had to learn English and even had my arm hair pulled the first day of school. The fourth graders wanted to make sure I was real, not an image they had seen on TV. So many details in this story were inspired by my own memories.

Aside from remembering facts, I worked hard to capture Hà’s emotional life. What was it like to live where bombs exploded every night yet where sweet snacks popped up at every corner? What was it like to sit on a ship heading toward hope? What was it like to go from knowing you’re smart to feeling dumb all the time?

The emotional aspect is important because of something I noticed in my nieces and nephews. They may know in general where their parents came from, but they can’t really imagine the noises and smells of Vietnam, the daily challenges of starting over in a strange land. I extend this idea to all: How much do we know about those around us?

I hope you enjoy reading about Hà as much as I have enjoyed remembering the pivotal year in my life. I also hope after you finish this book that you sit close to someone you love and implore that person to tell and tell and tell their story.

Thanhha Lai
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Thanhha Lai**

Biography

I was born in Vietnam in 1965 (The Year of the Snake), where life was good. I went to school, ate lots of snacks, was top dog in my class, and was the youngest of nine children. Yes, I know…nine. But it was war time, and people were told to have lots of babies.

On April 30, 1975, North Vietnam (the Communist side) won the war, and my family and I (living in Saigon, South Vietnam) scrambled onto a navy ship and ended up in Montgomery, Alabama. Why? Believe me, we didn't know about Alabama to choose it. But to enter the United States, refugees had to have a sponsor. The man who had the nerve to take on all of us (10 in all) lived in Alabama.

Life got more complicated, with me not speaking English and never having tasted a hot dog. Add to that my looks. I was the first real-life Asian my classmates had ever seen.

It took about a decade to get acclimated and to learn grammatically correct English. By then we had moved to Ft. Worth, Texas, where I went to high school. I received a degree in journalism from University of Texas, Austin.

I covered the cops beat at *The Orange County Register* in California for two years. Then I got this insane idea that I should quit and write fiction. After many false starts and an MFA in Creative Writing from New York University, I'm publishing my first novel.

Now I'm in New York City, teaching at The New School. Life's good: running, biking, reading, writing, and chasing around a four-year-old.

*Inside Out and Back Again* is my first novel.

Hobbies, Interests, and Enthusiasms

I try to read a novel a night. As soon as my daughter goes down, I read. If I love the novel, I read every word until I finish it. If not so much, I flip and get the essence of what the writer is doing.

I get to write Tuesdays through Fridays, usually. Something always comes up, but I can count on
15 solid hours a week to sit there and see what happens.

I have a garden. I throw seeds down and see what comes up. Usually, the tomatoes and kale win. And I have raspberry bushes in tubs, making it easier to water.

I salivate over the idea of having a chicken coop. Just three hens, quiet and productive. So far I just read about other people raising chickens in the city, in the suburbs. I'm plotting…

And I exercise because I'm really not meant to sit still, and so far writing is all about sitting still. I bike 10 miles to teach. Otherwise, I try to run a little. Then I go home and eat too much.

**Education**

New York University (MFA)
University of Texas, Austin
Critic’s Corner

“Open this book, read it slowly to savor the delicious language. This is a book that asks the reader to be careful, to pay attention, to sigh at the end.”
Kathi Appelt, bestselling author of Newbery Honor Book The Underneath

“Based in Lai’s personal experience, this first novel captures a child–refugee’s struggle with rare honesty. Written in accessible, short free–verse poems, Hà’s immediate narrative describes her mistakes—both humorous and heartbreaking; and readers will be moved by Hà’s sorrow as they recognize the anguish of being the outcast.”
Booklist (starred review)

“The taut portrayal of Hà’s emotional life is especially poignant as she cycles from feeling smart in Vietnam to struggling in the States, and finally regains academic and social confidence. An incisive portrait of human resilience.”
Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“An enlightening, poignant and unexpectedly funny novel in verse. In her not-to-be-missed debut, Lai evokes a distinct time and place and presents a complex, realistic heroine whom readers will recognize, even if they haven’t found themselves in a strange new country.”
Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“American and Vietnamese characters alike leap to life through the voice and eyes of a ten–year–old girl—a protagonist so strong, loving, and vivid I longed to hand her a wedge of freshly cut papaya.”
Mitali Perkins, author of Bamboo People

“Lai’s spare language captures the sensory disorientation of changing cultures as well as a refugee’s complex emotions and kaleidoscopic loyalties.”
The Horn Book

“Hà’s voice is full of humor and hope.”
School Library Journal (starred review)

“In this free-verse narrative, Lai is sparing in her details, painting big pictures with few words and evoking abundant visuals.”
Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books
**Reading Group Guide:**
**INSIDE OUT AND BACK AGAIN**  
by Thanhha Lai  
Reading Levels: GRL: W LEX: 800L DRA: 60

**PRE-READING ACTIVITY**

**Activate Prior Knowledge**

Have students respond to the following prompts: What do you know about the Vietnam War? What questions do you have? Record students’ responses in the first two columns of a K–W–L (Know, Want to Know, Learned) chart. Then, how students a slideshow of photographs from the era and provide background information about the war. (If students are mature enough to view them, consider showing them some of the images described in the poem “War and Peace” in *Inside Out and Back Again.*) Return to the chart after the discussion to complete the third column. (SL.4.1c, SL.5.1c, SL.6.1c)

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITTEN RESPONSE**

- Compare and contrast Hà’s home in Vietnam with her new environment in America. Use a Venn diagram to organize your ideas. Then, write a summary of your analysis, including specific details from the text in your answer. (RL.5.3, RL.6.2)

- Describe Brother Quang. What do his words and actions show about him? How does he feel about his family’s decision to leave Vietnam? Support your answer with accurate quotations from the text. (RL.4.3)

- Explain what happens in the poem “Most Relieved Day.” What can the reader infer about Steven and Pam? How does this poem mark a turning point in the book? (RL.4.1, RL.5.1, RL.6.1)

- List the many challenges Hà and her family face in Alabama. How do they respond to these challenges? What messages does the book convey about the refugee experience? (RL.5.2, RL.6.3)

- Explain how Hà adapts to her surroundings over the course of the book. At what point do things begin to get better for her? Describe the specific episodes that lead to positive changes in her life. (RL.6.3)
OTHER ACTIVITIES TO TRY

Explore Structural Elements of Poetry
Ask students to examine the structure of *Inside Out and Back Again* (Is the book a novel, a collection of poetry, or both? How can you tell? What helps you recognize a poem?) Teach or review the terms *stanza* and *line*, pointing out these structural elements in the poem “Wishes.” Then, have students write poems about their own dreams and desires modeled after “Wishes.” Students can structure their poems in four stanzas, the first three beginning with the line “I wish.” (RL.4.5)

Write Profiles
In her Author’s Note, Tahnhha Lai says she hopes the book inspires readers to “sit close to someone you love and implore that person to tell and tell and tell their story.” Ask each student to have a conversation with a relative using the questions below as a guide. Then, ask students to write about their conversations in narrative form, incorporating dialogue and descriptive details whenever possible. (W.4.3, W.5.3, W.6.3)

- How were things different when you were a child? Be as specific as possible.
- What were the biggest challenges your family faced when you were growing up?
- What did you fear most when you were a kid?
- What did you look forward to most when you were a kid?

Teach Similes
Review the term simile and have students analyze the quotations from the book below. What does each simile describe? What feelings and ideas do the similes convey? To extend the activity, have students write similes about images and sensations in their own lives. (RL.5.4, RL.6.4)

- “the piles of bodies / that keep crawling on / like raging ants / from a disrupted nest.”
- “the morning air glides cool / like a constant washcloth / against my face.”
- “Eggs explode / like smears of snot / on our front door.”
- “Bathroom paper hangs / like ghosts / from our willow.”

BUILD VOCABULARY

Preview Challenging Words Have students work individually or in groups to determine the meanings of new words and identify synonyms. (RL.4.4, L.4.4, RL.5.4, L.5.4, RL.6.4, L.6.4)

- gaunt
- conviction
- monsoon
- tangible
- diacritical
tolerable persuade disrupted remnant illogical
justify migration obvious giddy solitude
flaunts chiding idle contorted superstitious

SITES TO VISIT

**Find a Unit Plan** on using poetry to explore change and belonging at http://tinyurl.com/69ptflm

**Write Poetry** with a “Writing With Writers” interactive at http://tinyurl.com/4ymcx

**Explore the Immigrant Experience** with an interactive activity at http://tinyurl.com/b2jn

**NOTE**: Questions are keyed to the Common Core Standards [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)

RL: Reading Standards for Literature
SL: Speaking and Listening Standards
L: Language Standards
W: Writing Standards