

Inside Out & Back Again

BY THANHHA LAI

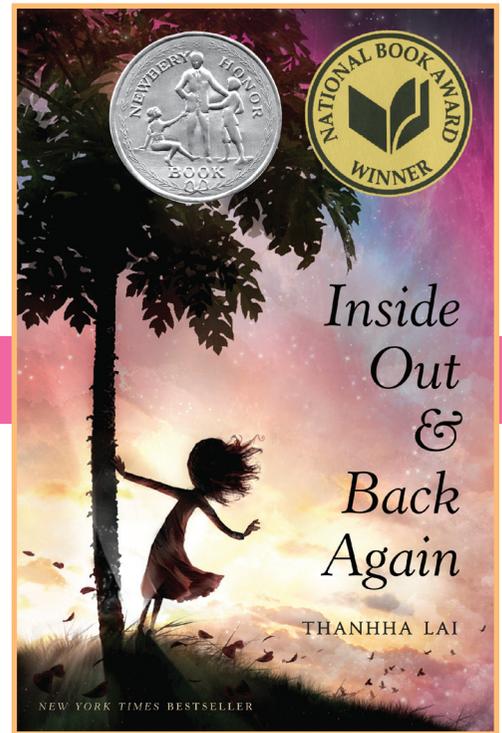
Discussion Guide

About the Book

Hà'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, Hà 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. Hà'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 Hà 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 Hà or one of her brothers and someone close to you passed away? What would you say to Mother?
5. What does Hà 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 Hà 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 Khôi?
7. On the ship, Hà touches the sailor's hairy arm and Mother slaps her hand away (p. 95). Why does Hà 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 Hà's features?
8. Hà 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 Hà?
10. Hà 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 Hà's family comes to say hello (p. 164)?
11. Why would sponsors prefer applications that say "Christians" (p. 108)? Do you agree with Hà'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?



Questions for Discussion continued on the next page . . .

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12. Why is it so important to Hà'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. Hà struggles to learn English and hates feeling stupid. She asks, "Who will believe I was reading Nhất 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 Hà 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.** Hà 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 Hà and Brother Khôi love to watch things grow, and Hà 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 Hà 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.



Photo by Sloane Bosniak

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.

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