

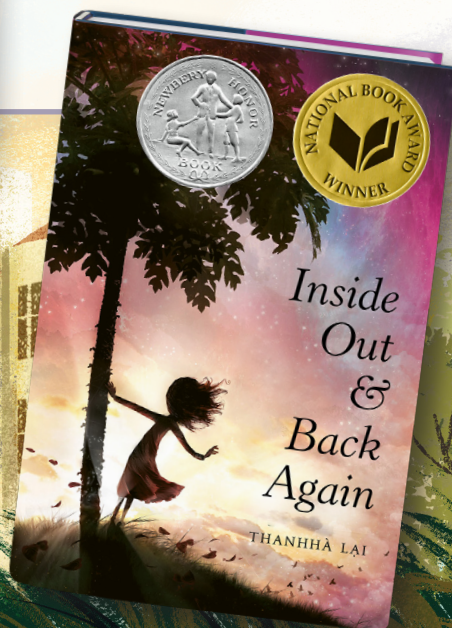
DISCUSSION GUIDE



SEQUEL TO THE AWARD-WINNING
INSIDE OUT AND BACK AGAIN

ABOUT THE BOOK

It's been two years since Hà and her family moved to Alabama after fleeing Vietnam as refugees. Hà is about to turn twelve, she's made a best friend named Pam, and they're about to finish sixth grade. When Mother decides a better future for the family is in Texas, Hà tries her best to hatch plans for them to not have to move again. After all, wasn't moving across the world once already enough? But Mother says in Texas there is a better job, better pay, better schools, and a better chance of owning a home. Rebuilding a life is not easy, but with Mother as the family's anchor, Hà eventually gives change a chance. This sequel to *Inside Out & Back Again* shares the joys and pains of Hà and her family as they strive to survive the daily, reclaim their core selves, and find belonging.



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A NOTE FROM THANH HÀ LẠI

Why a sequel?

It's to say thank you to the many students and teachers I've visited in person and virtually in the twelve years since *Inside Out & Back Again* was published. You're the best part of being a writer. The three questions I'm asked most often are:

1. Why write in poems? The style is called prose poems, a fancy name for sentences that line-break like poems. This is to convey what it's like to think in Vietnamese, a naturally poetic language. Remember, when *Inside Out & Back Again* begins, Hà's still in Vietnam and thinking in Vietnamese. I want you to feel how words float through her mind, yet because of literary magic, you're able to understand them in English. I've kept the prose-poem voice for the sequel because Vietnamese still swirls inside Hà's mind two years later. But notice how her language has become wordier as she acquires English. To me, English is so wordy.

2. Are the doll and chick real? Yes, I had a doll in Vietnam that was mouse-bitten after I loaned it to a friend. One of my brothers did raise chicks. But no, we did not bring them on the ship. I'm still amazed at how the doll and chick have touched readers. I wrote the scene and forgot about it until I met many of you. So for you, the doll and chick make a cameo in the sequel.

3. What happens to Hà? Read *When Clouds Touch Us* and find out. I will say that the long road of reclamation proves even more daunting than fleeing war in panic for her and her family.

Why a sequel now?

I wish I were writing true historical fiction, but we all know that refugees are arriving in host countries every day, often in shock. For them, I want to say I feel for them and I wish them the best. It's not just confronting a new language, climate, food, clothes, schools, trees, flowers. It's that your core also shifts, leading to clashes between parents and children, between classmates, between siblings.

It's hard. No one volunteers to start over, same as no one volunteers to experience an earthquake. It happens to you. Now you have the harsh task of reacting and rebuilding. But a quiet aftermath eventually will settle. I can vouch that after almost fifty years as refugees, my family and I have remolded our lives. We've done what my mother fled Vietnam for: her nine children graduated from college. We're now old enough to be retiring as engineers, a doctor, an accountant, a CIO (I finally kinda know what my sister does).

My mother would say it was all worth it. So would my siblings. And despite my endless documentation of the jarring years, I'd have to agree.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Did reading this book make you feel like you were looking into the window of someone else's life, or did it feel like a mirror of your own? In other words, could you relate to Hà in any way? How are your experiences similar? How are they different?

2. The author's dedication says, "To the millions who transplanted to a new land, may you each reclaim a core self." Your core self is your most authentic self, which includes your values, strengths, and what makes you who you are. Does Hà reclaim a core self by the end of the story? What part of her identity does she hold on to? What does she relinquish or let go? What does she gain? What about Mother and Hà's brothers? What makes up your core self?

3. Mother says, "I urge each child to withstand must above want" (p. 14). Make a list of the family's "musts" or needs. Now make a list of each character's "wants" or what they would like to have. What motivates each character? Does each character get what they need and want by the end of the story? Discuss the importance of these outcomes.

4. Mother reasons that luck led the family out of war and that luck will bring furniture to their new home. Hà suspects that Mother uses the idea of luck as her "cheery twist to endure refugee labor" (p. 81). Do you think Mother is kidding herself in order to cope, does she believe in luck, or both? Now refer to pages 82–83. What does Hà do to endure being the new kid at school? What does Mother do to cope with her exhaustion from working long hours and missing Father?

5. Hà describes the school bus as a "rumbling yellow rectangle" (p. 83). She describes a roller-skating party as a "rolling-shoe party" (p. 1). What did you picture and think when you read these descriptions of a school bus and roller-skating party? Discuss other examples of alternative names for objects or experiences that Hà uses in the story.

6. To "secure luck" for the new year, on Tết, Hà wears all new clothes that include the color red: a blouse, socks, and hair tie (p. 223). In what ways have Hà and her family had good luck in the story? What are examples of bad luck? Do you have rituals or traditions in your family or community for securing luck?

7. Hà's mother says, "I will gain a daughter in command of her hard head, soft heart, thick skin, fiery all over" (p. 242). What are examples of how Hà is hardheaded, softhearted, thick-skinned, and fiery all over? What adjectives might Hà use to describe Mother?

8. Every member of Hà's family works so hard for basic needs, yet they are barely scraping by. On page 29, Hà says to herself, "How many more steps to achieve belly heart mind?" By the end of the story, do you think Hà and her family achieve belly, heart, and mind according to Mother's vision: "belly free of storms, heart wide as the sea, mind stretching the sky" (pp. 27–28)?

9. Hà is sad to leave her best friend, Pam, in Alabama, but then she meets a new friend named Diggy in Texas. Describe their relationship. How does it compare to Hà's relationship with Pam? How would you describe Diggy? What does Hà think about after Diggy leaves to go to her grandparents' house for the end of summer?

10. In the author's note, Thanh Hà Lại states that she wrote the story in prose-poetry form "to convey what it's like to think in Vietnamese." How did you feel about reading the story in this form? Do you ever find yourself thinking in a similar flow? Do you have a better understanding of what it might be like to think in Vietnamese?

11. Why is the book called *When Clouds Touch Us*? Explain the meaning of this as it relates to the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. **Feeling Figurative?** The author uses figurative language such as metaphors, similes, and personification throughout the story. Hà's descriptions of everyday objects, feelings, and even English word pronunciations are often compared to nature (e.g., a junior high frenzied like bees from a dropped hive, p. 66; his neck hardening to a tree trunk, p. 90). Write your own story or poem using figurative language. Use Hà's descriptions as inspiration!

2. **You're the Illustrator.** How might you draw Hà's descriptions of objects, feelings, and experiences? Get some art supplies and give it a try! For example, what would "rumbling yellow rectangle" (p. 83), "snapping-turtle bites from an electric sewing machine" (p. 5), or "frantic gut dragonflies" (p. 61) look like if you were the illustrator? Or, come up with your own ideas. Is a stapler an alligator with metal teeth, for example?

3. **Gratitude Picnic.** Hà's mother's dream of having their own home finally becomes a reality. Mother lays a sheet on the floor (p. 231) so they can eat *chả lụa* sandwiches. Although the *bánh mì* is missing key ingredients, Hà says it tastes gourmet. Draw on a piece of paper what would be at your gratitude picnic. You can include different foods, stuffed animals, and symbols for other things that make your house a home.

4. **Try a Tonal Language.** Vietnamese is a tonal language, which means that the tone or pitch changes meaning. Accents indicate different tones. For example, *ma* means "ghost," but *má* means "cheek" or "mom" (in Southern Vietnamese dialect). Look up how to say the six Vietnamese tones. Can you hear the differences? Do you already speak a tonal language? If so, try tones in a different tonal language. Is it easy or hard? Imagine Hà's frustration as she tries to pronounce English words such as *superstitious* with all of its "s" sounds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thanh Hà Lại is the #1 bestselling author of *Inside Out and Back Again*, winner of the National Book Award and a Newbery Honor; the acclaimed *Listen, Slowly*; the award-winning *Butterfly Yellow*; and the gorgeous *Hundred Years of Happiness*. Born in Việt Nam, she now lives in New York. Visit her online at thanhhalai.com.

Guide prepared by Tram Habib, fourth grade teacher in Los Angeles, CA.



Photo by Paula Landry