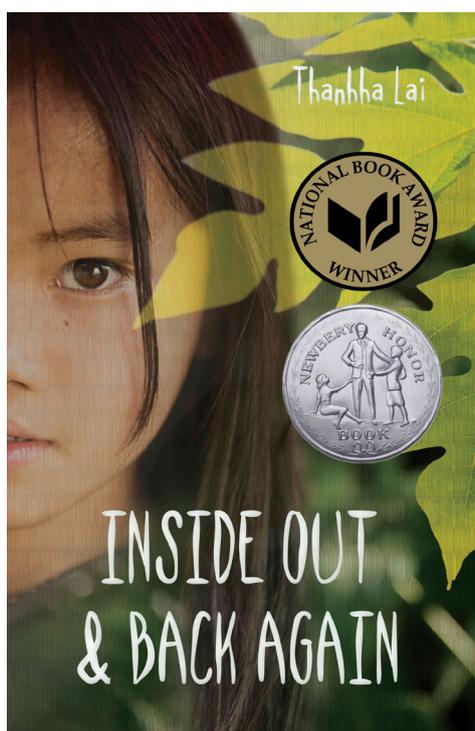


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INSIDE OUT AND BACK AGAIN

by Thanhha Lai



Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher Librarian

in context with the Australian Curriculum (English)

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SYNOPSIS:

It is 1975. As Saigon is about to fall to communism, Ha and her family are torn between staying in their beloved Vietnam and fleeing for safety to America. If they leave, will their missing father ever find them?

This verse novel is a powerful and beautifully written insight into the struggles and hardships facing refugees, not only as they make the difficult decision to leave their homeland but also as they try to forge a new life in a strange land.

THEMES:

Family:

- Ha has a close relationship with her mother and three brothers.
- Ha's father is missing in action. The family hopes he is still alive.
- Ha's mother is grieving the disappearance of her husband and the fall of Vietnam to communism.

Vietnam:

- The fallout of the Vietnam War causes alienation for Ha and her family.
- Once in America, Ha finds that many in the small township ridicule or ignore her culture and heritage.
- Vietnamese culture and customs play an important role in the text, as does Ha's determination to stay true to her heritage.

Refugees:

- Ha and her family become refugees, fleeing for their safety.
- Although faced with racism by some, the family also experiences acts of kindness once in America.

Hope:

- Amidst horrific circumstances, there is still hope for Ha's family.

WRITING STYLE:

Inside Out and Back Again is a verse novel told in first person, present tense. Set against the background of the Vietnam War, the poems are narrated by Ha, a young Vietnamese girl. The narrative is a compelling and insightful account of a family's life as they escape war-ravaged Vietnam and seek refuge in America.

STUDY NOTES:

- The first poem introduces us to the Vietnamese celebration of Tet – the new year. How do these rituals and celebrations compare with the way in which you celebrate a new year?
- What aspects of Vietnamese culture and customs are evident throughout the verses? Keep a journal that records examples as you read.
- The theme of hope emerges on the very first page. The Vietnamese are not permitted to sweep during Tet – 'for why sweep away hope?' (p1) What other symbols of hope are there in *Inside Out and Back Again*?
- Compare the first and the last poems in the text. How are they similar and different? Both revolve around Tet. Is there still hope and joy? Discuss.
- What characteristics, hobbies and personality traits do Ha and her family have? What devices has the

author used to help portray these aspects of the characters?

- Which brother do you think Ha is closest to? Make predictions about their relationship based on the first three of four verses.
- Ha often talks about her papaya tree and the fruit that it bears. Track the use of papayas throughout *Inside Out and Back Again*. What do the papayas symbolise? How is this metaphor woven throughout the text?
- We find out early on that Ha's father is missing in action. What do you think has happened to him?
- Reading *Inside Out and Back Again*, it is clear to see how much Ha and her family love Vietnam. They don't want to leave but feel they have little choice. Find examples that show their pride and sense of belonging to Vietnam.
- Ha talks about a photograph of her father in which he has 'forever-young eyes'. (p13) What does she mean by this?
- Record examples of poetic devices and figurative language that you particularly enjoy as you read the text. Examples to discuss include:
 - o An old, angry knot expanded in my throat (p2)
 - o A seed like a fish eye, slippery shiny black (p8)
 - o Peacock tails at the corner of his eyes (p13)
 - o Soft as a yam gliding down (p21)
 - o Bridge shaped like a crescent moon (p32)
 - o Like magic a crepe forms (p34)
 - o Tears of an ugly fish (p36)
 - o Her brows twist like laundry being wrung dry (p37)
 - o Bombs explode like thunder (p48)
 - o Gaunt like bark (p54)
 - o Black seeds spill like clusters of eyes, wet and crying (p60)
 - o Uncle Son flares elbows into wings...our family sticks together like wet pages (p61)
 - o Crawling on like raging ants from a disrupted nest (p63)
 - o Bombs pierce the sky (p66)
 - o Red and green flares explode like fireworks (p66)

- o I chew each grain s-l-o-w-l-y (p75)
 - o Hair the colour of flames (p92)
 - o An arm hairy with fuzz (p94)
 - o Mother's face crinkles like paper on fire (p124)
 - o I wake up with dragonflies zipping through my gut (p139)
 - o Thrash about like a captured lizard (p210)=
 - o Hovering like a blanket (p233)
- With older classes, research the Vietnam War in more detail, investigating the role of Ho Chi Minh and communism in this conflict. See the verse on p27/28.
 - Many of the poems make reference to Ha's mother's eyes, for example, they 'can't help but carry sadness' (p29). Find other examples and discuss the symbolism in these examples.
 - Ha's relationship with her mother is very strong. Her mother guides Ha through difficult times and tries to calm her spirited ways. What does Ha learn from her mother?
 - If you were in Ha's predicament, would you want to leave Vietnam? Write a response to this.
 - Re-read and analyse Crisscrossed Packs starting on p52. Examine the author's use of rhythm in this verse. Also look at the use of language, for instance – 'the needle a worm laying tiny eggs that sink into brown cloth.'
 - In the verse entitled Choice (p55) the children are required to each choose just one special thing to take away with them. What would you choose if you were in this situation? Why?
 - Many things have to be left behind. Discuss the emotional upheaval that refugees must face when leaving behind so many precious objects. (p57+)
 - Why do you think Ha loves her doll 'more for her scars'? (p55)
 - Why does Ha wrap her doll's arms around Brother Khoi's dead chicken and throw them overboard (p85/86)? What does this tell us about Ha's character and her relationship with her brother?
 - Ha feels guilty having not thought about her father. How would you feel in Ha's position? Should she feel like this? Discuss.
 - Ha's mother says that 'people share when they know they have escaped hunger.' Discuss Ha's sentiment 'shouldn't people share because there is hunger' (p93)

- Re-read Amethyst Ring on p103. What does the amethyst ring symbolise? How is this symbol revisited at the end of the text?
- Once in Alabama, the family faces a whole new set of challenges. List these obstacles.
- Why does Ha wish her mother ‘wouldn’t try to make something bad better?’ (p116) Write a reflection of a time you have felt like this.
- Ha has to master many new rules as she is learning English. Keep track of these rules such as spelling rules, irregular verbs, tense and plurals. Use these sections in the text to explicitly teach or revisit the same grammatical rules that Ha is learning.
- When Ha moves into her new home, she tells us what she doesn’t like about it. (p126) Discuss her reasoning behind some of these dislikes.
- Discuss Ha’s comment that pity makes the pity-giver feel better, not the pity-receiver.
- Analyse the verse Rainbow (p142) or Hiding (p160). Annotate the poem, taking note of the poetic techniques employed. Discuss what you find most effective about the verse.
- For the first time in her life, Ha feels dumb. She hates feeling like that, especially when she can purify water and do fractions. Why does she feel like this?
- What do refugees sacrifice when they leave their country for another? Use examples from *Inside Out and Back Again* to support your response.
- Discuss the title of the text. Why has the author chosen this title?
- The narrative starts and finishes with Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. Discuss the circular structure of *Inside Out and Back Again* and Ha’s personal journey during the year.
- Read poetry and listen to songs about the Vietnam War to help get a sense of the human cost of the war. Use these as stimulus for discussion.
- Ha mentions the famous wartime photograph of the little Vietnamese girl running naked down the street. If age appropriate, study this photograph in context with *Inside Out and Back Again*. Why is Ha frustrated that this is the side of Vietnam of her teacher has chosen to share with the class?
- What does Ha mean when she says ‘at times I would choose wartime in Saigon over peacetime in Alabama’ (p195)?
- Towards the end of the text, Ha’s beloved papaya is again mentioned, only this time, it is dried papaya. Ha complains that it is not the same as the real fruit, however her mother encourages Ha to ‘learn to compromise’ (p233). Discuss this notion in light of the entire text. Why is this an important lesson to learn?

- Try writing some of the episodes from *Inside Out and Back Again* in prose form. Likewise, try writing some of your own free-verse poetry based on the theme of alienation or refugees.
- Experiment using figurative language and poetic devices in your own writing.
- Visit the Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards website, which has excellent tips for teachers on how to teach poetry <http://www.dorothea.com.au/>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Thanhha Lai: 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.