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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Inside Out & Back Again by Thanhha Lai

Summary

For all the ten years of her life, Hà has only known Saigon: the thrills of its markets, the joy of its traditions, and the warmth of her friends close by. But now the Vietnam War has reached her home. Hà and her family are forced to flee as Saigon falls, and they board a ship headed toward hope. In America, Hà discovers the foreign world of Alabama: the coldness of its strangers, the dullness of its food . . . and the strength of her very own family.

This moving story of one girl's year of change, dreams, grief, and healing received four starred reviews, including one from Kirkus which proclaimed it "enlightening, poignant, and unexpectedly funny." An author's note explains how and why Thanhha Lai translated her personal experiences into Hà's story.

Discussion Questions

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? Discussion Guide Questions for Discussion continued on the next page . . .
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.

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.