

TEACHER'S GUIDE

This document is meant to provide teachers a preliminary set of ideas for incorporating the 2011 One Book, One San Diego featured book, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, into your class. Keep in mind, this is just the beginning of what we hope will be a much larger set of discussion questions, activity ideas, comments, and insights about this book.

SUMMARY

"The Gangster We Are All Looking For," written by Lê thi diem thúy, is a true-life novel about a Vietnamese refugee family in San Diego, told from the perspective of the family's daughter, who is just six years old when they arrive. The narrator and her parents struggle to adapt to life in an unfamiliar land, while simultaneously dealing with a troubled marriage, a father's mysterious past, and the loss of a brother, in this painful, magical, and poetic novel.qw3

GENRE: FICTION

Sub-genres:

- Asian American novel (lê accepts that designation)
- Autobiographical fiction (lê denies it)
thúy said in an interview: "It mirrors places I've [been], both geographical and emotional, but I didn't enter into it as a recollection of my own experiences and memories. I entered into it with these characters and followed them. I'm much more excited about the things that happen that I never anticipate."
- Fictionalized refugee narrative (escape and resettlement narrative)
- Fictionalized immigrant narrative
- Coming-of-age novel or bildungsroman

AUTHOR'S VIEW OF WRITING

- She compares writing to athletics (prepare, train, act when the moment arrives)
- She compares writing to capturing the ineffable
 - "I had a studio once near the train tracks and a bunch of freight trains would come by. I could feel them coming before I could actually hear them. Once I wrote, "Here comes a train," and in the time it took me to write those words, the train had already come and gone. I thought, this is so true of writing. It's so slow. On some level, it's both anticipating and yet it's always behind. There is something in language itself that is trying to point a finger or put a hand on something that is ineffable."
- She seeks to create characters and follow them
 - "I read a lot. I never had any formal training or workshops. My main interest in fiction is in the following part of it, the part of it where characters get ahead of you. You're following them where windows and doors and entire atmospheres

- open that you're not anticipating and that you have no control over, but that you shape because you're the writer.”
- She says revision is like shaping “musculature” on the “bones” of a piece of work
- She is interested in the “tension between what is on and what is off the page”

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Vietnam War: Took place during the Cold War from 1959 to 1975. It represented a successful attempt on the part of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam, DRV) and the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (Viet Cong) to unite and impose a communist system over the entire nation. Opposing the DRV was the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam, RVN), backed by the United States. The war in Vietnam occurred during the Cold War, and is generally viewed as an indirect conflict between the United States and Soviet Union, with each nation and its allies supporting one side.
- U.S. Role in Vietnam War: The war spanned several presidencies including Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford. The U.S. withdrew forces in 1973, but continued to provide funding and support to South Vietnam until even that trickled down to nothing which left the South even more vulnerable to the North. More than 3 million Americans served in Vietnam. By war's end, 58,193 soldiers were killed, more than 150,000 were wounded, and at least 21,000 were permanently disabled.^[229] Approximately 830,000 Vietnam veterans suffered symptoms of [posttraumatic stress disorder](#). An estimated 125,000 Americans fled to Canada to avoid the Vietnam draft,^[230] and approximately 50,000 American servicemen deserted.^[231] In 1977, United States President [Jimmy Carter](#) granted a full, complete and unconditional pardon to all Vietnam-era [draft evaders](#).^[232] The [Vietnam War POW/MIA issue](#), concerning the fate of U.S. service personnel listed as [missing in action](#), persisted for many years after the war's conclusion. (Wikipedia)
- Postwar reeducation camps: Following the North's takeover by the South, these incarcerated members of certain social classes in order to coerce them to accept and conform to the new social norms (communism). The camps were administered by PAVN or the Ministry of Interior, but they were not regarded as prisons and indeed were separate from the prison system. They were considered to be institutions where rehabilitation was accomplished through education and socially constructive labor. Only those who "deserved rehabilitation" (as opposed to those who deserved jail) were sent to the camps, where their political attitudes, work production records, and general behavior were closely monitored. (Wikipedia)
- Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975: passed on May 23, 1975, under President [Gerald Ford](#), was a response to the [Fall of Saigon](#) and the end of the [Vietnam War](#). Refugees from South Vietnam and Cambodia^[1] were allowed to enter the United States under a special status, and Congress granted them special relocation aid.

Volunteer groups such as [Civitan International](#),^[2] the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), the [International Rescue Committee](#), and the [Church World Service](#)^[3] all sponsored refugees and cared for them after they arrived. (Wikipedia)

- U.S. versus Vietnamese perspectives on the war: Vietnamese see the war as something that was done *to* them, ruined their country where the U.S. had a completely different perspective (see above bullets). Remember that for Vietnamese and Vietnamese Americans, Vietnam is country--not just a place where the US has fought a war

THEMES

- Loss
 - Racial melancholia (see David Eng and Anne Cheng)
- Creativity
- Adaptation to new culture
- Father-daughter relationship
- Power of stories
- Power of silence (see King-kok Cheung)
- Coming of age
- Class, gender, and race as interlocking components of identity
- Child's perspective
- Effects of war and displacement
- Beauty
- Simultaneity
 - Thúy said in an interview: *"I was working with [the idea of] Southern California haunted by southern Vietnam in so much as these characters had come from elsewhere but were now here. They brought that other place with them in unexpected ways. They were haunted by the other place and reminded of that other place in unexpected moments."*

LITERARY STRATEGIES USED TO CONVEY THEMES:

1. Formal Aspects of the Book

- Use of an unnamed narrator
- Nonlinear, fragmentary
- Elliptical
- Use of silence
 - Lack of language to describe some memories and experiences
 - No English
 - No words at all
- Use of images
 - Main organizational principle for some chapters

- Appropriate for six-year-old narrator
- Employed as transitions from currently-lived experience to memory, from reality to imagination, from narrator's perspective to other characters' perspectives

2. Narrator

Specific quotes that highlight the narrator and her contribution to the story:

- 19: "Was that where I had come from?" (when teacher points out Vietnam on a globe)
- 20-21: "'Go to sleep,' the teacher would say. . . 'Close your eyes. That will help.' . . . I stared at the ceiling and studied the shapes I saw there: a chair, a tree trunk, the worried face of an old man, a sliver of moon. I began to play with the ceiling, a game that I used to play with the sky when I was lying in the fishing boat on the sea. At that time, I thought that everyone and everything I missed was hovering behind the sky. The game involved looking for a seam in the sky, a thread I could pull. . . ."
- 24: "The butterfly was golden brown. . . ."
- 29: "I told the glass animals. . . ."
- 37: "In the shade of the evening, as you looked over the second-floor railing into the swimming pool below, the shapes of things that had happened would slowly take form and come into focus."
- 45: ". . . I'd gaze at the rectangular shape of the window above my parents' bed and picture fish in the sea. . . ."
- 65: "You could lift up a corner of that ground and there would be nothing beneath it. Except maybe water."
- 99: "We stand on the edge of the chain-link fence The whole world is two butterfly wings rubbing against my ear. Listen . . . they [grandparents in photograph] are sitting in the attic . . . Paper fragments floating across the surface of the sea. There is not a trace of blood anywhere except here, in my throat, where I am telling you all this."

Topics for discussion:

- Why is she unnamed?
- Why is she a child?
- What is she like? What makes her worth listening to?
- What is her identity?
 - age
 - class
 - gender
 - sexuality
 - ethnicity

- How does her sensibility develop?
- Thúy said in an interview: “She sees, she's observant, she hears, but it doesn't necessarily mean that she knows. She absorbs. This is very true of children; they absorb but they don't necessarily understand what they're absorbing.”

3. Father

Specific quotes that highlight the father and his contribution to the story:

- 35: “Shuh-shuh . . . suh-top!”
- 79: “. . . my father, a Buddhist gangster from the North. . .”
- 93: “Ba jumps in his truck and drives away. When I grow up I am going to be the gangster we are all looking for.”
- 100: “It was my father who taught me how to do this, how to keep moving even when a bone in the leg was broken or a muscle in the chest was torn.”
- 107: “The year I left home, my father and I would sit at the kitchen table in the evenings and pass the silence back and forth, like smoke.”
- 108: “Where he would go in his mind, I don't know.”
- 122: “Between us now there hangs the familiar smoke . . . He made himself small, so that in the world there was very little left of him, even while within me his hunger grew.”

Topics for discussion:

- What are his challenges?
- What is his relationship to his daughter and wife?
- Do we care about him? If so, why?
- To what does the title refer?

4. Structure of chapters

Specific quotations:

- Chapter 2, Page 63: “I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his palm. . . . Down below, the palm looked lonely as an island.”
- Chapter 2, Page 77: “I stood in that small room and wept into the desert of my palms.”

Topics for discussion:

- What principles organize each chapter? In answering this question, consider the themes of displacement, location, and the age of the narrator.
 - Consider the development of characters and their relationships with each other, the U.S., and the past.
 - Discuss the author's use of controlling images.

5. Beginning & Ending

Specific quotations:

- 3: “Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed to shore.”
- 158: “Out from the darkness of the sea, wave after wave of small, luminous bodies washed to shore.”

Topics for discussion:

- What is the relationship between the first and last lines of the book, and of the significance of being washed to shore?”

6. Language

Specific quotations:

- 35: “Shuh-shuh . . . suh-top!”
- 44: “I didn’t know how to swim then, so my mother told me never to go near the pool.”
- 63: “I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his palm. . . . Down below, the palm looked lonely as an island.”
- 88: “We live in the country of California, the province of San Diego, the village of Linda Vista.”
- 112: “He listened to his English-language tapes . . . ‘Hello,’ he said to a bag of flour.”
- 114: “He used to walk around the house and mutter the spelling of his name in English. . . .”

Topics for discussion:

- On language, thúy once said in an interview, “When I talk about the slipperiness of language, I think experience itself is difficult to grasp directly. We can grasp concepts directly, and we can engage with them, but experience is filtered through the body--and the body is constantly aging and changing. All the devices that we use to understand our own experiences are themselves things that we're constantly trying to understand, like the mind and the body. For language to be true to experience, it has to have that quality of being at once utterly precise and also have a resonating surface. When it resonates, it's atmospheric, it becomes what is in the air and hard to grasp.”
 - Activity suggestion in using this quote: Ask students how the author’s statement about language is used in the book. Ask them to support their answer with images, statements and direct quotes from the book.

- Describe thúy's use of language:
 - What do we mean by "poetic"?
 - Think about images, transitions, elliptical quality
 - What is the significance of color?
 - What is the function of silence?
- What role does English play in the characters' lives?

BEYOND THE BOOK: CONNECTIONS & RESOURCES

1. Films relating to Vietnamese American experience:
 - *Oh Saigon* by Doan Hoang
 - *Journey from the Fall* by Ham Tran
 - *The Farmers and the Helicopters* by Ding Q. Lê
2. Films that served as inspiration for the child's point of view (according to thúy):
 - *The 400 Blows* by Francois Truffaut
 - *The Spirit of the Bee Hive* by Victor Erice
3. Food

Thúy said, "Food as a repository of memory is an important part of Gangster. Sharing food is sharing cultures." Some local Vietnamese restaurants to try:

 - Pho Hoa Linda Vista, 6921 Linda Vista Road, (858) 492-9108
 - LV Sandwiches & Restaurant, 6925 Linda Vista Road
 - Pho Sao Bien, 1958 Garnet Avenue, (858) 272-9612
 - Thuan Phat Market, 6935 Linda Vista Road, (858) 505-0168
4. Local organizations
 - Vietnamese Federation of San Diego: www.vietfederationsd.org
 - International Rescue Committee: www.theirc.org/us-san-diego-ca
5. Books
 - *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien
6. Other resources:
 - KPBS segment: "USS Midway Played Significant Role in Vietnam War:" www.kpbs.org/news/2010/apr/29/uss-midway-played-significant-role-vietnam-war/
 - KPBS article: "Experience And Imagination: Interview With lê thị diễm thúy:" www.kpbs.org/news/2010/sep/23/experience-and-imagination-interview-le-thi-diem-t/
 - KPBS One Book, One San Diego webpage: www.kpbs.org/onebook