

About the Author & Book

Thanhha Lai was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1965. At 10 years old, she was forced to leave Vietnam and was resettled in Alabama. In Alabama, she faced prejudice, stereotypes, and misunderstandings. The book is written as a series of poems and from her experiences as a girl living in Alabama. To learn more about the author, you read an interview article published by UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in 2015¹, titled “The Vietnamese Refugee Story that Inspired a National Book Award Winner.”

Background

The Vietnam War was a conflict that involved twenty years of violence and political unrest in Vietnam and neighboring countries like Cambodia and Laos. The conflict ended in 1975 with the fall of Saigon, which caused over 3 million people (about the population of Arkansas) to leave their homes throughout Southeast Asia and resettle in the US. Many of these people traveled by boat in dangerous and even deadly conditions. They became known as “Boat People.” In the year following the fall of Saigon, over 125,000 Vietnamese refugees resettled in the US.

Reading Discussion Guide:

1. If you were to speak to your friend about this story, what would you say?
2. Are there any scenes or characters that stood out to you in particular? Why?
3. Hà loves her Papaya tree. Taking care of it is a point of pride for her. In the end of the book, Hà is gifted dried papaya. This upsets her because it doesn't bring the same joy *her* papaya tree did. What is your Papaya tree? Is there anything in your life that you had to leave behind for new beginnings? How did this make you feel?
4. Think back to when you were 10 years old. What was your life like? Over the course of the year, we slowly see Hà lose her optimistic view of life. How might this affect her future? How would you be affected if you lost some of your innocence at that age?
5. The concept of “Boat People” has continued today and has been used to refer to Syrian refugees, many of whom travel by boat to Turkey. What does it mean refugees are still forced to make the same potentially dangerous choices 50 years later?
6. Before moving Hà loves school, but in Alabama she must learn English adding an extra barrier to her education. She hates feeling dumb and gets very discouraged to learn. ESL classes are not provided in all schools. How do you think Hà would progress in school if she didn't have English lessons available to her?
7. MiSSiss WaSShington and Hà form a close relationship through their English lessons. This allowed Hà to be comfortable enough to share that she was being bullied at school. How does MiSSiss WaSShington's kindness impact Hà? What can we learn from her?
8. Did reading the book change your outlook on refugees? How so?

¹ UNHCR: <https://www.unhcr.org/ie/news/stories/vietnamese-refugee-story-inspired-national-book-award-winner>

About Vietnamese Refugees in Alabama

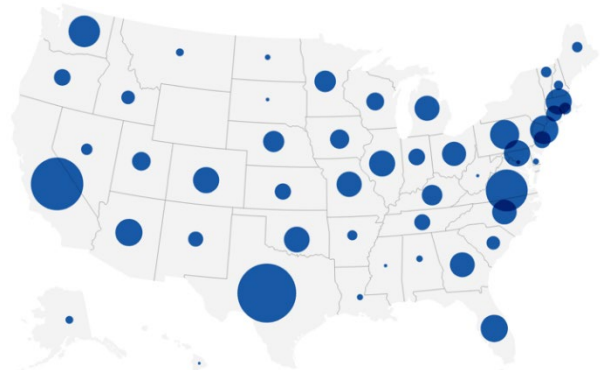
- Congress passes the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975 to assist and support the resettlement Vietnamese refugees which helped to expedite the process to grant US citizenship.
- Today, there is an estimated 1.3 million Vietnamese immigrants living in the US, making up 3% of our immigrant population. Among this group 48% of adults say their children's standard of life will be better than theirs.²
- The Gulf Coast became a primary place of resettlement Vietnamese refugees since the mid-1970's. Many refugees were fishermen and shrimpers before leaving Vietnam, so being able to continue this work made integration into the economy easier; however, that is not to say it was easy for this group culturally and socially, there was also tension over competition in fishing, in some areas, that led to violence and hate crimes.
- There are 2 entrepreneurial niches this group has filled, nail salons and commercial fishing. Vietnamese small businesses employed 97,035 people in 2006 (about the number of people currently employed by McDonald's). Vietnamese Americans make up 37% of all licensed nail technicians in the US and almost half of the shrimping industry in the Gulf.³
- Today non-profit organizations like *Boat People SOS* (<https://bpsos.org/gulf-coast>) and the *Mobile Baykeeper* (<https://mobilebaykeeper.org/blog/the-boat-people/>) are improving the lives of Vietnamese living along the Gulf by overcoming health disparities, spearheading disaster relief efforts and encouraging civic participation.

How does this story relate to current US-military conflicts and refugee resettlement today?

- Following the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the majority of displaced Afghans were accepted as refugees in Iran and Pakistan (3.4 million and 1.9 million, respectively)⁴, while only 76,000 Afghans have been welcomed into the United States via humanitarian parole.⁵
- Unlike refugee resettlement, humanitarian parole is not a pathway to permanent status; it is a temporary allowance to enter and remain in the US. Afghans on short term parole are being put in an asylum system that is already facing a 2-3 yearlong backlog.
- The US promised Afghans who assisted our military that we would ensure a pathway to safety and citizenship so they can rebuild their lives in the U.S., yet many remain in limbo and separated from their families (wives and children).
- The Afghan Adjustment Act was drafted in 2021 and introduced to Congress in 2023. Like the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975, the Afghan Adjustment Act allow Afghan parolees to seek legal permanent residence in the U.S.; however, it has not yet been approved.
- More than one-third of Afghans processed by U.S. have been resettled in Texas, California and Virginia, while 8 states received fewer than 100 evacuees (Alabama, Louisiana, Delaware and North Dakota, South Dakota, Mississippi, West Virginia and Hawaii).⁶

Where Afghan evacuees resettled in the U.S.

As of February 22, more than 67,000 Afghans have left military bases and settled across the country.



Map: CBS News - Source: State Department data

² Pew Research Center: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/rise-of-asian-americans-2012-analysis/vietnamese/>

³ Immigration Policy Center: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/RefugeestoAmericans.pdf>

⁴ UNHCR: <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/afghanistan/>

⁵ Migration Policy Institute: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-immigrants-united-states>

⁶ CBS News: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghan-evacuees-resettled-us-texas-california-virginia/>
Source of Map: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghan-evacuees-resettled-us-texas-california-virginia/>