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Classroom Guide for **JOURNEY HOME**

by **Lawrence McKay, Jr.**
illustrated by **Dom and Keunhee Lee**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 1-5

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.8/0.5

Lexile Measure®: 710

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 3.5

Themes

Single Parents, War, Mothers, Biracial Families, Asian Americans, International, Self-Esteem/Identity

Synopsis

Ten-year-old Mai describes returning to Vietnam with her mother to seek out her mother's birth family. Mai's mother, although brought up in the United States by an American family, was left as a baby in an orphanage during the Vietnam War. Before leaving on their journey, Mai and her mother read about the country, and Mai is especially interested in the stories of Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, who is believed to remove sorrow when a cry of misery is heard. Taking along a photograph of Mom as a two-year-old holding a kite, Mai and her mother visit the People's Hall of Records and many orphanages, but no one recognizes the picture. Finally, in a marketplace, they see a kite like the one in the photo and learn the name of the kite maker and the city where he sells his wares. The kite maker recognizes the photo and tells Mom her story and her Vietnamese name. Mom's parents died in the bombing during the war, and the kite maker, a friend and student of Mom's father, brought her to an orphanage for safekeeping. As they visit the shrine where the ashes of Mom's parents are kept, Mai silently thanks Kuan Yin and contemplates where home really is.

Background

Vietnam is an S-shaped country in Southeast Asia. Most people in this tropical land live in coastal villages or on river deltas. Farming and fishing are two mainstays of Vietnam's economy, and rice is its chief crop.

France took control of Vietnam in the 1800s and governed the country as three separate parts of French Indochina. During WW II, the Japanese took over the country until their defeat in 1945. At this time, a Vietnamese Communist, Ho Chi Minh, became the leader of the Viet Minh, an organization supporting independence. Although the French returned and re-established control in the south, they could not put down the Viet Minh resistance. As a result, the Indochina War

began in 1946. When the French were defeated in 1954, the country was divided into North Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam led by Ngo Dinh Diem. By 1957, Communist rebels in the south known as Viet Cong began to revolt against the South Vietnamese government, leading to the Vietnam War.

United States' involvement in Vietnam was based on a policy of helping nations threatened by Communism as well as to retain its credibility with other nations who depended on the United States' help to resist Communism. At first the U.S. role in South Vietnam consisted of civilian and military advisers, but by 1965, it included ground combat troops and bombing. Conflicts escalated and subsided many times over the following years, but by the end of 1973, few U.S. troops and military personnel were left in South Vietnam. Fighting between North Vietnam and South Vietnam continued until 1975, when South Vietnam surrendered after a full-scale invasion by the North Vietnamese. In 1976, the country was officially unified under a Communist government. Economic deprivation and harsh government relocation and "reeducation" policies led much of the population of South Vietnam to become refugees seeking escape. About one million people fled, often in small boats. Many eventually came to the United States.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before reading the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. What does "home" mean to you? How might the word mean more than just the place where you live?
2. Why do you think people sometimes return to visit a place where they used to live? What circumstances might make such a visit very meaningful?
3. Where is Vietnam? Help students locate Vietnam on a globe or world map and trace a route to Vietnam from the United States.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Invite students to read the title aloud and elicit comments on the meaning of the title. Then focus on the front and back cover illustrations. Where do you think the girl on the front cover is? Why is she there? How would you describe her expression? What is shown on the back cover? How might this picture be related to the one on the front?

Turn to the title page and ask students to study the picture. Suggest that students write down their ideas about who is shown in the picture, where it was taken, what the child is holding, and how this picture relates to the one on the front cover. Ask students to keep their ideas in mind as they read the book to see if their predictions were correct.

Vocabulary

Write the following words from the book on the chalkboard or a word wall.

orphanage	fragile	hazy	exhaust
merchants	wares	pier	craters
apology	rubble	pagoda	shrine
mercy	nun	ruins	trickles

Assign each word to a small group of students. Explain that each group will present its word to the class on a given day, and encourage them to think of new or creative ways to do this. Students may want to think of interesting sentences that illustrate the meaning of the word in the story, tell the word's history and/or derivation, make up a song or poem using the word, and so on.

READING AND RESPONDING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation. Encourage students to refer back to the book to support their responses.

1. Mom has three different names in the book. What are they? How does each name represent a different time in her life, both before and after she was adopted.
2. How can someone's past be "like a puzzle"? Why is Mom's life like a puzzle?
3. Mom tells Mai that "at the cry of misery, Kuan Yin hears the voice, then removes the sorrow." How does Kuan Yin remove the sorrow in Mom's life?
4. Why do you think Mai wants to go to Vietnam with her mother?
5. What do the words "palm trees" and "jungle" tell you about Vietnam?
6. Why does Mai understand how her mother feels about finding her lost parents?
7. How are the places Mom and Mai visit different from where you live?
8. How does nature make it hard to see the scars of war?
9. Why did Tran Quang Tai take Mom to an orphanage? Why did he leave her on the steps? How do you think he felt about having to do this?
10. In what way does Mom find what she is looking for? What doesn't she find?
11. Why does Mai feel that part of her belongs in Vietnam? What does Mai discover about where "home" is?

Literature Circles*

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing the roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to 1 – 4, 6, 10 – 11 in the Discussion Questions section above to help students explore the book's themes.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages that suggest what life was like during the war.
- The **Illustrator** might draw pictures to illustrate scenes not shown in the book, such as the orphanage in which Mom lived or the driver taking Mom and Mai to Sa Dec.
- The **Connector** might report on life in Vietnam today.
- The **Summarizer** should provide a brief summary of the group's reading for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might find additional stories or oral histories about people who left Vietnam and came to the United States.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started With Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice In Book Clubs And Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and *Literature Circles Resource Guide* by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

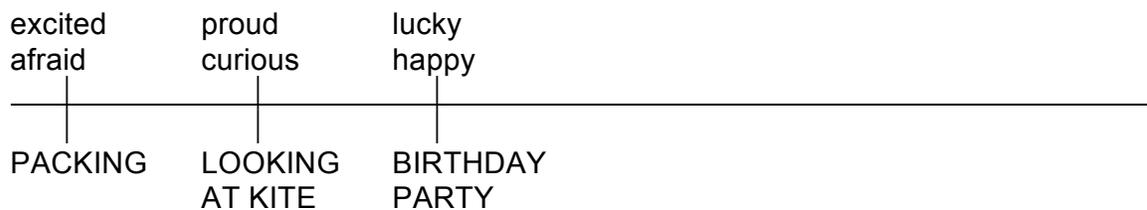
Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, oral discussion, or drawings.

1. The kite has special meaning for Mom and Mai. Write about something that has special meaning to you, telling how you came to possess it and why it is special to you.
2. What does this story suggest to you about the relationship between the past and the present? Try to connect this to something in your own family history.
3. What can you learn about war from this book?
4. Mai gains a greater understanding of her mother and cultural heritage during their trip to Vietnam. Describe an experience that helped you better understand something about yourself or your family.

Other Writing Activities

Ask students to respond to one or more of the following writing activities.

1. Suggest that students write a letter to Mai telling how they feel about her story and giving their thoughts on the question: Where is home?
2. Ask students to create a time line for different events and the corresponding moods in the story. Tell students to use the illustrations in the book to help them figure out the moods. Why are some of the pictures colorful? Why are others darker and more somber?



3. Students might enjoy writing a story about a ride on a cyclo. Their stories could take place in either familiar or unfamiliar settings.
4. Have students go through the book and write a caption for each illustration.
5. Ask students to pretend they have accompanied Mai and her mother on their trip to Vietnam. Have each student create a postcard to send home, with a picture on one side and a message on the other side.

ESL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Use a map of Vietnam to help students identify and describe the story setting and locate Saigon [now called Ho Chi Minh City].
2. Pair ESL students with strong English speakers to read the book together. Suggest that partners retell pages of the story orally as they go along.
3. If you have students in your class who read and speak Vietnamese, invite them to teach a few words to the others. Suggest that students start with words from the story, such as *kite*, *home*, *family*.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To integrate students' reading experiences with other curriculum areas, you may wish to have them complete some of the following activities.

Social Studies

1. Encourage students to do research about Vietnam to become familiar with its geography and history. Encourage them to find the answers to questions such as the ones below.
 - What nations are Vietnam's neighbors?
 - What bodies of water border its western and southern parts?
 - What is the Pacific Rim?
 - What is the capital city of Vietnam? What are some other cities? What was Ho Chi Minh City once called?
 - Why was this region once called French Indochina?
 - Who was Ho Chi Minh? Who was Ngo Dinh Diem?
 - Who were the "boat people"?
 - What is the climate like in Vietnam?
 - What are its chief products?
2. Students might find it interesting and informative to interview adults about their memories of the Vietnam War. Beforehand, give students some background about the war. Make them aware that not all Americans supported the war, that many Americans lost family members in the war, and that some people in the United States are here as refugees from the war. After students complete their interviews, lead a discussion comparing the different points of view students discovered and what they learned.
3. Display a picture of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial designed by Maya Lin and located in Washington, DC. Talk about the purpose and meaning of this memorial and invite students who have seen it to describe their experiences.
4. Remind students that Mom's link to the past was a photograph and that she tried to learn more about who she was at the People's Hall of Records. Point out to students that all people have personal records or documents that help identify them. Make a list of possible items: photographs, birth certificate, library card, social security number, health records, and so on. Then invite students to bring in and share with the class one or two photographs that help tell who they are. Make a bulletin board display of students' photographs.

Language Arts

In the book, it is very important to Mai's mother that she learn her real name. Explain to students that in Vietnam a person's family name is given first, and the name equivalent to a first name follows. Invite students to learn more about the origins and meanings of their own names. In addition to consulting family members, students might check books about names or search for information on the Internet. Have students design plaques with their names and a brief explanation of them.

Art

Both Mom's father and Tran Quang Tai are kite makers. Challenge students to design and make their own kites. Students might make simple kites from folded cardboard or construction paper, or they may choose to research more elaborate kites from crafts books. Be sure to set aside a time for class kite flying.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE ILLUSTRATORS

Lawrence McKay, Jr. is an award-winning author of children's books. *Journey Home*, a Cooperative Children's Book Center "Choices" selection, also received a Parents' Choice Approval and Recommendation.

McKay wanted to be a writer from his childhood days. He wrote haiku in fourth grade and went on to other poetry by sixth grade. Says McKay, "I've always loved language." McKay is also an avid reader who "devours world literature." In *Caravan*, a ten-year-old boy accompanies his father on a trip down from the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan to the regional market. As does *Journey Home*, the story involves the role of family and culture. McKay says, "I have come to believe that human truths are the same for all of us, regardless of race, color or creed. Culture often colors reality, and thus truth can be difficult to recognize, yet sadness is sadness, happiness is happiness, no matter what our ethnicity or culture."

A native of Pennsylvania, McKay now lives with his wife and children in Vashon Island, Washington. He is an enthusiastic cyclist, hiker, skier, and musician.

Dom Lee has illustrated several children's books in addition to *Journey Home*, including *Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story*, an *American Bookseller* "Pick of the Lists," *Baseball Saved Us*, a Parents' Choice Award winner, and *Heroes*, a *Smithsonian* magazine Notable Book for Children, all written by Ken Mochizuki.

For each title, Lee familiarizes himself with the era in which the story is set, researching both photographs and texts. He then uses a unique illustration process to create pictures that resonate with the mood and period of the story. After applying handmade encaustic beeswax to paper, Lee scratches out the images and then uses oil paint and colored pencils to add color.

Lee is a native of Korea. He received his bachelor's degree in fine arts from the College of Fine Arts at Seoul National University. He then earned a master's degree in illustration at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Keunhee Lee collaborated with her husband Dom Lee to illustrate *Journey Home*. She is also a contributing artist to *America: My Land, Your Land, Our Land*, by W. Nikola-Lisa. Lee has had numerous gallery shows in the United States, Paris, and her native Korea. She presently lives in New Jersey with her husband Dom and their children.

Awards & Reviews

Parents' Choice Approval and Recommendation

"Choices", Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)

"Subdued and affecting... The Lees' realistic art, by turns brightly lighted and almost oppressively dark, seamlessly matches the changing moods of the text. [W]ill engage anyone interested in Vietnam or adoption." —*Publishers Weekly*

Please see our Web site, for an update-to-date listing of awards and reviews at:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/jhome.html>

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Journey Home* at

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/74/hc/journey_home

Also illustrated by Dom Lee

Baseball Saved Us

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/17/hc/baseball_saved_us

Baseball Saved Us in Spanish

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/141/hc/el_beisbol_nos_salvo

Be Water, My Friend: The Early Years of Bruce Lee

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/18/hc/be_water_my_friend_the_early_years_of_bruce_lee

Heroes

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/61/hc/heroes>

Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/89/hc/passage_to_freedom_the_sugihara_story

Passage to Freedom: The Sugihara Story in Spanish

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/154/hc/pasaje_a_la_libertad_la_historia_de_chiune_sugihara

Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/109/hc/sixteen_years_in_sixteen_seconds_the_sammy_lee_story

Booktalk with Dom and Keunhee Lee

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/domkeun.mhtml>

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