

The Clay Marble: And Related Readings Study Guide

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Plot Summary

This novel for young adults is set during the mid-1970s in Cambodia, during a period when the country was ruled by the Khmer Rouge, a Communist dictatorship. It tells the story of a young girl and her family, innocent civilians caught up in a war being fought between that dictatorship and outside governments trying to remove it from power. As the narrative recounts the hardships that Dara and her family encounter as they struggle to stay together and to survive, the novel explores themes of self-confidence and the nature of family.

The book begins with a preface from the author, in which she describes how watching television images of the war in Cambodia inspired her to take action to help the civilians caught up in its damaging effects. She also describes how, when visiting a refugee camp, she was given two gifts by a young girl - a small clay marble, and the opportunity to see her and other children in the camp at play, finding joy in the midst of horrible suffering.

The novel itself begins with Dara, a young Cambodian girl, traveling with her family (her Mother and older brother Sarun) to the Nung Chan refugee camp, where they plan to find safety from the war raging around them (between the soldiers of the Khmer Rouge dictatorship and the Vietnamese government attempting to overthrow it). When they arrive at the camp, the family makes its way to one of the few open spaces left, where they set up camp next to another refugee family - friendly teenaged Nea, solemn Grandpa Kem, Nea's outspoken cousin Jantu (a girl about Dara's age) and Jantu's baby brother. After some initially tentative conversation, the two families join forces to make as good a life as they can in the camp. Jantu and Dara in particular become close friends, with Jantu teaching Dara many things, including how to make toys out of clay, many of which are deliberately destroyed by a bullying orphan, Chnay. One toy, a marble that Jantu says is magic, is particularly fascinating to Dara. Meanwhile, Nea and Sarun experience a romantic attraction to each other.

Eventually, the war comes too close, and the camp becomes dangerous. The two families join the long convoy of departing refugees and hurry, as fast as they can, out of harm's way. When a bomb falls near the convoy, Dara and Jantu are separated from their families, and then from each other when Jantu has to ride with her injured brother in an ambulance. The frantically worried Dara doesn't want to leave her, but Jantu says she has to go find her family, and quickly fashions another clay marble which she says is also magic and will help Dara along her way. After Jantu leaves, Dara tries to catch up with the convoy, but is unable to. She then returns to the refugee camp, in the hopes that her family will be there waiting for her. There she finds the bully Chnay, who tells her her family had been there and had been waiting for her but had moved on. When Dara resolves to follow them, Chnay joins her, and the two eventually make their way to the makeshift base camp for soldiers in a rebel army, which Sarun had joined. The whole while, Dara relies on the magic clay marble for help and courage.



Dara, with what she believes is the help of the marble, manipulates her way into working for the camp cook, and eventually reunites with both families. Sarun is now a soldier, and determined to make good on his new career. Dara, meanwhile, is determined to retrieve Jantu and her brother from the hospital and then return home, where both families can resume their quiet farm life. Eventually, after bullying Sarun into helping her, Dara (accompanied by Nea) makes the journey to the hospital, where she finds Jantu and her baby brother more than ready to leave. On their way back, however, a group of sentries (including Sarun) mistakes them for enemies, and shoot at them. Jantu is fatally wounded and, with Dara at her side, dies the next day, but not before telling Dara that the marble in fact had no magic - all the strength Dara felt, all the opportunities she encountered, were the result not of the marble, but of her own courage. Following Jantu's death, the angry, grieving Dara then bullies Sarun into agreeing to make the trip home with them.

In an epilogue, the ten-years-older Dara narrates how she and both families made their way home, settled, and prospered. She also describes her intention to help her own daughter learn courage the way she did - with the help of a magic marble.



Preface

Preface Summary

This novel for young adults is set during the mid-1970s in Cambodia, during a period when the country was ruled by the Khmer Rouge, a Communist dictatorship. It tells the story of a young girl and her family, innocent civilians caught up in a war being fought between that dictatorship and outside governments trying to remove it from power. As the narrative recounts the hardships that Dara and her family encounter as they struggle to stay together and to survive, the novel explores themes of self-confidence and the nature of family.

The author sums up the history of Cambodia, the country in which her novel is set. She comments on how centuries of relative peace were ended by the emergence of a communist dictatorship in the 1970s, and on how an invasion by the Vietnamese Army began the process of freeing Cambodia from that dictatorship. She further comments on how, as the result of that invasion and the subsequent departure of thousands of refugees from Cambodia, the world finally became aware of the crimes that had been perpetrated on the Cambodian people. She describes seeing pictures of the refugees on television, feeling a need to help, taking a leave of absence from a teaching position at a prestigious American university, and feeling deeply overwhelmed at her first sight of the crowded desperation of the Cambodian refugee camps. She also describes, however, how that feeling eased as the result of an encounter with a little Cambodian girl, who gave her a marble made of clay. The author describes the glimpse of playfulness and joy she saw in that girl and in the other children in the camp, and how her attitude towards the refugees changed. The preface concludes with the author's comment on how she lost track of both the girl and the marble, but later in life was gifted with another, similar marble that she keeps on her desk, reminding her to hope that "the little girl who gave me that first clay marble is safe and happy, home in Cambodia".

Preface Analysis

On one level, the Preface is essential reading if one is to have insight and understanding into the military, social, and political circumstances of the novel. While a full examination of and/or commentary on the atrocities perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia is outside the scope of this analysis, it must be noted that that particular dictatorship is generally regarded as one of the worst, most inhumane examples of this particular form of government in the modern era.

That said, it's also important to note that on another level, reading the Preface is entirely unnecessary, in that the story of Dara and Jantu and their families is, in many ways, a universal one - an evocation of what it is probably like to be any civilian (i.e., non-soldier) caught up in any war. Everything that Dara experiences - the loss, the



helplessness, the frustration, the anger - is, it could be argued, an archetypal, arguably inescapable element of the non-combatant's experience of war.

Finally, the author's anecdote about the clay marble and witnessing children at play can be seen as the inspiration for several of the novel's key events and circumstances, not to mention the narrative's overall contention that even in the midst of the horrors of war, there is (in children at least) still the capacity for joy, and for hope.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Chapter one: Dara hears a cowbell, and urgently asks her mother and brother (Sarun), with whom she's traveling in a rickety cart, whether they too heard it. When they say they didn't, Dara points out that the sound came from the west - the direction of Nong Chan, the refugee camp to which they're headed and which, to this point, they've been unable to find. Dara's first person narration then shifts into the past, describing how she and her family suffered as under the dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge and how all the young men, including her brother, were sent away to work camps and her father was killed. She also comments on how the Khmer Rouge described itself as the "family" of the people, and on how she was confused as to how the violent and greedy soldiers could possibly be her family. After the Vietnamese army drove the Khmer Rouge out of power, she says, the situation didn't get much better, although Sarun was able to escape the work camp.

When Sarun returned home, he suggested that he, his mother and sister should travel to Nong Chan where, he has heard, there would be opportunities for freedom and prosperity. Mother reluctantly agrees and, after she digs up her treasured silver Buddha from where she had hidden it for safekeeping, the family sets off. That, Dara comments in narration, was nine days before the encounter with the cowbell which, she says (as the narrative returns to the present) she heard again and soon saw was attached to an ox pulling a loaded cart. After Sarun helps the driver of the cart free it from a muddy rut, the family learns that he has just come from Nong Chan, and is happily excited about the farming supplies he received there. As Sarun talks with the farmer, Dara realizes that her brother had begun to doubt whether Nong Chan was real and is now relieved to have proof. She and her mother both offer prayers of thanks to Buddha.

Chapter two: As the sun begins to settle behind the horizon, Dara and her family arrive at Nong Chan. At first, the barrenness of the location is surprising and upsetting, but as the family makes its way further into the area in search of a site at which they can camp. Dara notices that while everyone is in a strange place, the things they're doing are familiar. Eventually, the family finds a space by the river. As Sarun is untying the oxen, Dara and her mother make friends with Nea, the teenaged girl in the next camp. Nea is preparing an evening meal and, after both she and Mother comment on what their family now consists of and how many relatives have died (something of a ritual, Dara comments in narration), Nea invites Mother and the others to join her family for dinner. For a moment, Mother proudly refuses, but Nea tells her that everyone shares everything in Nong Chan. Mother, with tears in her eyes, then accepts. As the rice for dinner is cooking, Nea takes Dara to bathe in the river, where they examine a stone pillar. Nea tells Dara that her Grandfather (Grandpa Kem) thinks it might have come from an ancient temple, and Dara marvels at touching something that might be a thousand years old. When they return to the camp, Dara notices Nea and Sarun pay special attention to each other. Later Dara, Mother and Sarun all eat hungrily, and then



settle down for the night. Dara decides that instead of sleeping in what she once believed was the safety under their cart, she will sleep under the stars. As she shut her eyes, she comments in narration, she "had the strange feeling that somehow [she] had finally come back home".

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

This section introduces several of the narrative's key elements. First and foremost is its central character and protagonist, Dara, who begins her journey of transformation (from follower into leader) in these two chapters. Second, this section introduces the novel's narrative style (first person), and its situation (refugees struggling to hold on to some semblance of normality in the midst of the insanity of war), the former drawing the reader into a vividly portrayed experience of the latter.

This section also introduces all three of the narrative's key themes. The first, as mentioned, is an exploration of the suffering experienced by non-soldiers caught up in both the politics and the combat associated with war. The second is an exploration of the nature of family, with this section looking into three facets of that theme. The first is the false, domineering family (as exemplified, in Dara's commentary, by the Khmer Rouge), while the second is the biological family, or family of blood (Dara, her mother and her brother). The third is the family of choice, the family bonded together by shared experience and affection (Dara's and Jantu's biological families).

The third theme introduced in this section is that suggesting that courage comes from within, an important component of Dara's journey of transformation. While the full-on exploration of this theme doesn't really begin until later in the narrative, there are indications even in this introductory section that this is going to be one of the narrative's primary thematic considerations. These indications include Dara's decision to sleep under the stars. This is not a huge gesture in and of itself, but reader must remember that to this point, much of Dara's life has been affected and defined by fear, the result of being caught up in the war. In this context, sleeping out under the stars without the protection of the wagon can be seen as an act not only of feeling safety and comfort, but also as an act of self-defined courage. Another indication is Dara's insistence, as the narrative begins, that she did hear a cowbell, an insistence sustained even when her brother suggests she didn't. This, again, is a little act of courage that, like sleeping under the stars, foreshadows the more substantial acts of courage Dara manifests later in the narrative.

Finally, this section also introduces one of the narrative's key symbols, the stone pillar.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter three: The next morning, Dara wakes to find Mother and Nea by the camp fire. After Dara spends a few minutes in Mother's lap, Nea sends her to fetch water from the well, telling her to look for Nea's cousin Jantu who, Dara comments in narration, was at the meal the night before but who she hadn't paid much attention to because she was just so happy to be eating. At the well, Jantu (who carries her baby brother) calls to Dara, and they wait in line together. They tease each other about their looks, and Nea tells Dara about the daily arrival of a food truck that brings hot meals to the children of Nung Chan. After drawing their water from the well, Dara and Jantu return to the camp, where they help Mother and Sarun build a shelter. At noon, Jantu hears the food truck approach, and she and Dara grab their plates and run to meet it. There are hundreds of children there, and each gets a plate of hot, tasty food. Dara watches as Jantu feeds her baby brother the tastiest bits of the meal, and then enjoys her own food, marveling at its goodness and at Jantu's comments that the food distributed to the grownups is even better.

Chapter four: A few days later, the two families arrange that Sarun, as the head of his family, should join Grandpa Kem's "team", one of many such mini-communities grouped together to aid in, and equalize, the distribution of supplies. Sarun and Kem's families, Dara comments in narration, already feel like one family. When the time comes for the supplies to be delivered, Dara accompanies Sarun, Kem and other members of the team to the distribution site, where Dara is amazed and impressed to see how smoothly it all goes. Later, when they return to camp, Sarun proudly shows Nea what he has brought home - not only food supplies, but bags of rice seed to be planted when they return home. As Sarun and Nea speak flirtatiously to each other, their conversation revealing Sarun's plans to get gardening and fishing tools from the next distribution, to take them home and to rebuild his family farm, Jantu pulls the nosy Dara away, saying the two teenagers want to be alone. When Dara impulsively asks whether they'll be getting married, Jantu says there's a lot of time before the rice seed has to be planted, and anything could happen. Dara comments in narration that for the first time in a long time, she felt hope for the future.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the introduction and development of Jantu, a character who could be considered an antagonist to Dara. While some definitions of antagonist portray such a character type in a negative light (i.e., someone who opposes the goals and ideals of the protagonist), a broader definition of the term includes characters who simply trigger change in the protagonist. Jantu is such a character, her way of being in the world and, in particular, her way of relating to Dara, triggering profound change in Dara of the sort that both triggers and defines her essential journey



of transformation. Other important points to note about Jantu include her selflessness, especially when it comes to caring for her baby brother. The story of her making sure he gets the best bits of her food, in this context, can be seen as foreshadowing her actions later in the narrative when she accompanies him to hospital for treatment, a point at which she chooses, albeit

reluctantly, her brother over her friend.

Also in this section, the narrative continues its thematic exploration of the idea of family - specifically, that families aren't just defined by blood relationships. With Sarun joining Grandpa Kem's team, and as Dara points out in narration, the two families begin to forge bonds of cooperation and affection that combine them essentially into a single unit, bonds that continue throughout the narrative, supporting and sustaining the individual members of the new "family" even through separation, hardship, differences of opinion, and death.

Other important elements in this section include the references to the budding romance between Sarun and Nea (which foreshadows further developments in that romance later in the narrative), and the way in which Dara is essentially bossed around by Jantu. This aspect of their relationship further defines Dara as a follower, rather than a leader, and establishes more firmly the part of herself (i.e., defined by external circumstances and situations) that undergoes transformation over the course of the narrative.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter five: As the days pass, Dara spends more and more time with Jantu. Some days Jantu tells stories and fables, one about why so many armies in the area attack each other and another about how a cowardly man accidentally gained a reputation as a hero. Other days, Jantu makes toys and jewelry out of materials she finds around the camp, beautiful things that to Dara, have something magical about them. Jantu, for her part, thinks the toys she makes are nothing special, not even the pair of dolls that, once Jantu has finished constructing them, move in exactly the same rhythm as two women husking rice. After the toy is deliberately destroyed by Chnay, the camp bully, the upset Dara is reassured by the calmer Jantu, who tells her "the fun is in the making". Jantu then quickly fashions a small marble out of clay for Dara, who at first thinks it's nothing special, but after Jantu blows on it and says it's magic, finds that just holding it makes her feel better.

Chapter six: Dara comments in narration that after making the clay marble, Jantu only wanted to create toys and dolls out of clay. She and Dara build a shelter near the stone pillar, where they spend day after day with Dara watching Jantu make her clay dolls. One day Dara comments that she would love things to stay this way forever, the two of them playing together and happy. Jantu comments that everything changes, and adds that no matter how happy they feel, they're not a real family, which is something, she adds, they both long for. Just as Jantu puts the finishing touches on a clay water buffalo, it starts to rain. The sound triggers memories of family in Dara, and seems to be doing the same for Jantu. She reveals the entire collection of clay dolls she's been working on, representing both her and Dara's families. Together, the girls set the two families across a river from each other, and then imagine what would happen if Nea and Sarun got married - the two families of dolls, they imagine, would become one. As they imagine what the home of the now united family would be like, conversation reveals that Jantu's father, like Dara's, was killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Eventually the rain stops and the game comes to an end. As Jantu and Dara put the doll farm and family to bed, Jantu softly sings a lullaby to a tune that Dara recognizes as having been sung by her mother and which she asks Jantu to teach her.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

As the relationship between Jantu and Dara deepens, noteworthy elements include the explanation of war (which portrays its participants as petty and foolish, a manifestation of the novel's thematically central commentary on the negative aspects of war) and the story of the cowardly man (which, in spite of its comic sensibility, foreshadows the emergence of Dara's own courage). Then there is the creation of the first marble, which foreshadows the creation of the second and more significant marble, as well as of the third marble, the one that Dara herself creates during her confrontation with Sarun late



in the novel. Another important element is the introduction of Chnay, who in this section can be seen as reflecting and/or manifesting the carelessly destructive forces unleashed by war, but who, later in the narrative, can also be seen manifesting the alternative, balancing force - the camaraderie and closeness that can emerge as the result of shared suffering caused by that destruction. Meanwhile, the doll of the women husking rice foreshadows an encounter Dara has, later in the narrative (chapter twelve), with two women performing exactly the same function, with exactly the same repetitiveness and lack of emotion, as the doll.

In chapter six, the narrative continues its thematic contemplation of the nature of family in Jantu's (perhaps surprising) commentary that her and Dara's families are not, after all, the kind of family they each want and need. There is the sense here that Jantu is, on some level, being defensive, keeping herself safe from vulnerability-triggering feelings of closeness and relationship that, moments later in the rainstorm, and later with the construction of the family of clay dolls, both she and Dara are essentially unable to ignore. Ultimately, however, and despite Jantu's apparent resistance, the narrative makes the clear thematic suggestion that the bonds of closeness and trust between the two girls and their families actually define them as family in ways that here they can only play at.

Meanwhile, the reference to the possible marriage of Nea and Sarun foreshadows their actual marriage later in the narrative. Another, even more important, piece of foreshadowing is the lullaby Jantu teaches Dara. This foreshadows the climactic moment in chapter sixteen when Jantu dies as Dara is singing her to sleep with exactly the same lullaby as Dara learns here.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter seven: The relative peace of the camp is disturbed by increasingly loud sounds of shelling and bombs dropping coming from the border, as well as by the frequent visits of soldiers looking for recruits. Eventually, the war comes too close, and everyone in the camp, including Jantu and Dara's families, hurriedly packs what they can and prepares to move on. Dara starts to pack the clay dolls, but Jantu tells her they'll break. Dara says she wants to stay behind with them, but Jantu convinces her to go along. As the families join the lengthening parade of refugees leaving the camp, Dara notices the signs of life and community they're leaving behind, at the same time becoming upset at seeing children who have been abandoned by their parents. At one point, she catches sight of the trucks that brought the lunchtime food deliveries, and has the idea to look inside them to see if any food was left behind. She convinces Jantu to join her, and after telling Mother what they want to do, along with Jantu's baby brother, they leave the parade of refugees and investigate the trucks. Just as they're discovering the trucks are empty, a bomb lands, destroying the trucks and scattering the parade of refugees. Dara's first thought is to find her mother. Jantu is unhurt but her brother is injured. Dara runs off to find help.

Chapter eight: Dara runs into the crowd of refugees, but is soon swept away by its panic. At one point, she knocks over both an elderly woman and a young man, but all three are eventually helped to safety by a worker for the Red Cross. She convinces the worker to come with her to treat Jantu and her brother, who turns out to have a fractured ankle that has to be treated at a hospital in another refugee camp. The frightened Jantu is loaded into the ambulance with him, and Dara tries to go with her, convinced that their families will somehow be able to find them. Jantu, however, convinces her that their families will simply think they're lost, and that she has to reconnect with them by returning to Nong Chan and waiting for them by the stone pillar. As Jantu quickly starts shaping some mud into a ball, Dara protests that she doesn't know how to find her way back to the camp. Jantu then gives her the clay, now shaped into what she tells Dara is a magic marble that will help and guide her. "It will make you strong," Jantu says, "and brave and patient." In the silence following the end of the bombing, Dara notices the sound of the birds and takes leave of Jantu and her brother, the magic marble "firm and smooth" in her hand.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

The events of these two chapters define the turning point in the novel - from relative peace to upheaval, from Dara experiencing a sense of community and family to her experience of separation and enforced independence, and from contentment to fear. Most importantly, it marks the point at which she begins the active process of becoming a leader, rather than a follower. Granted, she is still following Jantu's instructions, and



for several chapters to come is still influenced by the attitudes and needs of others, and granted, she does so with what she believes to be the help of the magic marble, but the events of this chapter send her irrevocably on her own path. In short, this section marks the real beginning of her journey of transformation towards a sense of individuality and self that she never had before, and which the novel thematically suggests is the necessary and right place for her, and indeed anyone, to find courage.

Other important elements of this section include the attempts by the soldiers to recruit Sarun (which foreshadows his eventual recruitment into the army in subsequent chapters) and Jantu's comments about the clay dolls, which function on several levels. First, the comments can be seen as further reflection of her previous comments that, in spite of the happiness and relative security the two families bring to each other's lives, the bonds that they forge are bound to be broken. Again, as previously discussed, this is a somewhat pessimistic counter-suggestion to the novel's overall thematic premise that families formed by such bonds are, in fact, valid and lasting. And again, there is the sense that Jantu, emotionally wounded by the murders of her parents as she must be, is protecting herself from vulnerability and closeness. On another level, her comments can be seen as metaphoric foreshadowing of the family's being "broken" (i.e., separated) by the bombing. On a third level, the comments also foreshadow the actual breaking of the dolls (revealed in the following section) and the later fracturing of the family unit when it looks as though Sarun, absorbed into the military mentality, is unprepared to help the rest of his family achieve their dream of traveling home and returning to their quiet life.

Finally, another important piece of foreshadowing occurs in narration's reference to the lost children, which foreshadows Dara's (and Chnay's) experiences of being lost, experiences that define the context and action of the following section.



Chapters 9, 10 and 11

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Summary

Chapter nine: Dara retraces her footsteps back to the edges of Nong Chan, where she finds a few scattered refugee families settled down for the night. She searches for her own family but finds no sign of them, eventually settling down for the night in the shadow of a gnarled old tree, clasping Jantu's marble for comfort. The next morning, she wakes to find herself alive and safe, and thinks that maybe the marble helped her. She asks an old man for directions and he offers her a bit of food, telling her how to find her way back to where the food truck brought those fondly remembered lunches. From there, Dara thinks, she can find her way back to the pillar. Eventually, she makes her way back to what used to be her family's campsite, and is even more upset to discover not only that there is no sign of them, but the little shelter she and Jantu had built by the pillar and their clay dolls had all been destroyed. She leans against the pillar for support and weeps.

Chapter ten: When she hears a taunting voice, Dara looks up to find Chnay teasing her about caring for the broken clay figures. When she accuses him of breaking them, he tells her it was her brother, who accidentally broke them while he was leaving that morning. It turns out that Sarun and several other young men were convinced to join the army of General Kung Silor, who offered their families a place to live if they joined his counter-Vietnamese army. Chnay points Dara in the direction that her brother and the others went through a nearby forest, and tells her that if she follows the paths, she'll be able to find them by nightfall. After eating the bit of rice he gives her, Dara sets off, but then realizes that no one around her was paying any attention to her or would notice if she disappeared. She turns back and asks Chnay to go with her. He agrees, and together they set off into the forest.

Chapter eleven: Partway into the forest, Dara and Chnay emerge into a clearing, where a squad of Kung Silor's soldiers practices drills and sings the strident national anthem. The uneasy Dara backs away, and Chnay discovers an abandoned shack, where they hide for the night. Before she goes to sleep, Dara clasps the marble and asks for help finding her mother. The next day, Dara and Chnay find the first base camp and circle around it in hopes of finding Dara's family, but have no luck. They spend four days going further and further into the camp, but make no progress. At the end of the fourth day, Dara and Chnay are trying to decide what to do next when Dara smells chicken cooking. She and Chnay make their way past some soldiers by a campfire and steal some of the chicken. The soldiers, including Kung Silor himself, come running and accuse Dara and Chnay of stealing. As she clutches the marble, Dara speaks bluntly to the grudgingly admiring Kung, eventually getting not only the chicken but a job helping in the kitchen. Chnay jokes that she's got spirit, but Dara comments in narration that "it was actually the magic that Jantu had put in the marble".



Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

In this section, Dara takes more and more charge of her own life, thinking that she has the help of the marble (and relying to some degree on the assistance of Chnay) but in reality calling upon her own reserves of courage, confidence, and determination to get what she wants. In this, her actions embody and manifest the narrative's central thematic contention, that courage comes from within. Granted, she's not doing so consciously, her reliance being more on the power of the marble, but as the narrative eventually points out, there is no power in the marble - everything she accomplishes, she accomplishes on her own.

Other important elements in this section include the return of Chnay, whose presence in Dara's life is, on some level, a reiteration of the novel's thematic assertion that family (i.e., sources of support, respect, affection and community) can be found in circumstances other than those defined by biology. In other words, as Dara and Chnay struggle together to achieve the common goals of survival and of finding Dara's family, they form a bond that is a kind of two person family, a bond of trust and mutual need that in some ways, can be seen as defining family in general, or as a concept. This section also sees the return of the pillar, which once again carries with it important symbolic resonances. Finally, there is the brief appearance of Kung Silor and his amused, grudgingly respectful relationship with Dara. This foreshadows the scene later in the narrative (in chapter fourteen) when Dara uses that relationship to bully Sarun into getting the pass she and Nea need to collect Jantu from the hospital where she has been staying with her baby brother.



Chapters 12 and 13

Chapters 12 and 13 Summary

Chapter twelve: During her first day as a kitchen assistant, Dara works extremely hard for the bad tempered cook, waiting for news from Chnay, who eventually shows up, desperate for food. As Dara feeds him with leftovers from the soldiers' dinner, Chnay tells her about the increased numbers of soldiers coming into the camp and how it's getting more difficult to find her family. Over the next few days he keeps turning up to eat, but never brings news. Dara becomes suspicious that he isn't looking at all, but one night he says that he thinks he saw Sarun. All the next day, Dara is distracted from her work by daydreams of reuniting with her family. The angry cook takes her down to a shed where she is set to working with a group of women preparing rice that Dara discovers is actually taken from bags of seed. When she confronts the cook, he tells her that the armies are getting so large that the supplies of grain rice (as opposed to seed rice) are dwindling rapidly, and they have to start using the seed rice. Later that day, Dara catches a glimpse of her brother, doing drills with the other soldiers. She chases after him, even while he seems to be ignoring her, and eventually collides with Mother. As Mother embraces her, Dara comments in narration that she "could feel the hard round lump of the magic marble [between them]."

Chapter thirteen: Around the campfire that night, Dara tells her family (Mother, Sarun, Nea - now Sarun's fiancé - and Grandpa Kem) the story of what happened, saying she survived and that she found them only because of the magic marble. Only Nea seems to think that there was magic involved. Further conversation reveals that Sarun is excited about his new life as a soldier, and that Nea is upset that he is no longer the peace-loving farmer he once was. When Dara says she wants to hurry and rescue Jantu and the baby, Sarun says there's no rush, adding that he has to ask for a special pass from his commander, Kung Silor but can't because he is busy preparing for an important military demonstration.

Later, conversation between Dara and Nea reveals that the monsoon season is approaching, and that the family's rice seed has to get into the ground soon if there is to be a crop. Dara, with the help of the "magic marble", convinces Nea to get the carts, the oxen, the seed and all the other supplies ready for departure as soon as Sarun finishes his demonstration - all without telling him. Nea is surprised and nervous, but ultimately agrees. Over the next few days the two of them, assisted by Mother and Grandpa Kem, make all the arrangements, and Dara makes plans to collect Jantu and the baby and head home in time to plant the rice seed. She thanks the magic marble for helping make it all happen.



Chapters 12 and 13 Analysis

Here again, Dara experiences developments in her character, personality, and situation which she claims are the result of the influence of the marble but which are, in fact, the result of the growth of her own sense of confidence. A good example of this is her confrontation with the cook about the rice seed which she never would have done if the circumstances had arisen at the beginning of the novel and which, it's important to note, she does without giving any credit whatsoever to the marble. Granted, her journey of transformation is not yet complete - she still appears to be relying quite heavily on her faith in the marble, if not the marble itself, to support her in achieving her goals (which now specifically include rescuing Jantu and getting back home). Nevertheless, as the previously mentioned confrontation with the cook suggests, she is on her way. Meanwhile, another important element in the scene between Dara and the cook is the glimpse Dara gets of the two women husking the rice. This is simultaneously an echo of the toy made by Jantu in chapter five. Both these images foreshadow the reference in the Afterword to the adult Dara's being haunted by some of the things she saw during her wartime child - specifically, by the worn, expressionless, almost dead faces of the women seen here.

One final noteworthy element in this section is the narrative's portrayal of the changes in Sarun, whose hardness and capacity for violence can be seen as part of the narrative's contemplation of the dangers and foolishness of war. Specifically, the novel portrays a warm, gentle, nurturing young man as having been transformed by the influences and presence of war into an angry, violent fighting machine.



Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

Chapter fourteen: Dara and Nea tell Sarun that they've been preparing to leave for home. At first, Sarun is angry, and refuses to ask for the necessary travel pass. But when Dara reminds him that she knows Kung Silor personally (as the result of their conversation over the stolen chicken in chapter eleven) and that she will ask for the pass herself, he changes his mind. When he returns with the pass, Nea asks him to go with them to fetch Jantu, but he says he's been offered sentry duty, an important position that he is unwilling to turn down, saying he'll have a chance to actually shoot his gun rather than just parade around with it. The next day, Nea and Dara leave, hurrying through the forest and along the road to Nong Chan, where they are to catch a ride with an ambulance going to the hospital. After an exciting ride in the ambulance, Dara and Nea arrive at the hospital across the border in Thailand where they search for Jantu, passing through wards of children suffering from malnutrition and severe injuries and becoming increasingly upset as they think about how well, by comparison, the soldiers are being treated. Eventually they find Jantu and the baby, whose foot is healing well. Jantu introduces them to Duoic, the now-legless victim of a land mine explosion. After forcing the self-pitying Duoic to get his own water bottle, the suddenly tearful Jantu leaves with Dara, Nea and the baby.

Chapter fifteen: Night begins to fall as Dara, Nea, Jantu and the baby make their way back to the base camp. As Dara talks about wishing Duoic could have come with them, Jantu tells her that Duoic was actually happy she was leaving, "happy to think of [her] going back to a village to ... live out a peaceful normal life". Meanwhile, night is starting to come in, and as the group reaches a fork in the road, Nea and Dara are uncertain about which way to go. Jantu eventually chooses for them, and as Dara clutches the marble for reassurance, they make their way into what seems to be increasingly familiar. Suddenly they're shot at. As they drop to the ground, a soldier calls for them to identify themselves. There is another shot, and a second voice calls to them. Jantu recognizes it as Sarun's and runs forward, but is shot. The soldiers gather round as Dara tries to stop the blood flowing from the wound in Jantu's shoulder, debating whether it's safe to try to get her to a hospital. When they decide it's too dangerous, Dara tries to argue, but Jantu says everything will be all right, and that she'll be all right by morning. Dara agrees, commenting in narration that she was glad that Jantu "closed her eyes then, because otherwise she would have been able to tell that [Dara] was lying to her".

Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

There are several extremely important elements in this section. Some have to do with plot - Sarun's increasing involvement with, and pride in, the military and, perhaps most importantly, the accidental shooting of Jantu. These developments can also be seen as



manifestations of the narrative's thematic consideration of the dangers, corruption and destruction of war. The scenes in the hospital in particular are written in what could be argued is a somewhat heavy handed, lecturing fashion, the author clearly wanting to make her point about the senselessness of children and others who have nothing to do with the war suffering horribly when they have no reason to. In this context, the character of Duoic is also an important element.

Also in this section, what might be described as the balance of power and/or of influence between Dara and Jantu begins to shift, with the latter taking on the situation of being reliant on the former. Throughout the rest of the novel, the reverse was true - Dara was reliant on Jantu. But as the result of her experiences - not of her relationship with the marble but of her increasingly trusting relationship with herself - Dara is finding herself able to assume the position of leader, rather than follower. In other words, she is nearing completion of her journey of transformation, getting more and more in touch with her personal sense of self, of power, and of courage. It's also important to note, however, that Jantu's leadership and decisiveness put the returning "family" on the wrong road to the base camp, a circumstance that might metaphorically be suggesting that Dara was wrong to follow Jantu's impulsive leadership, and that it's ultimately wrong for anyone to follow another too blindly. This might also be the implication of the novel's depiction of Sarun as blindly following the will of Kung Silor.

Finally, there are the sections closing lines, which clearly, vividly, and movingly foreshadows Jantu's death in the following chapter.



Chapters 16 and 17

Chapters 16 and 17 Summary

Chapter sixteen: After Jantu is taken back to the base camp, Mother does what she can to treat her wound, but the bullet remains inside her body and there is little that can help. Jantu is made comfortable, and Dara spends the night with her, begging the magic marble for one more gift. The next morning, Dara tries to convince Jantu that she will get better, but is met with stony resistance. Meanwhile, Sarun prepares to participate in the military demonstration, insisting that Nea and Mother come along. Dara insists upon remaining with Jantu, who has Sarun move her to an outdoor hammock before he goes. Dara and Jantu listen to the sound of the demonstration, and to the political/militaristic speeches coming over the loudspeaker, Jantu commenting bitterly on the foolishness of those fighting the war. Dara tries to convince her that once they get home, everything will be all right, adding that she will need Jantu's help to convince Sarun that it's time to go. Jantu says she won't be able to help any more, and Dara feels a chill of fear, saying she needs the help of a new magic marble and pushing a lump of clay into Jantu's hands in the hope that she'll make her one. The weakening Jantu tells Dara that there was no magic in the other marble - that Dara did what she did because she found the courage in herself, and that she has to do the same when it comes to dealing with Sarun. Jantu then ask for her baby brother to be put into the hammock with her - she wants to sleep with him, and she wants Dara to sing her a song of home. Dara sings her the song Jantu taught her in the early days of their friendship at Nung Chan. As Dara sings, the baby falls asleep, and Jantu seems to be looking through Dara, "at something far away". Even as fear again wells up in her, Dara keeps singing.

Chapter seventeen: Dara is still rocking the hammock when Sarun, Nea, and Mother come home after the demonstration, Sarun speaks excitedly about how it all went. When Dara tells him to be quiet so he doesn't wake the sleepers, Sarun rocks the hammock faster, crying for Jantu and the baby to wake up so they can share his news. The baby wakes and starts crying, but Jantu doesn't. Nea picks up the baby and realizes Jantu is dead. Her cries of grief cause Mother to rush to Jantu's side, and Grandpa Kem to come running. The grieving Nea says she wants to go home and Dara agrees, but Sarun says no, he's going to enlist. Dara hates her brother and wants to curl up and cry like Nea, but then remembers what Jantu told her about being strong. As Dara kneads the clay in her hands, she calmly reminds Sarun of what she and the other non-soldiers have suffered, how they have displayed profound courage, how they're all ready to go home, and how, if Sarun refuses to go, she will go home herself. Much to Sarun's astonishment, Nea, Mother, and Grandpa Kem all side with Dara. When Sarun reminds them that he is the head of the family, Dara quietly tells him that yes, he is, and that they need and want him to come with him. Finally, he takes Nea's hands and agrees to go home. Meanwhile, Dara looks at what she has done with the clay - while she was talking with Sarun, she had shaped it into a perfect marble. "I did it, Jantu", Dara thinks. "I made my own magic marble".



Chapters 16 and 17 Analysis

There are several important elements of this section, most of which relate to one or more of the narrative's three themes. The first, and most important, is Dara's confrontation with Sarun, in which she comes to realize the truth of what she has been told all along - that the courage, strength and decisiveness that she thought came from the marble in fact came from within her. The marble she makes, in that context, can be seen more as a metaphor for that courage, rather than an actual source, Jantu's marbles being exactly the same sort of metaphor. As the result of this confrontation, Dara's journey of transformation is near completion. She is no longer a follower, but a powerful and respected leader, albeit one who still believes that her strength came, at least to some degree, from the marble. It's only in the following, final chapter that the pieces of the puzzle of realization come together, and she fully understands what Jantu has been saying all along about courage coming from within.

Another point to note about Dara's challenge to Sarun is her sharp, angry commentary on what she and the others have suffered as the result of the war, and stand to suffer if Sarun continues to deepen his involvement with that war. This is a manifestation of the novel's thematic focus on the dangers of war, which also manifests in Jantu's angry comments just before her death on the foolishness of the speeches coming over the loudspeaker (and on those who place so much importance on them). In both these circumstances, the voices and sufferings of those caught up in war drown out the voices and braggings of the arrogance and insensitivity of those who fight it and advocate it as the only and necessary way.

Then there is the novel's thematic focus on the value of family. This manifests in several ways - in Jantu's wanting to stay close to her brother as long as she can, the sorrow and support that the members of both families experience at Jantu's death, and the union of both families behind Dara's vision of a quiet farm life back home. Here again, the novel suggests that family is defined not only by ties of genetics and blood, but by ties of shared feelings, goals, and purposes.



Chapter 18, Afterword

Chapter 18, Afterword Summary

Chapter eighteen: The morning the family is to leave, Dara wakes early, filled with excitement. After a hasty breakfast, Sarun leads the family's two ox-carts into the convoy of other refugees heading for home. Just as they're leaving, Chnay turns up with a gift - a wooden cowbell that he carved himself. He says he thought of Jantu while he was doing it, regretting the times he destroyed the things she had made. Dara invites him to come with them, but he says he feels at home where he is, and runs off. As Dara drives the second cart, she holds the two clay marbles in her hand, but as she accidentally lurches into a rut, she drops Jantu's marble into a puddle. She's about to stop the cart and go after it, but Nea convinces her not to, first by saying she'd hold up the entire convoy and second by saying that the marble had no magic - it's all in her. Dara realizes she's right, and then looks at the second marble, the one she had made, realizing the same thing about that marble and then throwing it into the same puddle into which Jantu's marble had one. She flicks the reins and the cart moves forward, carrying Dara and Nea through a beautiful day and a beautiful countryside, the sound of Chnay's cowbell standing out from the sounds of all the cowbells in the convoy.

Afterword - That, Dara comments in narration, was ten years ago. Since then, the family arrived back in Siem Reap and set up homes and productive fields. Sarun and Nea married and had three children. The war continues, and Dara comments in narration that she understands it no better now than she did when she was in the middle of it. She comments that she doesn't think of her experiences in the war very often, but when she does she remembers certain things very clearly - Duoic, the children forgotten by their parents, the women husking the rice. "But of Jantu", she comments, "I only have happy memories", commenting specifically on the dolls Jantu used to make and how she is now able to make good clay dolls herself. She mentions that she now has a husband and daughter, who are always after her to make more dolls, and also that there is one thing she is not going to make her daughter just yet - a clay marble. "When the time comes", she writes, "I want to teach her how to make a magic marble, for herself".

Chapter 18, Afterword Analysis

In this section, in the aftermath of Jantu's death and Dara's successful challenge to Sarun, there is a feeling of hope and optimism - not only in the family, but in the presence and gift of Chnay. There is also the sense that Dara's journey of transformation is fully complete. While her actions in the last chapter clearly triggered the self-affirming realization of her own courage and strength, her actions in chapter eighteen solidify that realization, clearly defining her as having come to both an acceptance and understanding of how she can, should, and from now on will, govern her life and her choices. It is this realization, this belief in herself, her strength and her



courage, that she clearly intends to pass on to her daughter, the marble she refers to actually being as metaphorical in actual nature as the other marbles in the narrative.

Both chapter eighteen and the Afterword, meanwhile, reinforce the narrative's other thematic contentions. The first is that the non-biological ties that bind a family (shared beliefs, values, feelings, experiences, and dreams) can be as important and as sustaining as the biological ones, while the second is that war, corruptible and destructive, is an eternal, haunting force against which a constant struggle to hold onto faith and courage must be maintained. But in the narrative's final moments, in Dara's references to her family and her dreams for her child, the author clearly references the realization she says in the Preface that she had while visiting the refugee camp. This is the idea that non-combatants, non-soldiers who survive the war are the real victors, the real winners - not governments, not generals, not soldiers, but everyday people who manage to forge and maintain everyday bonds of family and friendship in the faces of the physically and spiritually violent forces that seem destined, and determined, to destroy them.



Characters

Dara

Dara is the novel's central character, its protagonist and narrator. As the story begins, she is twelve years old, a young Cambodian girl from a farming village. Her father has died, murdered by Communist soldiers, and she, the rest of the family, and all the people of her village have undergone serious, traumatizing hardships as the result of their country being taken over by the notorious Khmer Rouge. Initially, Dara is more of a follower than a leader, doing almost entirely as she's told - first by her older brother and mother, then by the strong personalities she encounters when her family arrives at the Nung Chan refugee camp, self-assured Nea and outgoing Jantu. Eventually, though, Dara finds her own strength and courage, her own sense of identity. This is partly because of the circumstances she is faced with, many of which boil down to simply struggling to survive in the middle of a war zone. More importantly, however, Dara discovers her capacity for bravery and fortitude as the result of lessons taught her by Jantu, who gives the younger Dara a marble made of clay, which Jantu says has magic powers to help Dara achieve whatever she wants. Over the course of the narrative, Dara relies on the marble and its powers to help her through a series of troubles, but comes to realize, through the teachings/comments of Jantu and others, that the strength to get through those troubles came from inside her, not from the marble. In other words, the presence of the marble in her life is a catalyst for Dara to develop faith in herself and in her own strength, a personal journey of transformation that embodies and manifests the novel's central theme, that courage comes from within.

Sarun

Sarun is Dara's older brother, initially a loving, strong, teasing presence in her life but, as the war progresses, becoming absorbed into the military machine fighting to defend Cambodia from invaders. In short, he becomes proud, violent, and aggressive. As such, he can be seen as a manifestation of one of the novel's secondary themes, the dangers and corruptible powers of war. Eventually, however, Dara convinces him to return to the peaceful life of farm and family.

Mother

Dara's mother is quiet and sensitive, with a strong Buddhist faith, a sometimes misguided sense of pride and dignity, and a sense of loving tenderness towards both her children, but particularly her daughter. She too tends to be a follower rather than a leader, only standing up to her son (i.e., the dominant male) after Dara has the courage to do so first.



Nea

When Dara and her family first arrive at the Nung Chan refugee camp, they find a spot next to another refugee family. Nea is the eldest female in the family, a beautiful young woman in her late teens. Warm, compassionate and gentle, she gently persists in her determination to share what she has with Dara's family in spite of Mother's pride. Throughout the novel, quiet courage is her most evident characteristic, particularly when, in the final chapters, she follows Dara's lead and stands up to Sarun. This is particularly noteworthy, in that by that point, Nea and Sarun have become engaged, and in Cambodian culture at the time, the word of the male head of the family was law. In other words, in standing up to her soon-to-be husband, Nea displays significant courage and independence of thought and attitude.

Jantu

Jantu is Nea's younger cousin, about the same age as Dara. More outspoken and excitable than Dara she is, for the most part, the dominant partner in the friendship, leading the generally more submissive Dara in the quest for food and in the playing of games. She often comes across as being more mature and more sensitive than her years, wiser and more in tune with her spirit and her sense of identity. This last is particularly evident in narrative descriptions of how she looks and how focused she seems while she's creating toys and miniature works of art, although narration also comments that she doesn't see anything particularly special about what she does. The most significant element of Jantu's character, however, and her primary purpose in the narrative, is to teach Dara the value of courage and faith in oneself. She does this partly by example, in that she has an ample supply of self confidence. More importantly, she does this by creating a kind of talisman for Dara in the form of a clay marble, which Jantu tells her has magical powers to help Dara in times of difficulty. Eventually, Jantu tells Dara that the marble in fact has no real powers but that the courage to survive those difficult times actually came from within. In other words, and as discussed above, Jantu's presence in Dara's life, as manifest both in the marble and in their day-to-day dealings, is a catalyst for Dara's growing to maturity, strength, and wisdom.

Grandpa Kem

The elderly Kem is grandfather to both Nea and Jantu. He is not a particularly important character, but his presence in the novel serves several purposes. First, he is a catalyst for the writer to demonstrate how elders are treated with respect in traditional Cambodian culture. Second, he is a (somewhat surprising) example of how even the old and experienced can be changed by a powerful young influence (i.e., Dara, in her courage to face down Sarun). Finally, his glimpsed reactions to the suffering inflicted by war, his pain and resignation, serve as brief but very telling manifestations of the novel's thematic interest in, and commentary on, the trials that war inflicts upon civilians.



Baby

Jantu's primary responsibility in her family is the care of her younger brother. He is with her constantly, she loves him deeply, and at times sacrifices her own well being and/or pleasures so that he will have a better life. In her final moments, as she lies dying, she calls for him to sleep with her, taking comfort from his presence and holding him one last time.

Chnay

Chnay is a teenaged orphan, first encountered by Dara and her family in the Nung Chan refugee camp. Something of a bully, he maliciously destroys several of Jantu's delicate, beautiful toys for no other apparent reason than he simply can. Later in the narrative, he helps Dara survive being lost and alone, the two of them eventually forming a somewhat grudging friendship. As the novel concludes, a more mature Chnay apologizes for the mistakes of his past, and reveals, in a secondary manifestation of the novel's thematic consideration of the nature of family, that he has found a sort of family of his own with a group of other orphans at a military base.

Duoic

When Jantu is in hospital taking care of her baby brother, she makes friends with a boy named Duoic, wounded in a land mine explosion. Her insistence that he find the strength and courage to help himself is a manifestation of the novel's thematic emphasis on the need for courage to come from within. As such, it is also a lesson for Dara, an example of the sort of courage she needs to find in herself, and eventually does.

Kung Silor

Kung is the leader of a faction of the Cambodian army, fighting to free his country from the influence of the invading Vietnamese. When Sarun enlists, Kung is his commanding officer. Kung is also the officer whom Dara impulsively confronts about her need for food and her desire for a job, gaining more respect from him than her ambitious brother ever gets.



Objects/Places

Cambodia

This country in southeast Asia, geographically located between Vietnam and Thailand, was the home of the Khmer Empire for several centuries, became a protectorate of France in the mid 1800s, and stayed that way until the 1950s. During the Vietnam War in the early 1970s, it was bombed and overrun by American and Vietnamese forces, who were then forced out by the Communist Khmer Rouge in the mid 1970s. This period, during the dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge and its ongoing war with Vietnam, is the period in which the novel is set.

The Khmer Rouge

In Cambodia in the mid 1970s, control of the government was seized by a military dictatorship. For half a decade, the Cambodian people suffered under the torturous rules and philosophies imposed by that government, until it was eventually ousted by Vietnamese authorities in the late 1970s.

Thailand, South Vietnam

These two countries border Cambodia, Thailand to the west, South Vietnam to the east. Both countries, historically and in the narrative, engaged in war with the authoritarian Khmer Rouge to try to get them out of power.

Siem Reap

This is the home village of Dara and her family, a small farming community near a lake. At the beginning of the novel, they leave the village because it has been essentially destroyed by both the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese armies. At the end, they return home to restart their lives as far as they can get from the war.

The Silver Buddha

One of the last things that Dara's mother does before the family leaves Siem Reap is dig up a small silver figure of Buddha from beneath a tree, where she had buried it to keep it safe from soldiers. When the family discovers that they are indeed on the right road to the refugee camp, Mother uses the Buddha as a focus for her prayers, inspiring Dara (who, as she says in narration, hadn't prayed for years) to pray as well.



Nong Chan

This is the name of an expansive, crowded refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border, the camp to which Dara and her family move and where they encounter Jantu and her family.

The Stone Pillar

In the middle of a river running through the Nong Chan camp, there is a stone pillar that, according to Jantu, has been estimated by Grandpa Kem to be part of an ancient temple, and about a thousand years. Jantu and Dara make the pillar, and the area around it, the center of their friendship, Dara becoming increasingly aware of the durability and strength it represents.

The Clay Family

As part of their games at the stone pillar, Jantu and Dara fashion a family, complete with pets, farm animals and trees, out of clay, twigs, and bits of fabric. The family represents and embodies their dreams that their two broken families will be united into one through the marriage of Nea and Sarun. The destruction of the clay family in the aftermath of the families' rushed departure from Nong Chan, represents and foreshadows the way the families are separated during that departure.

Jantu's Clay Marbles

Twice in the narrative, Jantu fashions small marbles out of clay and gives them to Dara. Both times, Jantu says the marbles have magic powers. The first marble is little more than a toy and soon disappears. The second marble, however, is made under difficult conditions, and provides comfort and support to Dara when things get even worse. As previously discussed, the marbles are in fact a catalyst for Dara to develop feelings of courage and self confidence.

Dara's Marble

During her confrontation with Sarun following Jantu's death, Dara takes clay taken from the ground by Jantu and shapes it into a marble, the work of her hands triggering clarity of focus in her mind and responsible use of feeling. The creation of this marble, like that of Jantu's marbles, is a catalyst for the release of Dara's courage, and for her realization that such courage comes from within.



The Red Cross

The Red Cross is an apolitical international aid agency, active in times of disaster and war, providing humanitarian aid to the suffering. Members of the Red Cross provide food and medical aid to Dara and Jantu when they becomes separated from their families after the bomb attack that scatters the convoy of refugees leaving Nong Chan.

Kung Silor's Base Camp

This is the community set up by soldiers fighting in the service of Kung Silor. Dara and Jantu's families settle there when Sarun is enlisted, and it is there that Dara, and eventually Jantu, are reunited with them.

Khao I Dang

This is the hospital Jantu and her baby brother are taken to after they are injured in the bomb attack, and where Nea and Dara, after making a difficult journey to bring them back, meet Jantu's fellow patient Duoic.

Chnay's Cowbell

At the end of the novel, as Dara and her new blended family finally depart for home, the once-bullying Chnay presents her with a handmade wooden cowbell that, as he says to her, is a kind of tribute to the creative gifts and spirit of Jantu.



Themes

Courage Comes from Within

This is the novel's primary theme, manifesting in and defining the journey of transformation of its central character and narrator. As previously discussed, protagonist Dara starts her journey, both physical and spiritual, as a follower rather than a leader. She essentially does what she is told to do - first by her brother and mother, then by her friends. She finds a sort of courage and independence with the assistance of Jantu's magic clay marbles, but eventually comes to realize that courage and independence come from inside and that the marble was, in fact, a catalyst for their emergence. In other words, Dara comes to believe in herself, in her own capacity for courage and faith, as the result of first believing in an outside power but then coming to realize that the power, in fact, came from inside, from her own spirit. It might be worth, in this context, pointing out the similarity between Dara's name and the word "dare". In any case, there seems to be a degree of irony here, in that Dara only comes to this realization after being told the truth about what happened by Jantu (i.e., once again being led, rather than independently making the realization on her own). It could be argued, however, that how she comes to the realization is less important than the fact she comes to the realization at all. Meanwhile, although Dara's journey is the primary manifestation of this central theme, other characters also manifest it. This is particularly true of Jantu who, from her first appearance, has about her a powerful air of self-confidence and courage that is, perhaps, an even more vivid example of the value of internal courage than Dara, a courage that manifests most movingly in Jantu's final moments as she faces death with quiet, clear-eyed faith.

The Nature of Family

Several times throughout the novel, Dara refers in narration to her thoughts and/or feelings on the nature of family. Other characters, particularly Jantu and Nea, do so as well. The essential content of these references is that the source of a feeling of family is not limited to biological considerations - that is, to actually being born into a relationship with mother, father, sister, brother, or other relatives. On the contrary - on several occasions, the narrative suggests that the emotions and bonds that define and sustain a family are possible to achieve and/or realize as the result of other things, such as shared circumstances, shared opinions and perspectives, shared responsibilities, shared feelings of affection, trust, and respect.

Both Dara and Jantu regard their biological families as being essentially destroyed, a situation that ultimately leads them, along with what remains of their families, to form a bond that doesn't replace their original families, but comes close to filling the gap of love, safety, and support that the destruction of those original families left behind. That bond is tested by the extremely difficult circumstances both girls face and is strengthened by their survival of those circumstances, and extends to other members of



their respective biological families - at one point, Nea calls Dara her sister. Granted, this may be at least in part because Nea is intending to marry Dara's brother, but there is the sense about the novel that Nea's use of the word has more to do with their present, rather than their future, connection.

It's important to note that the novel does not appear to advocate the maintaining and/or construction of non-biological family bonds over the biological - Dara's relationship with Mother, for example, remains close and important even while Dara's relationship with Jantu deepens. The novel just seems to be making the thematic point that bonds of family form in different ways and for different reasons, but in those ways and for those reasons, they can be just as important.

The Futility and Foolishness of War

In its very premise, portraying the struggles of individuals caught up in the destructive, dangerous circumstances of a war going on around them, the novel is making a thematic statement about the futility, the foolishness, and the selfishness of war. Nowhere is this thematic attitude more vividly expressed than in the almost-last words of Jantu, lying in her hammock as the wound caused by a trigger-happy soldier ends her life and in Dara's words to Sarun in response to his determination to continue fighting. Jantu and Dara, like so many of the nameless, homeless, suffering people around them, see themselves as little more than playthings - as Jantu suggests, pawns in a game they didn't choose to be part of. The validity of this perspective is supported by the novel's many vignettes, or scenes, of the suffering heedlessly caused to those caught up in the rages and frustrations of those fighting the war. The bombing of the food trucks, the children separated from their parents, the needlessly wounded Duoic, the hundreds of people of all ages in the Nung Chan refugee camp - all are testimonials to the novel's thematic contention that war is fought by the few with only lip service paid to the well being of the many. Granted, the novel at times presents other perspectives - the idea that the war is being fought to protect the home country from invasion, that the way of life of the people is being protected. On the whole, however, the narrative's thematic contention seems to be that the cost of such efforts at protection is too high; that such violent efforts at protection of a people may ultimately result in their being no people left to protect.



Style

Point of View

The narrative is written from the first person, past tense point of view - specifically, from the perspective of its twelve year old narrator and protagonist, Cambodian refugee Dara. There is a sense of immediacy and intimacy about the narration, the surges of feeling it portrays coming across very clearly as appropriate for a person of her age. The circumstances of Dara's life and experiences being what they are (i.e., caught up in the middle of a war that she doesn't understand, much less believe in), the sense of connection with her that this narrative perspective allows works well to support and/or illustrate the novel's thematic concern with the suffering caused by war. In other words, the novel's point of view draws the reader effectively into the experience of struggling to survive in unpredictable, dangerous, profoundly frightening circumstances. There are also times when the novel's narrative point of view has the potential to bring the reader deeply into other important experiences, the death of Jantu most notable among them. Here the sense of immediacy and presence in the narrative is particularly compelling, with the evocative narrative bringing the reader next to the hammock with Dara as she gently rocks and sings Jantu into sleep and into death. Granted, there are points when the language of the main body of the story seems somewhat inappropriate, or more highly advanced, that Dara's age would seem logically to allow for. It's important to note, however, that as the Afterword makes clear, the novel is actually being written from the years-later perspective of the adult Dara, portraying her childhood memories with an adult clarity that ultimately enables the reader's emotional empathy with the various feelings evoked by those memories.

Setting

Setting is an extremely important component of this novel. This is true of its setting in time, as well as its setting in place, both of which are noteworthy for essentially the same reasons. The novel is set in Cambodia in the mid-1970s, a time of profound military, economic, and social upheaval. During that time, the people of Cambodia were first subjected to the violent, autocratic control of a communist dictatorship, the Khmer Rouge and later placed in the middle of a war between that dictatorship and forces determined to overthrow it (the Vietnamese army). Both circumstances were particularly hard, to say the very least, upon the ordinary people caught up in them. During the Khmer Rouge dictatorship, for example, the work, the lives, and the overall well being of the people were all essentially plundered, robbed in the name of supporting the power and authority of the State (i.e., the government in power). During the war, both sides saw the people of Cambodia as what is known as "collateral damage", expendable lives that could be sacrificed in the name of the strenuous efforts made by both sides at gaining political and military power and control. In short, Cambodia in the 1970s was a place of profound inhumanity, a circumstance that makes the humanity of the



connections between Dara, Jantu and their families both particularly important and particularly moving.

Language and Meaning

The language of the narrative is, for the most part, used in a way that clearly suggests and/or evokes the nature of its central character, twelve-year-old Dara. Granted, the vocabulary employed seems substantially more advanced than that which would probably be used by such a person (i.e. young, probably quite uneducated) in such a set of circumstances. This is true even when the Afterword establishes the premise that it is, in fact, the adult Dara (probably only slightly more educated) telling the story of her younger self. Ultimately, however, accuracy of vocabulary seems to be less important than accuracy of experience - specifically, the experiences being portrayed and Dara's experience of feeling in response to what she sees, hears, and encounters. Here, the language is quite effective, understated in places and vividly stark in others as the narrative strives to evoke at least some of the horrors (physical, psychological, emotional) triggered by an experience of being caught in a war not of your own making. In other words, the narrative does not seem to have been intended to create a detailed, psychologically perfect portrait of the inner world of a twelve-year-old Cambodian girl caught up in a war. It does seem, on the other hand, to have been intended to evoke, in the reader, at least some sense of what it might have been like to be such a girl, in such a situation. In that, the narrative often succeeds.

Structure

The narrative is structured in a traditionally linear fashion, moving from beginning to end and from event to event, one leading to the other in an organic, logical, natural way. The exception is the novel's first chapter, which places Dara and the other central characters in a situation, then goes into a flashback (i.e., narration of the past) in which the narrative explains how they got into that situation (i.e., provides exposition). After the flashback, the narrative then returns to the present, and the main narrative line of the book resumes. Throughout the remainder of that line, events and character journeys (specifically, the journey of transformation undertaken by Dara, the central character and protagonist) interrelate, with each event triggering a change in character, which in turn triggers new behavior in response to another event, which triggers new changes, and so on and so on, all building to the novel's climax. This is the death of Jantu, the point at which Dara's emotional and psychological journey comes to an end, when she realizes the truth of, and acts upon, Jantu's teaching about courage coming from inside, rather than being bestowed by magic. Dara still, however, has one more aspect of her journey to complete. This takes place in the novel's denouement, or resolution, or falling action, when Dara and her family return home. In short, with its structure of exposition, entwined plot and character journey, climax and denouement, the narrative follows what might best be described as traditional narrative structure, taking the reader through a story charted clearly from its beginning to its end.



Quotes

"The intricacy of the toys was wonderful, but it was nothing compared to the radiance of those children's laughter. I saw these refugees then for what they really were: not the victims of war but its victors. They were the people who had, against all odds, survived, determined to start their lives over again."

Preface, p. ix.

"Had he been killed because he knew how to read and write and had taught the village children their alphabet? Or perhaps because he had gone to catch some snails in the fields for my grandmother to eat because she was sick and dying? I will never know. I knew only that I was not allowed to ask about him, or even cry when I missed him."

Chap. 1, p. 7

"We passed women taking down laundry from lines, children spinning tops near the makeshift shelters, and quiet groups of people sitting around chatting. Why did it look so familiar and yet so unusual? And it suddenly struck me: everyone was part of some family - not the cold-blooded Khmer Rouge version, the state as family, but a living, laughing, loving family."

Chap. 2, p. 13

"If I were a tadpole weaving my way through a big, flooded seedbed, I thought, and each rice seedling were a refugee family, that might be about how big this camp is!"

Chap. 4, p. 32

"Whenever Jantu started making something, she would withdraw into her own private world and ignore everything around her ... she would hunch over her project, her fierce scowl keeping at bay anybody who might come too close or become too noisy."

Chap. 5, p. 39

"'What I have, and what you have,' [Jantu] said, 'are leftovers of families. Like fragments from a broken bowl that nobody wants.'"

Chap. 6, p. 45

"I closed my eyes now and tried to imagine them all sitting a round me: Grandmother stroking me, Father and Sarun whittling on the steps, Mother stoking the embers of the cooking fire. It wasn't just the thick thatched roof that had sheltered me, I realized ... it was the feeling I had had then, of being part of a family as a gently pulsing whole, so natural it was like the breathing of a sleeping baby."

Chap. 6, p. 47

"And so, sitting on the ancient stone beam in the fading light, Jantu taught me the lullaby. I closed my eyes and rocked myself slightly as I sang, and thought of sleeping babies, and full harvests, and a home with a real family."

Chap. 6, p. 53



"In our small make-believe world, at least, life was simple and easy to understand. There were not soldiers and no war, only people like ourselves quietly getting on with their lives. And so, as the soldiers tried to talk my brother into becoming a soldier, I made the clay Sarun doll plow his tiny rice fields."

Chap. 7, p. 55

"Things that can break ... are not worth taking ... It's only what you can bring inside of you that really matters. How do you think I was able to say goodbye to my mother and father ... when they died, I stored it up - everything I remembered about them, loved about them. That's what I bring with me. They're inside me now. Part of me."

Chap. 7, p. 57

"So that was what it meant to be a refugee. We were farmers who had been displaced from our old land and yet prevented from settling on any new land. Would we always be on the move, people who not only didn't have a home but weren't allowed to build a new home anywhere?"

Chap. 7, p. 61

"I felt a certain pride that I had survived the night alone, with only the clay marble for company. Maybe Jantu's magic is working, I thought. Maybe the magic in the marble is making me stronger and more sure of myself."

Chap. 9, p. 74

"The carving on this one stone has survived a thousand years, I told myself. What does it matter that your silly clay dolls didn't make it through the night? I closed my eyes, but the tears trickled out just the same, until my cheeks were cool and slippery against the stone."

Chap. 9, p. 77

"Magic has a way of working for those who believe in it ... maybe it wouldn't have been magic for someone else, but you were brave and patient, Dara, and you believed in the marble, so maybe the magic worked for you."

Chap. 13, p.106

"I thought of the Thai villages we had caught a glimpse of on the road outside Nong Chan. They had probably been there for hundreds of years without once being touched by war. No bombs were ever dropped on their paddy fields. None of their men were ever herded off to work camps. Nobody had ever been taken to the nearby forest in the depth of night and clubbed to death. Nobody had had their legs blown off walking across a field."

Chap. 15, pp. 130-31

"As I talked, I watched her anxiously, and it was as if a mask had descended on her face, making it blank and hard ... I had seen the same mask settle on Duoic's face the day before ... it was the look of someone who wasn't going to try any more."

Chap. 16, p. 138



"They all say the same thing. They seem to think it's a game ... they take sides, they switch sides, they play against each other. Who wins, who loses, whose turn is it to kick next - it's like an elaborate soccer game. Except that they don't use soccer balls. They use us."

Chap. 16, p. 141

"[I]n the sudden silence of my fear, I remembered my father's voice the night he was dragged away to be killed in the forest. I had lain there, I had heard the dread and the fear in his voice - and I had felt the fear lodge in my own heart. Yet he had begged so softly. Was it because he hadn't wanted to wake me up ... and then there was only the silence."

Chap. 16, p. 144

"Even after Jantu's long, slim fingers went limp, I kept on singing. I rocked and I sang, and I sang and I rocked, not daring to stop, for fear of waking the baby, but more than that, deeper than that, for fear of finding out that my friend Jantu would never wake up again."

Chap. 16, pp. 146-47

"I looked into the hammock at her and saw the lump of clay still cupped in her hand. You have to do it yourself, she had said; you have to make your own magic marble ... hesitantly, I started to roll it between my hands. And as I rolled it, I began to feel calmer."

Chap. 17, p. 150

"Don't tell me I don't understand war ... I understand that Jantu will never wake up in that hammock again. I understand that Father will never come home to us again. I understand that war kills people who aren't even fighting in it."

Chap. 17, p. 151



Topics for Discussion

Do you have people in your life (friends, co-workers) outside your biological family that you would consider family? What about those relationships makes them feel like family? Do you feel differently about your biological family than you do about your chosen family? What do you find in your experience of one that you don't have in the other?

Discuss the symbolic value of the stone pillar. Consider its age and Grandfather Kem's belief that it originally came from an ancient temple - to coin a phrase, a "pillar of faith". How do you think its durability, for example, relates to the narrative's thematic and narrative elements - for example, the friendship between Dara and Jantu?

Have you ever had an object - a toy, a souvenir, anything - that triggered courage, confidence, and strength? How did that object come to have meaning for you? In what situations did it help you? What, if anything, did your relationship with that object teach you about yourself?

The character of Duoic is an important element in the novel's consideration of two of its main themes. Discuss how his situation, his actions, and his reactions manifest and/or are defined by the themes relating to the dangers of war and to the need for courage to come from oneself.

Discuss the value and concept of war. When is it justified, if ever? What responsibility do governments and the military have in considering what happens to the citizens of their country? Is war as important as Sarun says it is in defining national identity and security?

What is the metaphoric value of the wooden cowbell Chnay presents to Dara at the end of the novel? In your considerations, relate this cowbell to the one heard by Dara at the beginning of the novel. What do the two cowbells have in common? How do their commonalities relate to the experiences of Dara and her family?

Consider and discuss a situation where you, like Dara, had to stand up for what you believed in. What were the circumstances? What were you fighting for? What made you certain that what you were fighting for was right, and true for yourself? Where did you find the courage to stand up for what you believed?