

# **Inside Out and Back Again Study Guide**

**Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhha Lai**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Inside Out and Back Again Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Section 1, pgs. 1 – 54.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Section 2, pgs. 55 – 112.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Section 3, pgs. 113 – 168.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Section 4, pgs. 169 – 216.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Section 5, pgs. 217 – 260.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>



# Plot Summary

“Inside Out & Back Again” is a semi-autobiographical children's middle grade novel by Thanhha Lai which recounts the fleeing of Vietnam by Ha and her family and their immigration to the United States of America. In 1975, ten year-old Ha lives in Saigon, South Vietnam, with her mother and three older brothers, Vu, Khoi, and Quang. They are a close-knit, traditional family, though their father was captured by the Communists on a naval mission nine years before.

The family endures high prices and scarcities in food as North Vietnamese forces move toward Saigon. Uncle Son, a friend of Ha's father, encourages Ha and her family to be ready to flee Saigon at a moment's notice. Ha's family is divided on whether to leave or stay, but in the end, Ha's mother convinces everyone to leave. Tens of thousands of people do the same. Ha and her family make it out of Saigon by boat just as the city falls to the Communists.

Ha and her family are on board the ship for weeks, sailing toward Thailand. Food and water are scarce, but the people on board are cautiously hopeful about what could happen next. Ha and her siblings use the time to practice their English. Salvation appears in the form of an American naval vessel, which distributes food and supplies, and tows the boat to Guam where a refugee camp has been established.

There, Ha learns about how most of the refugees are either going to France, Canada, or the United States. Ha and her family decide to travel to the United States. They are sponsored by a Southern farmer named Mr. Johnston, who helps the family to settle in Alabama and looks after their interests. Ha's mother insists they assimilate into American society as quickly as possible, shutting out their old lives entirely. But this is difficult for Ha to do, for she misses Vietnam greatly.

In Alabama, Ha and her family receive mixed reactions from their new neighbors. While many, like Mr. Johnston, Miss Washington (a neighbor), and Miss Scott (Ha's teacher) are friendly and welcoming, others are not. At school, Ha is bullied by a pink-colored boy who takes every chance he can to make fun of Ha. Ha is humiliated, but comforted and watched out for by not only Mr. Johnston, Miss Washington, and Miss Scott, but by her brothers as well. Vu teaches her self-defense, and Ha's mother tells her that there is always a time when Ha must defend herself. When the pink-colored boy attempts to become physical with Ha, she uses self-defense against him, frightening him into no longer bullying her.

Slowly, all of the neighbors come around and warm up to Ha and her family, and the family begins to feel welcome at last. As the Vietnamese New Year comes on, a letter is received from Ha's father's brother, who has no news about Ha's father to report. When Ha's mother loses her amethyst ring--a gift from her husband years before--she takes it as a sign that he is dead. As a result, the family holds a mourning ceremony for him and vows to move on in America while remembering the past.

NOTE: Due to the structure of this novel, this study guide has been arranged into sections according to page numbers. Quotes are therein referenced by section numbers in this guide, by page number, and by paragraph number. This study guide specifically refers to the 2011 Harper Paperback edition of "Inside Out & Back Again."



## Section 1, pgs. 1 – 54

### Summary

Part I: Saigon – It is the Vietnamese New Year, February 11, Tet 1975, the Year of the Cat. Ten year-old Saigon-native Ha (named “Kim-Ha” after the Golden River, Kim Ha) and her family, celebrate. Ha’s mother explains how each person behaves this day will foretell the entire year. Ha is jealous since only men can rise first in order to bring luck to the house. Ha secretly wakes early just to tap her foot before anyone else is up.

The family does its best to be joyful, despite soldiers in the streets and the war growing closer. The I Ching Teller of Fate tells Ha’s mother it will be a bad year for them. Since the Americans have left South Vietnam, the Communists have gotten closer and closer to Saigon. Ha discusses all of this in Miss Xinh’s class at school during the day. Sounds of war can be heard at night. There is outrage when a South Vietnamese pilot betrays the country and bombs the presidential palace downtown.

Ha has three older brothers: Vu, Khoi, and Quang. Quang is the oldest at twenty-one and is studying engineering in college. Vu is a Bruce Lee fanatic. Ha is growing a papaya tree, which is the pride of her young life. It is just beginning to bear fruit. In early March, TiTi, Ha’s best friend, flees Vietnam with her family, leaving Ha a tin of flower seeds both girls intended to plant together. TiTi’s family has money to flee, but Ha’s family does not.

Ha is glad that she and her family cannot leave yet. Ha’s father, remembered as a good man, is also gone. He was taken prisoner while on a mission for the navy on Route 1 an hour south of Saigon nine years ago. Ha’s mother still deeply feels the loss and struggles to support her family as a navy secretary and seamstress of baby clothing. Food is scarce and prices are high. Ha, responsible for shopping at the market, skims away some money to afford fried dough as a treat.

Ha asks to hear about her mother’s past. Her mother is originally from North Vietnam and married Ha’s father at sixteen. When Ho Chi Minh and the Communists came into power and took away the land and rights of those in the north, Ha’s parents moved south for freedom. Ha wishes her father would return home. In the spring, war widows are honored with gifts of food for their sacrifices.

As the Communist forces close in, Ha’s father’s best friend, Uncle Son, discusses evacuation with Ha’s mother. Only navy families can evacuate from the port, and they must be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Ha’s family is split on whether to leave or not. Khoi is most determined to stay, while their mother produces brown bags for fleeing. Ha’s family pretends the distant sounds of war are the sounds of monsoons, instead, in order to keep sane.



## Analysis

“Inside Out & Back Again” is a semi-autobiographic children's novel by Thanhha Lai, which recounts the fleeing of Vietnam by Ha and her family, and their immigration to the United States of America. In 1975, ten year-old Ha lives in Saigon, South Vietnam, with her mother and three older brothers, Vu, Khoi, and Quang. They are a close-knit, traditional family, and here, the theme of Family immediately becomes significant to the novel. They have survived the previous nine years with only each other and will endeavor to survive whatever comes their way, together.

As a family, they are united not only in their love of one another and their loyalty to one another (for each other is all they truly have), but also by their shared sense of loss relating to their father. Their father has been gone for nine years, and no one knows what has become of him beyond his capture during a mission for the navy. His loss demonstrates just how fragile life is and how important things like family truly are, which is something Ha and her siblings have grown up understanding.

Ha's father's disappearance comes about as a direct result of war, which moves to become an important theme in the novel as well. War negatively affects families in Saigon and across South Vietnam in many ways. The cost of goods and foods skyrockets, and the amount of food and goods available to be purchased dwindles dramatically. At night, the sounds of war travel throughout the city and the surrounding area as North Vietnamese forces close in on Saigon.

It is through Communism that war comes to South Vietnam. Communism is a cruel and evil system where the individual rights of people are stripped away, and freedoms are replaced by an all-powerful state which decides how people live their daily lives. Ha's mother explains that she and Ha's father fled the Communists in North Vietnam, who stole lands and took away the rights of people. After the Americans withdrew from Vietnam following a peace accord meant to preserve South Vietnam, the Communist-led North Vietnamese army cruelly invaded South Vietnam, launching a renewed war now impacting Ha and her family.

The reader should also note in this section of the novel a number of important cultural attributes and mores of Ha and her family. They are indeed a very traditional Vietnamese family, celebrating Tet, and adhering to customs such as men having to walk around the house first to bring good luck in the New Year. This also includes visiting a fortune teller who will predict the coming year for the family. The reader should also note that many Vietnamese, including Ha's mother, take the advice of fortune tellers quite seriously. It is no accidental or cultural aside that the fortune teller is included in this section of the novel. The fortune teller's warning that things will be very bad for Ha and her family in the coming year should not be taken lightly. Instead, the fortune serves as an ill-omen for even worse things to come.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Ha's family value their togetherness and their sense of family so much? Why does Ha herself value family so much?

## Discussion Question 2

What effects does the war have on Ha and her family's daily lives? How do they cope with the effects of war?

## Discussion Question 3

When Uncle Son says Ha's family should be prepared to leave at a moment's notice, opinion among her family members is divided. What is the reaction of each of the family members? Why? Given a choice to leave or stay, what would you choose? Why?

## Vocabulary

glutinous, embroider, calculate, justify, flaunts, conviction, tolerable, migration, gaunt



## Section 2, pgs. 55 – 112

### Summary

Part I: Saigon (continued) – Ha's family puts essential possessions into their brown sacks, such as clothing. Ha includes her doll, scarred by rat bites. The family burns everything else so that if their father comes back when they are gone, he will not be hurt by evidence of the life he left behind. Ha's papaya tree is also cut down. Word of the navy ships planning to abandon the country with families has leaked out, and the port is chaotic with people seeking to flee the Communists. The ships are crowded, and Saigon itself comes under attack from the Communists. As Ha's ship leaves port, word comes that Saigon has fallen. It is April 30.

Part II: At Sea – Food and water is scarce on board the ship. Uncle Son and his family, and Ha's family, stay together. The ship heads toward Thailand. To pass time, Ha and her siblings commit to chores and things like English lessons. Quang quietly explains he feels ashamed at having abandoned his country and having to start from the bottom in another country. On May 14, word comes that South Vietnam no longer exists. The danger is not over yet. The Communists are hunting down people trying to escape.

Salvation soon comes in the form of an American Navy ship, which distributes food and supplies and tows the Vietnamese ship to a port in Guam on May 28. There, refugee camps have been set up. English lessons and medical care are provided, along with Disney cartoons and Clint Eastwood cowboy films. Mother considers selling her purple amethyst ring--a gift from her husband from the time he trained in America for the navy--for clothing, but Quang opposes this. From Guam, the refugees decide where to go. Uncle Son and his family will be moving to Canada. Many others choose France. Ha's mother chooses America for its chances and opportunities, especially in education. The family lists their religion as Christianity to make it more likely for a sponsor to bring them to America. An overweight American cowboy from Alabama does just that.

### Analysis

As this section of the novel unfolds, war returns front and center to the plot. The Communist onslaught is unstoppable, and Ha and her family decide that leaving is now the only option. Saigon itself is being bombed and battled over, with countless innocent people dying as a result. South Vietnam itself ultimately crumbles. The reader recognizes that Son's insistence, and Mother's decision to leave, are for the best. This is especially true once word comes that the Communists are brutally hunting down people who are trying to leave South Vietnam.

The treatment of South Vietnamese citizens by the Communist troops of North Vietnam once again brings to light the barbarity and evil of Communism. The rights of South Vietnamese people are utterly denied as they are hunted like animals while trying to





escape to freedom. The North Vietnamese show no compunction in bombing a city of civilians. Communism is a system which denies people their basic humanity, and this is clearly seen in the fall of Saigon.

However, hope soon appears in the form of an American naval vessel, which brings the boat Ha and her family are sailing on to a port in Guam. In Guam, a refugee camp has been established for Vietnamese refugees. Here, the cultural meeting of East and West can be seen in many ways. The American-run camp is a clear example of a Western power assisting the refugees of a fallen Eastern nation. At the camp, they teach English and show Western movies and television shows. Most people appreciate these things. Nearly all the people decide they will resettle somewhere in the West, whether in France, Canada, or America. Ha's family decides on America.

Despite Ha and her family as well as countless others looking forward to a new life in the West, they cannot help but look with sadness upon the past. Quang, for example, feels ashamed at having abandoned his home country in its hour of need. He also feels miserable that he will have to start from the very bottom and work his way up in a new country. However, Ha's mother knows that America will offer great chances and opportunities that are not available anywhere else in the world.

The reader should also note in this section of the novel how the war is still affecting Ha and her family, even though they are removed from it directly. Quang is right when he says that he and his family will have to begin again in a new country: something necessitated by war and by the unrelenting drive of Communism.

It is not something that Mother worries about too much, however. Her concerns are more immediate, which include better clothing for her family. She even considers selling her prized amethyst ring, an American gift from her husband when he studied in America years before. Quang, however, opposes this idea. He knows that the ring is a symbol of the past, a symbol of the family, and a symbol of his father. Some things, the reader gleans, should not be parted with no matter the price.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways are Vietnamese refugees exposed to Western culture in Guam? How do they respond to these cultural differences? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Quang feel ashamed at having fled Vietnam? Do you believe he is right or wrong in feeling this way? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

Although Ha and her family are no longer in direct danger from the war in Guam, they are still affected by it. How? Why?

## Vocabulary

abandon, raging, lingers, idle, putrid, fermented, tangible, remnant



## Section 3, pgs. 113 – 168

### Summary

Part III: Alabama – Ha and her family move to Alabama where the cowboy, Mr. Johnston, welcomes them happily. His wife is not as welcoming. Ha's mother tells her children to forget their old life, and focus on the future in America, including mastering English. The family finds it difficult to adjust to American food. Their experience with Kentucky Fried Chicken is unpleasant, since they are used to fresh-killed chickens from their backyard.

The family later moves into a house on Princess Ann Road at the expense of the American government, which Quang attributes to guilt over losing the war. Ha's mother tells him that people living on others' goodwill cannot have such opinions. At the new house, the family marvels at things like the gas stove and the shower. Ha's mother also writes to her husband's brother in North Vietnam to see if he has heard anything about Ha's father.

As August ends, the Mr. Johnston brings Ha to register for school. Ha is disappointed that Mr. Johnston doesn't have a horse on his farm. Ha's mother begins working at a factory, while Quang begins repairing cars. Ha and her other siblings will attend school. At school, Ha introduces herself to her teacher, Miss Scott, who thinks Ha is laughing when she says her name.

Ha is interested to see white and black children at the school, all of whom eat lunch separately. Ha eats alone, unsure where to sit. She is later made fun of for the way she looks by a pink boy with white hair, and everyone else laughs. He and two friends follow her home, continuing to make fun of her. Vu decides to teach his younger sister how to defend herself. He tells her to call him "Vu Lee."

The family's home becomes the target of racially-motivated crimes, such as eggs thrown at the door and a brick thrown through the window. Mr. Johnston has had enough of it, and brings the family around to meet the neighbors. Most shut their doors. One who does not is Miss Washington, a widow and retired teacher. She starts to tutor Ha in English. Ha now comes to realize why many of the other kids bully her. For example, they assume she eats dogs, so they bark at her. She wishes she could go back to not understanding English as well as she does now.

### Analysis

The theme of Family reemerges strongly as the novel continues. Ha and her entire family move as one unit from Guam to the United States of America. They settle in Alabama together, and Ha's mother strongly advises her children to forget the past and focus on the future. Here, the cultural differences between the United States and Vietnam can be seen in some regard. While Mother is certainly advocating assimilation



into American society, she is also reminding her children they must let go of the pain of the past or they will never move on. They have a new home now and will have better lives in freedom.

Other cultural differences appear quite quickly. Mr. Johnston does his best to introduce Ha and her family to American culture, society, and customs, but these don't always go over so well. For example, Ha and her family cannot quite stomach Kentucky Fried Chicken, preferring instead freshly-killed chicken in the backyard like they used to have. However, other differences between the United States and Vietnam are immediately embraced by the family, such as having an indoor stove and a shower with hot water.

Interestingly enough, the reader should note some prescient comments made by Quang. The American government is providing for Ha and her family for a limited time, allowing them to get on their feet and become independent and successful Americans. Ha's mother is delighted with the temporary assistance, but Quang believes it is done merely out of guilt for the Americans not having done more to stop South Vietnam from falling. The lingering effects of war can be seen here in their different reactions.

Through it all, the family remains committed to one another. Mother takes on work in a sewing factory, while Quang takes on work as a mechanic. Both become the principal providers for the family so that their siblings may all attend school. They take comfort in one another when things get tough, and look out and provide for one another as they can. When Ha is bullied in school, it is Vu who teaches her self-defense.

Ha's bullying also brings to present the theme of Racism in the novel. While many people are happy and welcoming to Ha and her family, such as Miss Washington, many others are not. Among them is the pink-skinned boy, who makes fun of Ha in racially-charged ways, such as squinting his eyes at her. Some of this comes from the clash of Vietnamese culture with American culture. People throw eggs at Ha's family's house, and a brick is thrown through the front window with a racial slur attached. Mr. Johnston is quick to defend the family, to his credit.

And the family itself does not give up on Ha's father. Now in America for a while, Ha's mother writes to her husband's family, seeking any news or information they might have. Even now, nine years later, she refuses to give up. The depth and strength of family is palpable here, and it is clear that Ha and her siblings imbibe this sense of family from their mother.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe Ha's mother refuses to give up in her search for answers about her husband? What does she hope this will accomplish? How do Ha and her siblings feel about this? Why?



## Discussion Question 2

How do Ha and her family adjust to American living in this section of the novel? What do they love? What do they dislike? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Mother insist so strongly that her children forget the past and look to the future? Do you believe she is right in doing so? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

mastery, recoils, spews, political, translating, diacritical, bulkiest, furious



## Section 4, pgs. 169 – 216

### Summary

Part III: Alabama (continued) – Through Mr. Johnston's encouragement, Ha and her family become members of Del Rey Southern Baptist Church. As a result, members of the church community come to warmly embrace Ha and her family. At night, Ha listens to her mother speaking in prayer to Ha's father, hoping he'll show up sooner or later. Mr. Johnston comes around frequently to deliver gifts of food, such as catfish and chocolate.

Miss Scott comes to learn that Ha has been eating lunch in the bathroom to avoid having to deal with bullying. Miss Scott says she'll pack Ha a lunch from now on and assures Ha that things will get better. Ha does not believe Miss Scott, but at least feels that someone cares. Miss Scott follows through on her word: she brings a good lunch for Ha, and makes sure Ha has two new friends, Pam and Steven.

In class, the pink boy glares at Ha for being able to solve a math problem that he cannot. On Halloween when everyone dresses up except Ha, the pink boy says Ha should be a pancake because she has a face as flat as a pancake. At home, Mother chants and strokes Ha's hair to make her feel better. At school, some black girls braid Ha's hair, but when she takes out the braid clips to sleep, the girls are angry the next day. Vu begins delivering newspapers, flipping burgers, and teaching martial arts. This attracts the other kids in the neighborhood, and slowly the other people warm up to Ha's family. At school, Miss Scott delivers a lesson to the class on what has happened to Ha's homeland.

Ha learns that Miss Washington's son died fighting in Vietnam. She tells Miss Washington about the pancake-face comment, which in turn is related to Mr. Johnston. Mr. Johnston brings Ha and her family to the school to seek an apology from the pink boy. This only angers the pink boy, who continues to make fun of Ha. She runs home, and screams that she hates everyone. Miss Washington comforts Ha.

Quang returns home later, explaining he has successfully repaired a car no one else could and so will now be working exclusively on engines. Ha sits down and has a long talk with her mother about everything bothering her, from being made fun of to sneaking money to buying fried dough to tapping the floor with her foot. Ha says she hates being told she can't do something because she is a girl. Ha's mother tells her there is a time when everyone must fight back, but preferably it is without violence.

### Analysis

In this section of the novel, Ha and her family, as well as their new friends and neighbors, begin to come to a better cultural understanding of one another. The family's



conversion to Christianity exposes them to an entirely different group of people who warmly embrace the family. Ha herself is not thrilled about the conversion.

Vu's martial arts skills begin to earn him many friends in the neighborhood, and eventually, many of their parents and other neighbors start to accept Vu and his family as a result. Vu goes on to take on quintessential American jobs, such as delivering newspapers and working as a fry cook. Miss Scott, in turn, spreads cultural awareness by educating her class on Vietnam and the recent war.

However, the cultural exchange stops at school and the pink skinned-boy. The pink boy continues to racially harass Ha, cruelly referring to her as a pancake-face at one point. By now, Mr. Johnston has had enough, and again, to his credit, he takes the issue before the school, which in turn forces the pink boy to apologize. However, the apology does not solve the problem, but intensifies it. While speaking with her mother about the issue, Ha learns that there is a time and a place to fight back, but preferably without use of violence if possible.

The theme of war also drifts back into this section of the novel. Beyond Miss Scott teaching her class about Vietnam and the war that has plagued it, the reader learns that Miss Washington has also suffered her own loss as a result of the war. Her son was killed fighting in Vietnam at the very young age of twenty years old. Here, Ha comes to understand that she is not alone in suffering from the war, that many Americans have suffered because of the war, as well. It makes her more grateful for the things she has, though she still terribly misses Vietnam.

Despite the bullying that Ha faces at school, Miss Scott, Miss Washington, Mr. Johnston, and Mother all insist that things will get better sooner or later. Ha is not entirely convinced of this, but is grateful for their compassion and support. Ha, however, sees how things are improving for her brothers, from Vu's popularity to Quang's promotion at work, and she hopes that her own time will soon be coming.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways do Ha and her family begin to assimilate into American culture? In what ways do some of the Americans reach out culturally to Ha and her family? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Loss due to the war in Vietnam is not something Ha alone experiences, but many Americans as well. Which American experiences loss in the novel as a direct result of the Vietnam War? How does Ha handle this?



## Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe that Mr. Johnston is so quick to defend Ha's family? How do Ha and her family feel about Mr. Johnston's kindness? Why?

## Vocabulary

panicked, misery, superstitious, unbearable, preferably





## Section 5, pgs. 217 – 260

### Summary

Part III: Alabama (continued) – At the grocery store, the butcher is annoyed when Ha's mother asks him to grind their pork, but the butcher relents when Ha's mother angrily insists. At school, Ha refuses to be bullied anymore, and calls the pink boy "Doo-doo face" which causes everyone to laugh at him. A rumor then circulates that the pink boy is going to get his older female cousin to beat up Ha. Ultimately it is the pink boy who tries to do so. Ha defends herself with the moves Vu taught her, and by doing so she scares the pink boy. She is then picked up by Vu who is on a motorcycle, and who scares the pink boy off. For Christmas, Mr. Johnston and Miss Washington bring gifts for Ha and her family. Among these are dried papayas, which Ha later wants to throw out because they are not the same as fresh papayas. Ha's mother tells her to be grateful and learn to compromise.

Part IV: From Now On – Ha is embarrassed at not being able to give a Christmas gift to Pam when Pam brings Ha a beautiful new doll. Ha's mother then reveals she has secretly kept the flower seed tin from TiTi, which Ha gives to Pam. A letter arrives from Ha's father's brother, who has not been able to find out anything about Ha's father. The New Year is very difficult on the family as a result. Ha's mother loses her amethyst ring at work. It cannot be found anywhere. Mother takes this as a sign that her husband is truly gone. The family holds a mourning ceremony for him and decides to move on.

Quang returns to college during the evenings to study engineering. Vu decides to study at a cooking school in San Francisco. Khoi will become a vet. Mother hopes Ha will become a lawyer, but Ha doesn't want this for herself. The Vietnamese New Year, Tet, comes on. It is the Year of the Dragon. Mother predicts their new and old lives will intertwine until it doesn't matter which are which. Ha prays that she will learn how to fly in the New Year.

### Analysis

Ha's mother's wisdom that sooner or later one must fight back is applied in force in front of Ha at the grocery store. A butcher, annoyed with Mother's request to grind her pork more than likely due to racial reasons, is put in his place when Mother demands just service. Ha takes courage in her mother's stand, and makes her own stand against the pink boy. When the pink boy attempts to physically beat up Ha, Ha employs the martial arts taught to her by Vu in self-defense, and stuns the pink boy. Vu's arrival on a motorcycle seals the deal, and the pink boy runs away, never to bother Ha again.

The reader should also carefully note how, up until this time, Ha has largely been resisting her mother's advice to assimilate, or at least try to become a part of America. When Miss Washington kindly brings some dried papayas to Ha, Ha later rejects them



because they are not the same. However, Mother tells Ha that Ha must learn to compromise, and to appreciate the gift given to her. Ha takes this lesson to heart at last, and she realizes that it was a kind gesture from Miss Washington. Ha also accepts that dried papayas are better than no papayas at all.

As the novel draws to a close, the theme of family once again emerges strongly. Ha and her family continue to be close with one another –from Vu’s timely motorcycle appearance to Mother’s encouraging of her children to pursue their dreams. By this point, Mr. Johnston and Miss Washington have also become something like extended family, even bringing Christmas gifts for Ha, her siblings, and her mother.

Family can also be seen in one other important place. Ha’s mother has desperately been seeking news of her husband, but the news of no-news arrives by letter. Ha’s mother is unsure whether or not to accept that her husband may be dead. The reader will remember the amethyst ring she had considered selling earlier in the novel, which became a symbolic representation of her husband. When Mother accidentally loses the ring, she takes it as a symbolic sign that her husband, too, is lost, and so the family mourns together.

This coincides with Mother finally acknowledging the past in ways her children can clearly see. Having all long told them to assimilate to American society, she now proposes a compromise of her own, a middle ground where her family Americanizes and looks to the future, while also respecting the past and holding on to parts of their culture. In the end, both must blend together, she explains, until they are one in the same. This in turn gives Ha hope for the future.

## Discussion Question 1

Why has Ha been so resistant to assimilation? What finally changes her mind? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Ha’s mother respond to the butcher at the grocery store? Why? What does this teach Ha? Why is this important?

## Discussion Question 3

At the end of the novel, Ha’s mother concedes the past and the present should intertwine until they are the same. Why is this? Why has she changed her mind about letting go of the past completely?

## Vocabulary

flattened, defeated, compromise, consulted, obvious, fluent



# Characters

## Ha

Kim-Ha, or Ha, is the ten year-old narrator and main character of the novel “Inside Out & Back Again” by Thanhha Lai. Ha is the daughter of Mother and Father, and is the younger sister of Quang, Vu, and Khoi. Ha is named after Vietnam’s Golden River, a place of fond memories for her parents. Ha’s name can be seen as “beautiful life” and “good progress,” a telling name for the good things that Ha will someday do. Ha deeply loves her family and still enjoys their life in Saigon, South Vietnam despite the difficulties they face due to war. Among these is the disappearance of their father nine years before.

When Saigon falls to the Communists, tens of thousands of people flee South Vietnam by boat, including Ha and her family. They are rescued by the American Navy, taken to a refugee camp in Guam, and are then sponsored to immigrate to America by Mr. Johnston. Ha and her family settle in Alabama, and face mixed reactions from locals. Some, like Miss Washington, are very glad to get to know them, while others refuse to do so. At school, Ha finds herself the victim of bullying and racial insults from a pink-skinned boy. Despite this, Mother, Miss Washington, and Ha’s teacher, Miss Scott, tell Ha things will get better.

Ha doesn’t believe things will get better. She misses her old life in Vietnam and has some difficulty accepting the way things have changed. Slowly, she opens up and comes to value her new life. Vu teaches Ha self-defense, who uses it against the pink-skinned boy, ending his bullying. Slowly, the local community warms up to Ha and her family. Ha and her family also come to accept that their father is not just missing, but dead and so hold a mourning ceremony for him. As the novel ends, Ha comes to look forward to her new life in America, and the promise of a better future.

## Mother

Mother is the wife of Father, and the mother of Ha, Quang, Vu, and Khoi. Very traditional, very compassionate, and very rational, Mother worries about the approach of Communist North Vietnamese forces as they close in on Saigon. Mother, a native of North Vietnam, fled for the South with her husband after the Communists took power and took away the rights of the North Vietnamese people. She knows what kind of cruelty comes under Communism, and so has decided that she and her family will flee Saigon. Further convincing her this is the right thing to do is the memory of the disappearance of Father nine years before, while on a mission for the navy. Mother is right to worry about the safety of her children.

Mother ultimately decides to bring the family to America, where the family is sponsored in Alabama by Mr. Johnston. Mother goes to work in a sewing factory. Mother at first



urges her children to cut the past out completely, but later admits the past and the present must be equally as important. She reminds her children that there is a time and a place to fight back, but always preferably without violence if possible. While in America, Mother also endeavors to find out what has become of Father, but there is new news. When she loses her purple amethyst ring--a gift from Father years before-- she accepts this as a sign that he has died. The family thus holds a mourning ceremony for him, and they begin to move on.

## Quang

Quang is twenty-one, and is the eldest of Mother's children. He is the older brother of Ha, Vu, and Khoi. Quang is studying at university in Saigon to become an engineer when the country falls to the Communists. He is ashamed at having to abandon his home country and also ashamed he will have to start all over in another country. He condemns the war altogether, and begins work as a mechanic to help provide for his family. Ultimately, he is promoted to work on engines, and he begins attending night school to complete his engineering degree.

## Vu

Vu is eighteen, and is one of the two middle children of Mother. He is the older brother of Ha, Vu, and Khoi, and the younger brother of Quang. Vu is a martial-arts fanatic, and is a fan of Bruce Lee. In America, Vu takes to teaching his sister self-defense, getting a newspaper route, and going to work as a fry cook, all things which earn the respect of neighbors. Vu also takes to riding a motorcycle. Vu shows up after Ha has defended herself against the pink-skinned boy, scaring the boy out of his mind. Vu ultimately decides to become a chef.

## Khoi

Khoi is fourteen, and is the younger of Mother's two middle children. He is the younger brother of Vu and Quang, and is the older brother of Ha. Khoi is mostly quiet, and very determined to stay in Vietnam even when things get bad. In America, he adjusts to things as best he can and ultimately decides to become a veterinarian.

## Father

Father is the husband of Mother, and is the father of Ha, Quang, Vu, and Khoi. He is mentioned in the novel but never seen, for he has been missing for nine years. An hour outside of Saigon on a mission for the navy, Father was captured and never heard from again. He is remembered most by Mother, who misses him deeply, by the purple amethyst ring she wears (a gift from Father during the time he trained with the American Navy), and in the memories of Ha's older brothers. At the end of the novel, Ha and her family accept that Father is dead and hold a mourning ceremony for him.



## Mr. Johnston

Mr. Johnston is an Alabama farmer who wears a cowboy hat and sponsors Ha and her family to immigrate to the United States. He is overweight, kind, friendly, and acts very warmly toward Ha and her family. He repeatedly intervenes on their behalf to protect them against racism and bullying, and always brings by gifts for the family, such as catfish. He also does his best to help the family orient themselves to American living, but this doesn't always work out, as is true of the Kentucky Fried Chicken incident. Ha and her family are incredibly grateful to Mr. Johnston for his kindness and his friendship.

## Miss Washington

Miss Washington is a neighbor of Ha and Ha's family. A friend of Mr. Johnston, Miss Washington is a widow who has also seen her son die in the Vietnam War. Miss Washington warms up to Ha and her family immediately and helps Ha to practice her English. Miss Washington also becomes a source of moral support, telling Ha that things will get better sooner or later. Miss Washington also lets Mr. Johnston know about the racial bullying plaguing Ha, and this prompts Mr. Johnston to set things right.

## Miss Scott

Miss Scott is Ha's teacher at school. Miss Scott is very kind and very gentle and feels terribly that Ha eats lunch alone. She helps Ha to befriend two other children and begins packing a lunch for Ha each day, which Ha truly appreciates.

## The Pink Boy

The pink boy is a pink-skinned, white-haired boy who is cruel and unkind to Ha throughout the novel. He is a bully, hurling racial and racially-charged insults at Ha, including calling her face as flat as a pancake and squinting his eyes to insult her. When the pink boy tries to beat Ha up, Ha uses self-defense against the boy and knocks him down. When Vu shows up on a motorcycle as the fight ends, the pink boy is terrified, and runs away, never to bother Ha again.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Purple amethyst ring

Mother wears a purple amethyst ring throughout the novel. It was a gift from Father, purchased in the United States during his time doing naval training. It is one of the very few things Mother still has from father. When the situation gets desperate, and Mother knows her children need clothes, she considers selling the ring. Quang, however, opposes this idea. He knows that the ring is a symbol of the past, a symbol of the family, and a symbol of his father. When Mother later loses the ring, she accepts this as a sign that father has died.

## Food

Food is in short supply in Saigon, South Vietnam, during the closing days of the war. Prices for food have skyrocketed, and with much of the country under Communist control, little food is being produced and sent to the city. The lack of food is among the many concerns that Mother faces on a daily basis. Most money the family earns is used for limited amounts of food.

## Fried dough

Ha purchases fried dough while she is sent to the markets to buy food for the family. Ha sneaks a little money out of what her mother gives her to buy the fried dough and comes to deeply regret having done this later on. Her mother forgives her transgression, already aware of what her daughter had been doing.

## Brown sacks

Brown sacks are stitched together by Mother for herself, and each of her four children. These sacks are to be filled with clothing and only their most valuable possessions. They are intended purely for the purposes of evacuating Saigon and fleeing the country when the Communist North Vietnamese forces arrive.

## Doll

Ha considers a doll her most valuable possession. She has had the doll since infancy, and so has a strong emotional attachment to it despite the fact that a rat has gnawed on the doll in a few places. To Ha, this makes the doll even more lovely. Here, the doll becomes symbolic of Ha herself, who has been battered around the edges due to her experiences but is otherwise together.



## Tin of seeds

A tin of seeds is kept by TiTi to be planted by her and by Ha in the spring. When TiTi's family evacuates Vietnam, TiTi gives the tin of seeds to Ha. Ha's mother brings the tin to the United States, and the tin becomes a gift given to Pam by Ha at Christmas.

## Papayas

Papayas are a sweet fruit that are Ha's favorite. She harvests papayas from a tree she is growing, and loves to eat them. They are one of the things she misses most about Vietnam. When Miss Washington learns this, she purchases three packs of dried papayas for Ha, who unhappily accepts them because they are not fresh. This causes Mother to explain to Ha that she must learn to compromise, that not everything will always be the way she wants it to be, and that she should be grateful for having papayas at all.

## Papaya tree

A papaya tree is grown by Ha at the beginning of the novel. Because papayas are her favorite fruit, Ha looks forward to being able to harvest them from a tree she has grown. When Ha and her family must evacuate Saigon, Ha's family decides to destroy the tree rather than letting it fall into the hands of the Communists. Here, the new tree is symbolic of the roots the family has set down, and how they are now being forced out of their home with their life in Vietnam destroyed.

## Gifts

Gifts are given to Ha and her family by Mr. Johnston, Miss Scott, and Miss Washington through the latter half of the novel. These gifts range in size and scope, from catfish to dried papaya to tuition money for night school for Quang. These gifts are symbolic of the generosity of Americans and the kindness and respect that Mr. Johnston, Miss Washington, and Miss Scott show to Ha and her family.

## Kentucky Fried Chicken

Kentucky Fried Chicken is a kind of American fast food that Americans love. In his efforts to help the family adjust to life in America, Mr. Johnston brings Ha and her family a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. In an amusing scene, Ha and her family cannot stomach the crunchy breading or the taste of the chicken, which confuses Mr. Johnston. The family explains to him that they are used to killing chickens fresh in their backyard for use in cooking.





# Settings

## Saigon

Saigon is the capital city of democratic South Vietnam. It is the home of Ha and her family, and is the symbol of resistance for the free people of the South against the oppression and violence of Communist North Vietnam. When the novel begins, the North Vietnamese have invaded South Vietnam and are inching closer and closer to Saigon on a daily basis. The situation in Saigon is desperate as food prices increase dramatically, and the amount of food becomes incredibly scarce. When the North Vietnamese military finally arrives in the city, tens of thousands of residents, including Ha and her family, flee by boat. The Communists brutally hunt down people trying to escape Saigon as they fully seize the city.

## Alabama

Alabama is a southern state in the United States of America. It is a largely rural landscape, and it is the home of Mr. Johnston and his wife. It is also the home of Miss Scott and Miss Washington. Mr. Johnston sponsors Ha and her family to come live in Alabama. It is there that Ha and her family encounter American culture in full, from indoor plumbing and cooking to convenience food like Kentucky Fried Chicken. The family initially has a mixed success settling in, as locals are either very welcoming or shun the family completely. Slowly, over time, everyone warms up to Ha and her family.

## School

School is where Ha attends classes during the day. Ha's teacher is Miss Scott, who takes an active interest in Ha and how she is settling in. It is at school that the pink-skinned boy and many others make fun of Ha in racist ways. School becomes a terrifying and unwelcome thing for Ha. Miss Scott, however, attempts to bridge the cultural divide between the local students and Ha by offering her class lessons on Vietnam and the war there so that the locals will better understand where Ha is coming from physically and emotionally.

## Miss Washington

Miss Washington's house is located next door to the house that Ha and her family rent on Princess Ann Road. It is at Miss Washington's house that Miss Washington tutors Ha in English and where Ha learns that Miss Washington's son was killed in the war defending South Vietnam. This is also where Miss Washington encourages and comforts Ha after being bullied racially at school.



## North Vietnam

North Vietnam is the country directly north of South Vietnam, in which the Communists reign and have taken away the rights of their citizens. Ha's mother and father fled North Vietnam years before for the freedom of the South. During the Vietnam War, the United States sided with the South against the North until a peace accord could be settled. When American troops left, North Vietnam resumed the war and invaded the South, ultimately overrunning and destroying the country.



# Themes and Motifs

## Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Inside Out & Back Again” by Thanhha Lai. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Family can be found consistently throughout the novel, and Family affects the plot of the novel in various ways.

At the beginning of the novel, it is clear to the reader that Ha and her family are very close-knit and have only one another to rely upon. They are daily faced with the effects of war--including food scarcity--and are constantly reminded of the absence of their father, who has been gone for nine years. His absence only means the rest of the family grows closer, grateful that they still have one another.

When North Vietnam invades South Vietnam, and closes in on Saigon, Mother makes a decision that the entire family will leave, though not everyone agrees this is the best option. Nevertheless, the family remains together out of love and loyalty for one another, and with the understanding that they are all in it together.

At the refugee camp, the family continues to stick together and care for one another. Mother, for example, considers selling her purple amethyst ring to have money for the family, but Quang opposes this, saying the symbolic importance of the ring relating to their father is more valuable than new clothing. Mother consents to this point of view, a decision made that will affect the entire family.

In the United States, the family continues to stick close together as the family goes through culture shock and new experiences. Mother takes a job in a factory, and Quang becomes a mechanic in order to support the family financially. Vu teaches Ha self-defense so that she may defend herself, and his Americanization helps to warm up many of the neighbors toward the family.

At the end of the novel, the family comes to accept that Father has died, for they have heard nothing from him, and have no news of him. The family rallies together and holds a mourning ceremony for Father so they can finally move beyond him though they will not forget him. Even in this tragedy, the family's unity is strengthened. By accepting the death of Father, the family recognizes both the past and the present in itself as a family, and this symbolic act also reflects how the family is recognizing both past and present in who they are in their new lives in America.

## War

War is an important theme in the novel “Inside Out & Back Again” by Thanhha Lai. War--sustained combat between two or more participant countries or groups--appears in the



novel in the form of the resuming of the Vietnam War. War, thematically, influences the plot in tremendously negative ways.

When the novel opens, North Vietnamese Communist forces have invaded free, democratic South Vietnam. In the decade before, American forces had come to Vietnam to preserve a free and independent South Vietnam, as they had done in Korea in the 1950s. When the Vietnamese War had been peacefully settled, American troops withdrew, after which North Vietnam resumed hostilities by invading South Vietnam, determined to conquer the country.

Mother explains that she and Father were natives of the North, and lived there happily until Ho Chi Minh and the Communists came to power. They took away the rights, lands, and properties of people, and so Mother and Father went South for freedom. The evil nature of the Communist regime in North Korea is demonstrated by their unwillingness to seek out peace with the South, but rather, to conquer and consume the South.

The war has numerous negative effects. In Saigon, the cost of food is high, and food itself is scarce. People are starving. Many other people have gone missing or have been killed, such as it the case with Ha's own father. Father has been missing for nine years and is believed to be dead at the hands of the Communists.

As the North Vietnamese military drives south toward Saigon, tens of thousands of people flock into the city and head south. As the North Vietnamese army enters Saigon, thousands and thousands of people flee the country and must leave the lives they have lived and loved behind. The Communists hunt down those trying to escape like animals.

Fortunately, the United States Navy rescues and brings to safety thousands of South Vietnamese who have fled by boat, such as Ha's family. These people are brought to refugee camps in places like Guam, where they are allowed to remain until they figure out their next step in life. Ha and her family decide to go to the United States to begin a new life.

Ha is angry with how there are such cultural differences in the United States and wishes she was back in Vietnam at one point. However, Ha soon comes to learn that she is not the only person affected by the war. Ha comes to discover that Miss Washington's own son, at the very young age of twenty, died in the Vietnam War fighting to save the South. This makes Ha reflect on how costly war is for many people, and not just herself.

## Communism

Communism is an important theme in the novel "Inside Out & Back Again" by Thanhha Lai. Communism is a social and economic theory and system of government that evolved from various strains of similar thought, from Socialism to Marxism. In such systems of government theoretically, the State forms an all-powerful entity meant to ensure equality among its people. In reality, Communism is a brutally oppressive and evil system which denies basic human rights to people in order sustain only itself, its



power, and its control. Communism relies on brutality, fear, and force in the novel order to do so. Throughout the novel, Communism and its effects can be seen firsthand.

When the novel begins, South Vietnam is under invasion from Communist North Vietnam. Mother explains to Ha and her other children that she was originally from the North, where she married her husband at the age of sixteen. She explains the North was a wonderful place until Ho Chi Minh and the Communists took power. When they did, they took away the properties, lands, and rights of human beings. As a result, Mother and Father fled to the South.

Communist North Vietnam was always determined to crush and conquer democratic South Vietnam, but the United States intervened in the war on behalf of the South. Following a peace treaty which preserved a free and independent South Vietnam, the United States withdrew its forces. Shortly thereafter, Communist North Vietnam resumed the war, and brutally invaded the South.

When the Communist troops of North Vietnam arrive in Saigon, they make no distinction between soldiers and civilians and proceed to kill and bomb everyone. As a result, tens of thousands of South Vietnamese flee the country in every way possible, including by boat, such as was the case with Ha and her family. As they leave, Vu chops down Ha's papaya tree, thereby preventing it from falling into the hands of the Communists.

Ha and her family later learn that, while things are horrible living under the Communist conquerors, the Communists are treating those they catch trying to escape even worse. They are hunting down refugees like wild animals, indicative of the cruelty and force that Communism must exert to maintain control.

## Culture

Culture is an important theme in the novel "Inside Out & Back Again" by Thanhha Lai. Culture involves the practices, customs, traditions, and social activities (including what is eaten and what language is spoken) of any given country, society, or group of people. In the novel, Vietnamese culture and American culture sometimes clash, sometimes coexist, and sometimes intermix.

Cultural difference and exchange can be seen primarily through the experiences of Ha and her family once they have left Vietnam. At the refugee camps, Ha and her family are exposed to the kindness and generosity of Americans. They are also exposed to American entertainment, such as Disney cartoons and Clint Eastwood films, all of which are a hit with the people at the camps. It is while journeying to, and at the camp, that Ha's mother insists the family learn English. Vietnamese is Ha and her family's first language, so learning a new language is sometimes slow and cumbersome, for Ha especially.

In the United States, Ha and her family have some difficulty adjusting to the way things are done there. For example, Ha is unhappy with dried papayas, when she herself prefers fresh papayas. The family, used to fresh-killed chicken in the backyard, is unable



to stomach Kentucky Fried Chicken. The family must also deal with speaking only English in public places, for no one else speaks Vietnamese. Ha longs to return to Vietnam at one point, but then thinks better of this.

In other places, Ha and her family quickly adjust to American culture. For example, they are thrilled with the American customs of cooking indoors and bathing in showers. Vu happily takes to riding a motorcycle--a very American activity--as well as delivering newspapers and working as a local fry cook. Ha also learns that Americans are very generous and kind people, such as through the numerous gifts the family receives from Mr. Johnston. Ha also learns that Americans, like her own family, must endure terrible sacrifices when wars arise. This is true of Miss Washington, whose son has died in the Vietnam War.

Eventually, there is a cultural exchange by the end of the novel. The neighborhood warms up to Ha and her family. They are fascinated by Vu's martial arts skills, and he shows off for and ultimately trains many people in the neighborhood. Some of Mr. Johnston's gifts reflect his knowledge of Vietnamese culture, such as when he brings Mother a freshly-caught catfish for cooking. Mother herself tells her children that their past, including their culture, is every bit as important as where they live now, and what American culture is like. The new and the old should be blended together, for it makes Ha and her family unique, and whole.

## Racism

Racism is an important theme in the novel "Inside Out & Back Again" by Thanhha Lai. Racism--harboring cruel and biased views, or uttering foul words and committing negative deeds about other people based on their race--is seen and experienced by Ha and her family when they move to Alabama.

When Ha and her family arrive in Alabama, while many of the locals are friendly and welcoming toward them (such as Mr. Johnston and Miss Washington), many others are not friendly at all. Many doors are closed in their faces when Ha attempts to introduce the family around the neighborhood. This is mainly due to the fact that Ha and her family are Vietnamese.

At school, Ha notices how the white and black children sit separately from one another. She also notices how whites and blacks alike shun her for her Asian appearance. Ha immediately becomes the victim of a pink-skinned bully with white hair, who relentlessly mocks and humiliates Ha along racial lines. For example, he refers to her as having the face of a pancake because her face is flatter than his, and he squints his eyes with his fingers while speaking to her, mocking her appearance.

Ha's mother explains to her that there is a time and a place to fight back, however, and always preferably without violence. He witnesses her mother dealing with a racist butcher at the grocery store, who originally does not want to grind Mother's pork. Mother stands up for herself, demands the ground pork, and the butcher relents. At school, Ha

calls the pink boy “doo-doo head”, which causes laughter to shift from being against Ha to against the boy. Ha ultimately has to fight the boy in self-defense, but the fact that she will not stand down from racism anymore is telling.

As the family Americanizes, many of the locals come around, and there is a cultural exchange. For example, the neighbors approve of Vu taking on the very American jobs of newspaper delivery and working as a cook, and also take a fascination in Vu’s mastery of martial arts. Mr. Johnston also defends and protects the family against racism in numerous situations throughout the novel, such as when the pink boy uses the word “pancake” to describe Ha. When the family converts to Christianity, they are introduced to an entirely new group of people, who are nearly all warm and accepting of Ha and her family.

# Styles

## Point of View

Thanhha Lai tells her novel “Inside Out & Back Again” in the first-person present-tense narrative mode, from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist, Ha. This is done for several reasons. First, the novel is semi-autobiographical, so it is only natural that the author should use Ha as a mouthpiece for her own story and experiences. The author is thus speaking through Ha in many places, such as the sorts of bullying experienced by the author, and thus, Ha. The first-person narration also allows the reader an intimate glimpse into Ha's thoughts and emotions. This is especially important given the immense trauma of a ten year-old evacuating her war-torn homeland for an entirely new country and culture. The present-tense aspect of the narration also forbids omniscience, meaning that the reader only ever learns and understands things going on in the novel as Ha learns and understands them. This adds a sense of realism to the novel, as no person is omniscient, and as all people learn and understand things as they experience them.

## Language and Meaning

Thanhha Lai tells her novel “Inside Out & Back Again” in language that is simple and tender, and flecked with Vietnamese phrases and terms. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the novel is aimed at an audience of youths, and so the language used in the novel must reflect the education level of those reading the book. Second, the narrator herself is a ten year-old girl. The language used in the novel reflects the narrator having the education and worldview of a ten year-old, so the language is simple and tender as a result. This adds a level of realism and believability to the novel. Third, the use of Vietnamese terms and phrases found throughout the novel reflects Ha's Vietnamese upbringing and exposes the reader to Vietnamese as a language. For example, Ha's own name--Kim-Ha--is Vietnamese for “Golden River.” In Vietnam, the sound horses make is described as “hee hee” rather than “neigh”. Types of food, such as the rice, pork, mung bean, and banana-leaf delicacy, banh chung, are also mentioned.

The novel is told in free verse, focusing only in important events, places, and situations, and leaving aside any unnecessary detail. The simple and straightforward free verse style of writing also adds a level of realism to the characterization of Ha as a ten year-old girl, reflecting her simple and straightforward way of speaking. The free verse format could also be more appealing to children who would otherwise struggle with a straight prose narrative.

## Structure

Thanhha Lai divides her novel “Inside Out & Back Again” into four major parts, with each part being divided into a series of numerous, brief vignettes told in free poetic verse. Each part represents a major period in the plot of the novel, which come to symbolize the seasons of a year, and the seasons of a life. For example, Part I deals with Ha’s time in Saigon, while Part III deals with the family’s experiences in Alabama. The vignettes themselves are sometimes only a few stanzas long, and in other places, several pages long.





## Quotes

We named you Kim Ha, after the Golden (Kim) River (Ha), where Father and I once strolled in the evenings.

-- Mother (Section 1, Page 6 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Here, Mother explains the importance behind Ha's name. Not only is Ha named after a beautiful place that meant much to her parents, but her name itself has important meaning. Rivers are seen as forces of life and progress, and things that are golden are seen as beautiful and good. As a result, Ha's name can be seen as "beautiful life" and "good progress," a telling name for the good things that Ha will someday do.

People can barely afford food.

-- Mother (Section 1, Page 15 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** As Ha and her family hunker down in Saigon as the war grows closer and closer, food becomes not only scarcer, but its cost skyrockets. It is a hardship brought on by war with bad consequences. As a result, people can barely afford food, they certainly cannot afford to buy the clothing that Ha's mother makes and sells.

One cannot justify war unless each side flaunts its own blind conviction.

-- Quang (Section 1, Page 25 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Speaking of the horrors of war, Ha's older brother explains his opposition to war, taking an ambiguous approach. Both sides, he explains here, are equally to blame, and no side can justify its own participation without relying on blind loyalty to its own beliefs. It is a hypocritical statement, however, for Quang relies on his own blind beliefs in order to make a moral argument against war, period.

If the Communists catch us fleeing, it's a million times worse than staying at home.

-- Ha (Section 2, Page 87 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** The hypocrisy of Quang's antiwar statement (the previous quote) is perceived here. While Quang can argue against war all he wants, it will not erase Communist atrocities or prevent those atrocities from befalling on him and his family. In war, sometimes there is right and there is wrong, and it is clear that the Communists are wrong, hunting down refugees like animals.

At least the moon remains unchanged.

-- Mother (Section 2, Page 89 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** While everything in their lives is changing, Mother takes comfort in the fact that the moon has not changed at all. She believes that her husband, somewhere, is looking on the same moon, and that they have this in common left to share.



People living on others' goodwill cannot afford political opinions.

-- Mother (Section 3, Page 125 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** After Quang criticizes the reasons for American government assistance, Mother tells him to hush up. As a recipient of American kindness and generosity, Quang is shooting himself in the foot by criticizing that help. It is incumbent upon Quang to watch what he says, for the family depends on the assistance to survive in the meantime.

I am, She is, They are, He was, They were, Would be simpler if English and life were logical.

-- Ha (Section 3, Page 135 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Ha has difficulty mastering English, an ongoing process throughout the novel. Here, she relates the complexities of the English language to life in general, which seems illogical. Nothing remains constant, and little is consistent either in the difference between life in American and Vietnam, or life lived in just one place.

All my life I've wondered what it's like to know someone for forever then poof he's gone.

-- Ha (Section 4, Page 175 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Ha begins to understand the depth of her mother's sadness over the absence of her father. Married when they were sixteen, her parents have been together for years, with the last nine years lived apart. Ha wonders how badly this must feel for her mother, but doesn't recognize she can relate in some way. Ha herself has had her entire world changed by the Communists. A lifetime spent in South Vietnam is no more, and it is a chapter of her life she must mourn and ultimately move on from.

I hate being told I can't do something because I'm a girl!

-- Ha (Section 4, Page 214 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Here, Ha exhibits a mild feminist streak, having always been told what she can or cannot do based on her sex. This includes being able to be the first one up to walk around the house on Tet, considered bad luck for the family if done by a girl. Ha reveals a sense of self-worth and independence with this statement, revealing that she is not consigned to what is expected of her in life.

Learn to compromise.

-- Mother (Section 5, Page 233 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Unhappy with dried papayas as a Christmas gift, Ha is ready to throw them out. She has been resisting becoming too enmeshed in American society, and misses deeply things like fresh papayas in Vietnam. However, Mother cautions Ha that she cannot always be so extreme: she must learn to compromise. She must be grateful for a gift at all, even if it is not exactly what she wanted. She must also be grateful that someone has reached out to her culturally, as well as accept that things will not always be exactly the way she wants them to be.



Our lives will twist and twist, intermingling the old and the new until it doesn't matter which is which.

-- Mother (Section 5, Page 257 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Here, Ha's mother, who has previously told her children to shut out the past, compromises herself on the way things are. She predicts that the old ways from Vietnam, and the new ways from America, will ultimately become one in the same in each of them. The past, the present, and the future are just as important as the others, and blended together, they make Ha and her family members who they are. The past and the present will become intermingled to the point that they are both equally influential, loved, and consequential.