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Book Review: Inside Out & Back Again, by Thanhha Lai

Quan Manh Ha

University of Montana, quan.ha@mso.umt.edu

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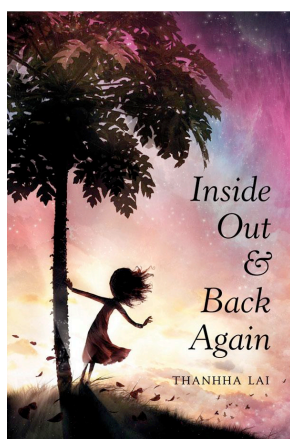
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Reviewed by
Quan Manh Ha
University of Montana



Inside Out & Back Again, by Thanhha Lai, is the first Vietnamese American memoir of childhood written *in free verse*, and it chronicles the narrator's memories of Vietnam prior to the communist takeover in April 1975, and of her family's initial resettlement in Alabama after their escape from Vietnam just before the fall of Saigon. Although the publisher categorizes the book as a novel in verse, *Inside Out & Back Again* in most respects is a memoir in verse, formatted as a journal with entries for specific dates. In the Author's Note to the readers, Lai writes, "Much of what happened to Ha, the main character in *Inside Out & Back Again*, also happened to me," and "So many details in this story were inspired by my own memories" (p. 261). She dedicates her book to "the millions of refugees in the world," hoping that they will "find a home."

This dedication establishes the book's themes of displacement and resettlement in diasporic communities.

Lai divides her book into four parts: Saigon, At Sea, Alabama, and From Now On, respectively. Part I, Saigon, starts with her memories of the 1975 *Tet*—Vietnamese Lunar New Year—the year of the Cat. Her father is a Navy officer in the Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), who has spent a few years training in the United States. He is mentioned in the book, but due to his Navy mission he is never present. The narrator, Ha, lives with her mother and three older brothers: Quang, Vu, and Khoi. The most significant image that she remembers from her childhood is of a papaya tree that she planted in her back garden—an image recurring throughout the narrative. War causes separation, fear, and a feeling of uncertainty, and the family experiences these misfortunes, but intensified by the father's "missing-in-action" status. Dutifully, they pray for his safety. In March of 1975, a month prior to the collapse of South Vietnam, the narrator experienced political turmoil, shortage of food, insecurity, sounds of gunfire and bomb explosions, and confusion, as "American soldiers left [Vietnam]" and the communists approached Saigon (p. 18). On April 8, 1975, her brother Quang runs from school to bring the family the news of his Father's capture by the communists. This horrific revelation is



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followed by a flashback of Lai's parents' arranged marriage years earlier in the North: after their wedding, they moved south, believing that "it would be / easier to breathe / away from Communism" (p. 28); thereafter, in 1954, Vietnam then was divided, and communication between family members in the two parts of the country was forbidden. This turn of events represents her family's first exile. She recalls the moments she accompanied Mother to President Thieu's "ceremony of comfort" to widows of ARVN soldiers, in which he "cries actual tears," but the narrator "know[s] that to mean / fake tears of a crocodile" (pp. 32-36).

Amid the chaos and turbulence of Saigon, Uncle Son—Father's best friend and also a Navy officer—visits the narrator's home and urges her family to flee Vietnam with him on a ship arranged for Navy families. Mother prepares items necessary for her children, and on April 29, they clandestinely board the ship. Part I ends with the official announcement of the fall of Saigon, when the narrator already is at sea.

Part II, *At Sea*, recounts the narrator's memories of the family's escape to Thailand, which is not as perilous as that experienced by thousands of "boat-people" who fled Vietnam on small fishing boats, because her family fortunately had obtained seats on a Navy ship. Nevertheless, they encounter certain hardships: inadequate food rations, cramped space, thirst, and primitive sanitary conditions. On the ship, the narrator observes the apprehensions of other escapees: one woman is desperate because "without a country / she cannot live"; others feel guilt for abandoning their homeland and loved ones (p. 85). Three weeks after their departure, they are rescued by a "gigantic ship / with an American flag," (p. 91), and the narrator, for the first time, sees American men, and she becomes curious about their appearance (most specifically, about their facial and arm hair). The Americans offer the escapees abundant food and water and take them to Guam, where they stay in a refugee camp, study English, and watch American movies. Mother then decides to choose America for their resettlement destination, where her sons "*must first go to college*" (p. 106). The family eventually arrives in Florida and awaits an American sponsor-family. Mother has to write down "Christians" on the application forms in order to attract the attention of potential religious sponsors. A "cowboy-like" car dealer then brings the entire family to his home state, Alabama.

In Part III, *Alabama*, the family begins its arduous process of assimilation into American culture, as it adjusts to life in exile. The family first lives in the sponsor's house. Although the husband is friendly and kind, his wife impresses them as "mean" and unwelcoming (p. 119). Later, the family moves into a two-bedroom apartment, provided by the U.S. government to "ease the guilt / of losing the war" (p. 124). Mother eventually writes a letter to Father's brother in Northern Vietnam, inquiring about her husband. Response does not come immediately. In the meantime, Quang focuses on mastering English and acts as the family's translator. He works as a mechanic, and Mother works at a sewing factory. The other members of the family "must go to school, / repeating the last grade, / left unfinished" (p. 136). Scattered throughout Part III are the narrator's memories of her efforts to learn English and of her confusion over complex English grammatical rules. At school, she feels alienated, and she is teased by her peers because she is the only Asian student, and a Buddhist. Her elementary school experience is quite unpleasant, as she faces bullying classmates and condescending teachers who erroneously equate her faulty English with poor cognitive abilities. At home, her brother Vu teaches her self-defense techniques, after which a subsequent confrontation with a bully named Pink Boy after school is comical. In the neighborhood, the family is befriended by Miss Washington, a widow and retired teacher, who kindly tutors the narrator in English and comforts her whenever necessary. Miss Washington had a son who died in the Vietnam War, and she gives the narrator a book about

Vietnam that her son had sent her. Part III also gives notes to a few incidents in which the family feels embarrassed due to their limited knowledge of U.S. culture and their unfamiliarity with American food. Life in exile is fraught with many false starts and misunderstandings.

In order to help the family gain greater acceptance in the community, the sponsor takes them to the Del Ray Southern Baptist Church, where they are baptized and become Christians. Nevertheless, at home, Mother continues to chant the names of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. The sponsor becomes kinder and more generous after their baptism. The narrator enjoys learning about such American holidays as Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Thus, the process of adjustment and assimilation is a mixture of positive and negative elements.

Part IV, which takes place during Christmas of 1975, opens with a letter that Mother receives from Father's brother, informing her of his death. Respectfully, she sets up a shrine for him and asks all members of the family to pray for his eternal peace. As career paths, Quang wants to become an engineer, Vu a chef, Khoi a vet, and the narrator a poet. *Inside Out & Back Again* concludes with the image of *Tet*, the family's first Lunar New Year celebrated in exile. The image is powerful because it recapitulates the status of the family as Vietnamese Americans: members of an ethnic community that must connect the positive values of two distinct cultures.

Thematically, *Inside Out & Back Again* does not present anything new to the corpus of Vietnamese American literature. The narrator's childhood memories resemble those described in several previous Vietnamese American works, such as Nguyen Qui Duc's *Where the Ashes Are* (1994) and Le Thi Diem Thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003). The themes of loss, separation, nostalgia, homesickness, alienation, invisibility, life in exile, cultural differences, language barriers, and the mother-daughter relationship present in Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again* are common to most Vietnamese American literature. However, her book is innovative in its narrative style and form, as she chronicles her memories in verse, instead of in prose.

The book's tone and point of view are those of an innocent girl who narrates events in simple vocabulary, but readers can appreciate the beauty, charm, and emotion conveyed in such simplicity, as they are enhanced by the poetic mode. The stylistic naiveté evidenced, for example, in her choice of vocabulary is innocently charming: she does not use the word *baptize* to describe the family's baptism, but "Each of my brothers / gets dipped" (p. 171) at the Baptist church; she uses the words "pretend day" to describe Halloween (p. 196). Despite the various adversities and obstacles that the family encounters, the narrator maintains a sense of humor. For instance, not understanding why English has so many /s/ sounds and "squeezing hisses," she observes: "Whoever invented / English / must have loved / snakes" (p. 118), and not comprehending many of the seemingly illogical grammar rules, she notes: "Whoever invented English / should be bitten / by a snake" (p. 128). Lai, in these instances and elsewhere, employs descriptions of sounds and images that evoke strong emotions and memories of the past, a sense of wonder in a new country, and a Vietnamese poetic spirit that adversity challenges but does not subdue. Readers can smell and taste the papaya fruit that she describes, and they can sense the frequent tears trailing down from her Mother's eyes. The author's choice of verse instead of prose permits such poetic enhancement of the narrative, and in this case it is a refreshing and satisfying choice.

Inside Out & Back Again, with its childhood perspective and lyrical language, is accessible for children and young adult readers who want to learn about the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese Americans, and the hardships one faces as the "alienated Other" in U.S. culture.

About the Author



Quan Manh Ha, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Montana. His research interests primarily focus on 20th-century and contemporary American literature, Vietnam War literature, ethnic studies, and literary translation. His publications have appeared in various journals and books, such as *Short Story*, *Ethnic Studies Review*, *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, etc. Currently, he is writing a book on the Vietnamese American short story.



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