

The Great Michigan Read 2009-10

Teacher's Guide



Stealing
BUDDHA'S
Dinner



Michigan Humanities Council
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This guide contains a variety of curriculum suggestions and supplemental resources to assist educators in presenting *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* to their students. Content developed by the Michigan Humanities Council.

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Welcome!

WELCOME TO THE MICHIGAN HUMANITIES COUNCIL'S GREAT MICHIGAN READ!

The Great Michigan Read is a book club for the entire state. With a statewide focus on a single book—*Stealing Buddha's Dinner* by Bich Minh Nguyen—it encourages Michiganians to learn more about their state, their history, and their society.

TELL ME MORE ABOUT STEALING BUDDHA'S DINNER

Stealing Buddha's Dinner is a memoir that chronicles Bich Minh Nguyen's migration from Vietnam in 1975 and her coming of age in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the 1980s. Along the way, she struggles to construct her own cultural identity from a menagerie of uniquely American influences.

It was selected by a group of nearly 50 librarians, teachers, students, professors, authors, and others from all corners of the state.

HOW CAN MY CLASSROOM PARTICIPATE?

Stealing Buddha's Dinner is appropriate for high school students, college students, and—at the teacher's discretion—some middle school students. This teacher's guide provides resources to help educators incorporate the book into their lesson plans; highlighted themes include immigration, cultural understanding, and contemporary history.

The book works well as an anchor text, around which teachers may develop an entire unit. Alternatively, it may serve as a linking text, bolstering an existing lesson plan. Many of its chapters stand alone as essays. The book is appropriate for multiple subjects, including English language arts, social studies, and general humanities courses.

In addition to this teacher's guide, the Michigan Humanities Council provides a variety of free resources for *Great Michigan Read* classrooms:

- welcome video from the author
- reader's guides
- bookmarks
- posters
- *Detroit Free Press* inserts (featuring an introduction from the author, an excerpted chapter from the book, and supplemental resources)
- grants for related programs (speakers, workshops, bulk book purchases, etc.)
- social networking website for discussion groups and other interactive tools

Register your classroom and request materials online at www.michiganhumanities.org or call (517) 372-7770. Check the website's calendar for *Great Michigan Read* exhibits, author appearances, and other events in your community.

High School Teaching Strategies

The following concepts are intended for high school English language arts classrooms but may be adapted for social studies and humanities courses. They were developed in accordance with the latest Michigan Merit Curriculum English language arts high school content expectations (2006). References to Michigan Merit Curriculum framework are **BOLDED** when appropriate.

GRADE-LEVEL APPROPRIATE CONTENT

Stealing Buddha's Dinner was selected as the 2009–10 *Great Michigan Read* by a diverse group of individuals including professional educators and librarians. The book is appropriate for high school students, college students, and some middle school students. It is the responsibility of educators to determine whether the book is suitable for their students in terms of content, reading level, and theme.

Goals

1

Stealing Buddha's Dinner will facilitate students' exploration of the following **DISPOSITIONS**:

- 9TH GRADE
Inter-Relationships and Self-Reliance
- 10TH GRADE
Critical Response and Stance
- 11TH GRADE
Transformational Thinking
- 12TH GRADE
Leadership Qualities

Objectives

Students will utilize *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* to explore the following **FOCUS QUESTIONS**:

2

The text focuses on the following

BIG IDEAS:

- acceptance and belonging
- personal identity
- relationships
- coming of age
- introspection

3

These concepts are manifest in the book's **THEMES:**

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

- We can navigate social constructs of identity by creating our own.
- Literature allows us to convey feelings, thoughts, and emotions that are difficult to confront otherwise.
- Material culture plays an important role in defining our lives.

IMMIGRATION STORIES

- A society's culture is continually evolving and comprised of that of its members, in varying degrees.

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

- Our environment (family, community, etc.) affects how we experience and interpret events.
- Individual lives are profoundly affected by broader historical events and trends.

1

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

- What elements comprise one's identity?
- What does it mean to belong to a family, community, or other group?
- How do material items convey symbolism and meaning beyond their intent?
- How does literature serve to express complex emotions?

2

IMMIGRATION STORIES

- What responsibility do I have to carry on my family's heritage, culture, and religion?
- What happens to different cultures when they come into contact?

3

CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

- What circumstances might influence how individuals interpret the same events differently?
- How do current events affect everyday life?

Activities

READING, LISTENING, VIEWING

SCHOLARS

The Michigan Humanities Council maintains a Directory of Humanities Professionals. These individuals may be helpful when implementing activities related to themes in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*; browse the directory at www.michiganhumanities.org/resources/professionals/.

GRANT SUPPORT

The Council offers grants to support in-class programs, including guest speakers, consultation, book purchases, and more; link to www.michiganhumanities.org/grants/ for more information.

MEMOIRS: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION

Using *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and the essays provided in this teacher's guide, ask students to explore the issue of truth and subjectivity, focusing on the memoir form.

- What is the difference between memoir and autobiography?
- Are the main tenants of the memoir form—detailed observations, reconstructed dialog, use of literary devices (metaphor, allusion, etc.)—inherently problematic? How so?
- Are all memoirs inherently biased? Is this bias intentional? Why might this be so?
- Why might authors write fictional autobiographies or fictional memoirs?

ACTIVITY: Choose an episode from *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* that involves multiple characters. Divide students into small groups, assign a different character to each group, and ask each group to rewrite the episode in memoir form using their character's point of view. Ask each group to present their creation to the class. Compare and contrast each presentation and examine them for bias.

OBJECTIVE: Students understand how circumstances might influence how individuals interpret the same events differently.

INTERPRETING CONTEMPORARY EVENTS

Using *Time* magazine articles from April 14, 1975, to January 5, 1976, (available online; see supplemental resources), compare the journalistic account of Vietnamese refugees with the account Bich Minh Nguyen shares in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*.

- Compare the dictionary definition of “refugee” with the political or legal definition (as delimited by governments). Are they the same? What might explain the differences?
- Do the magazine articles corroborate the basic facts of the refugees' flight, as portrayed in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*?
- How do the journalistic accounts and personal, literary accounts work together to provide a complete picture of the event? Does either tell the full story?

ACTIVITY: Ask students to choose a recent news article that chronicles an event with significant human impact. Ask each student to write a memoir-style account of the event as if they had taken part, taking into consideration the culture, politics, and other circumstances of the participants.

OBJECTIVE: Students understand the influence of current events on everyday life.

ESTABLISHING A VOICE: COMING OF AGE

Using *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, examine the intellectual and emotional development of the author from childhood to adulthood.

- What is the point of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*? Why did the author write it? What is she trying to say?
- Does the author change from the beginning of the book to the end? How so? What does she learn?
- Is there a point in the book where the author makes the leap from child to adult? How does she demonstrate this? Will all readers agree on this?

ACTIVITY: As an entire class, ask students to identify rites of passage in their journey to adulthood; record them on a whiteboard or chalkboard. Ask them to do the same for the author in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and a character from one of the linking texts. Ask the students to compare the lists. Are there similarities? Are there any universal coming of age experiences? Is it possible to recognize coming of age events as they happen, or are they manifest only in retrospect?

OBJECTIVE: Students understand how literature serves to express complex emotions.

MYTHMAKING: THE TRUTH & FICTION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Stealing Buddha's Dinner portrays a version of the “American Dream”: a family of Vietnamese refugees immigrates to America, begins a new life, and attains modest prosperity in their new country.

Using the book, anchor text essays, and linking text poems, explore the truth and fiction surrounding the “American Dream.”

- What is the “American Dream”? Is it the same for everyone? How might one’s background and experience affect their version?
- What is the origin of the “American Dream”? How has it changed over time?
- America is often referred to as a “nation of immigrants.” Is this accurate? Did everyone who immigrated to America actually choose to do so? How is the mythology of the “American Dream” linked to the mythology of America as a “nation of immigrants”?

- Consider versions of the “American Dream” in film, literature, music, and other media. How does this compare with reality?

ACTIVITY: Ask students to write a reflective essay presenting their version of the “American Dream,” and have them consider whether it is a realistic aspiration for all Americans.

OBJECTIVE 1: Students understand what happens when different cultures come into contact.

OBJECTIVE 2: Students understand what it means to belong to a family, community, or other group.

OBJECTIVE 3: Students evaluate their responsibility to carry on their families’ heritage, culture, and religion.

Activities

WRITING, SPEAKING, AND EXPRESSING

BUILDING AN IDENTITY: CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Following the example of Bich Minh Nguyen in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, explore the role of popular culture and consumer goods in constructing one's identity.

- What is popular culture? Is this concept inherently problematic? How so?
- Why does the author see certain foods or brands as “American”? How do these things play a role in establishing her as “American”? What does it mean to be “American”?
- How does the author use food as a literary device to reflect her uneasy navigation between American, Vietnamese, Mexican, and other cultures?
- How do the author's views on consumer goods and popular culture change over time?
- To what extent does American popular culture influence other parts of the world?

ACTIVITY: Ask students to construct an “identity collage” using images found in popular print or online media (including advertising). The

collage should reflect important personal attributes (i.e., personality, politics, ethnicity, gender, etc.). Ask the students to present their collages to the class. After the presentations, offer the following questions for open discussion: Do the collages accurately convey the complex characteristics of each person as an individual? How so? Using existing media, is this truly possible, or do we merely end up “branding” ourselves with consumer goods and popular culture (in effect, providing free advertising)? How might “identity collages” look if they were created by people in other countries? Of differing socio-economic backgrounds?

OBJECTIVE 1: Students understand how material items convey symbolism and meaning.

OBJECTIVE 2: Students understand what elements comprise one's identity.

OBJECTIVE 3: Students understand what it means to belong to a family, community, or other group.

ALTERNATIVE GENRES: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL AS LITERATURE

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the author uses memoir form to depict her emigration from Vietnam and her coming of age in Michigan. In *Persepolis* (a linking text), Marjane Satrapi uses the graphic novel format to share her experiences growing up in Iran during the 1979 revolution. Explore the graphic novel and its strengths and weaknesses as a literary form.

- What techniques do graphic novelists utilize to express complex emotions? Metaphors?
- Does *Persepolis* convey its point with the same intimacy and detail as *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*? In terms of literature, are there elements of graphic novels that are more effective in conveying emotion than written memoirs?
- Is it possible for graphic novels to convey the literary complexity of prose? Is this a fair comparison? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY: Partner with an art class in your school and split the students into small groups containing members of both classes. Ask the students to work together to create a “mini” graphic novel based on an episode in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*.

OBJECTIVE: Students understand how literature serves to express complex emotions.

FINDING & DEVELOPING A VOICE: MEMOIR WRITING

Like many other memoirists, the author of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* presents a story of personal growth and transformation. Explore the memoir form as a means of developing a personal voice for introspection, retrospection, and growth.

- What are the differences between autobiographies, memoirs, and journals?
- Is it possible to write a memoir without living through or taking part in a major historical event? Why or why not?
- Is it important for individuals to document their experiences and feelings, even if they never intend to publish their work? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY: Ask students to choose a significant moment in their lives and write about it as if they were writing a chapter of their own memoir. They should utilize literary techniques appropriate to the form.

OBJECTIVE 1: Students understand how literature serves to express complex emotions.

OBJECTIVE 2: Students understand the influence of current events on everyday life.

IMAGINING LITERATURE: CINEMA & THE WRITTEN WORD

Authors and directors utilize different sets of tools to express their creative vision. Using film, movie directors can show viewers the exact image they wish to portray; authors must rely on the reader's imagination and interpretation to reconstruct their vision. After reading the book and viewing a movie with similar themes (see supplemental resources for examples), explore the link between text and cinema, contrasting cinematic and literary techniques and the limitations of each.

- In what ways are the roles of authors and directors similar?
- Given its visual immediacy, is film a more powerful medium? Why or why not? What techniques do directors utilize to allow (or force) viewers to interpret their film in a certain way?

ACTIVITY: Divide the class into small groups. Ask each group to choose an episode from *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and reinterpret it as a short film, developing a screenplay that reflects their vision. Groups should use standard screenplay format and elements (for screenplay samples, see www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/insight/script_archive.shtml).

OBJECTIVE: Students understand how literature serves to express complex emotions.

Evaluation

After reading and analyzing *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* and its related anchor and linking texts, students should be able to articulate clear, yet nuanced, answers to the following **ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**, which relate to the Michigan Merit Curriculum English language arts **DISPOSITIONS**. Teachers may utilize this rubric when evaluating related assignments involving prose, speech, discussion, drama, poetry, art, and/or other formats.

GRADE 9

INTER-RELATIONSHIPS AND SELF-RELIANCE

- How do I relate to my family, my community, and society?
- What influence do class, religion, language, and culture have on my relationships and decisions?

10

CRITICAL RESPONSE AND STANCE

- What can I do to realize my dreams or visions for the future?
- What role does empathy play in how I treat others?
- What voice do I use to be heard?

11

TRANSFORMATIONAL THINKING

- How do I demonstrate that I am open-minded enough to learn from my experiences?
- How can I invent new opportunities?

12

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

- How do I resolve my responsibilities to myself with those to my family members, my school, my community, my world?
- How can I create the world I want to live in?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bich Minh Nguyen



Bich Minh Nguyen (pronounced *bit min win*) was born in Saigon in 1974. When North Vietnamese forces took over the city in 1975, she and her family fled Vietnam as refugees and eventually resettled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They were part of the first major wave of Vietnamese immigration to the United States.

Bich spent her childhood in Grand Rapids and attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1996 and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in 1998.

Currently, she is an associate professor in the English department at Purdue University. Her first book, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*,

won the PEN/Jerard Fund Award and received critical acclaim for its honest, convincing portrait of a young woman's coming of age in a community whose dominant culture, appearance, and lifestyle had little resemblance to her own.

Her first novel, *Short Girls*, was released in July 2009. Her writings have appeared in *Gourmet*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Dream Me Home Safely: Writers on Growing Up in America*, and *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*. She has co-edited three anthologies.

Bich is married to novelist Porter Shreve and resides in Chicago and West Lafayette, Indiana.

An Interview with the Author

Jan Fedewa: *How old were you when you knew that someday you would pen a book? How long after your decision did you begin to write? Why did you decide to write a memoir?*

Bich Minh Nguyen: Like most writers, I dreamed of writing because I loved reading. I loved going to the library. I loved falling into someone else's imagined world and getting carried forward within his or her language and narrative. At first, wanting to write stemmed from wanting to emulate the writers I admired, such as Louise Fitzhugh (*Harriet the Spy*) and Beverly Cleary (the Ramona Quimby books), and later, Dickens and Austen and Hardy and Steinbeck. Writing also felt like an enormous kind of freedom. In real life, I was so shy I sometimes couldn't answer when someone asked me a question; in the imagined life, I could speak through writing. I could pretend to be not so afraid. I was also intensely interested in language. While I wasn't conscious of it at the time, I'm sure that part of my obsession with reading, writing, spelling, and language was connected to my desire not only to learn English but to master it. It was my way of dealing with my self-consciousness as a "foreigner"—which is what I often felt like even though I was eight months old when my family came to the United States. I could

"de-foreignize" myself through English.

I didn't set out to write a memoir, but the genre insisted on my attention. I found that I could write in the nonfiction form what I could never seem to articulate so well in fiction or poetry: how my family fled Vietnam on April 29, 1975, and how we left my mother behind in our flight; how we settled in, slowly, to life in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It turned out that writing about this in fiction and poetry felt, in a way, like "hiding." I felt like I had to acknowledge the story as the truth—or my truth, the truth as I knew and experienced it. I'm also interested in the shape a memoir can take. It doesn't have to be confessional and full of trauma (a persistent misconception, I think). Rather, it can be a gathering of ideas and personal history, thematically bound—a meditation on memory and metaphor—or what the writer Patricia Hampl calls "the intersection of reflection and narration."

JF: *What author was an inspiration to you and to some degree influenced your writing? Why?*

BMN: I was deeply influenced by the books I read as a kid—everything from Laura Ingalls Wilder to Richard Peck to Jane

Interview conducted by Michigan Humanities Council Executive Director Jan Fedewa, April 2009.

Austen to Thomas Hardy. I especially loved big British novels (still do), even when I didn't fully understand what was going on in them. Then in college I discovered new realms of contemporary literature. I read Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Lorrie Moore, Stuart Dybek, Bharati Mukherjee, Sandra Cisneros, Marilynne Robinson, Li-Young Lee, Louise Erdrich, Louise Gluck. . . . So many of these writers showed me that not only was it possible to write about one's own personal experience, background, and identity, but that one *should* write about these things. So I would say that my literary influences include classic writers as well as contemporary-day writers.

JF: *In reading Stealing Buddha's Dinner, it becomes apparent that you want to achieve an American identity. How successful were you in becoming a "real" American? Why was this important to you as a child growing up? Is it as important as an adult?*

BMN: Well, as a kid I had a completely misguided idea about what it meant to be a "real" American. (In a way, a memoirist is always looking back, at any time period, and wondering: what was I thinking, and why?) Growing up in the '80s, I thought being a "real" American meant being Caucasian, basically, with bonus points if you

could trace your family back to the Mayflower. I wanted to fit in so much with the dominant society that I embraced everything that could be deemed "American," from food to literature to clothes. *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* is filled with images of consumer culture because I truly bought into the consumerism; my subconscious thought was that if I could consume as much Americanness as possible, then I could be a true American. It took me years of schooling, reading, and learning to realize that there is, of course, no one definition of a "real" American—that's one of the great things *about* being American. I am an American, and have always been proud to claim that identity. And I'm glad that my understanding of American identity is now far more informed by complexity, history, and awareness.

JF: *How difficult was it for your father and grandmother to understand the American culture that you embraced?*

BMN: I think it must have been difficult for my father, uncles, and grandmother to watch my siblings and me try to assimilate so much. It must have been painful to see how obviously I tried to shed my Vietnameseness so that I could

become fully "American." Back then, when I was a kid, I thought it was basically either/or: either I could be "American," or I could be "Vietnamese." As a consequence, I have numerous regrets now: I regret not knowing much Vietnamese anymore, and I regret that I didn't participate more in aspects of Vietnamese culture.

At the same time, of course, my father and grandmother and uncles were thrilled to be in the U.S. and very much wanted to be a part of its culture. In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, that joy in and fascination with American culture gets revealed in, for example, my dad's fondness for Burger King, my uncles' obsession with rock music, and my grandmother's addiction to soap operas.

JF: *What role did popular culture play in developing your identity?*

BMN: It's embarrassing to admit, but I really did buy into the pop culture and commercialism of the '80s. All the songs, television shows, and foods in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* are there to show the context in which I sought an identity. They were the identity I wanted. To help remember that, I listened to a lot of '80s music while writing this book. Journey, Styx, Cyndi Lauper, Prince—the songs called forth endless memories, like how I used to wait for the school

bus at the corner of the street and sing pop songs at the top of my lungs. The songs also revealed the ethos of the time. If the music of the '60s and '70s emerged from times of political and economic struggle, the music of the '80s emerged from a time of intense materialism. This resulted in a lot of truly awful songs (many of which I love). But at the same time, I think there's a grappling with identity politics, including sexuality, going on behind some of the materialism. This kind of mixing of messages helped define my '80s experience.

Today, I can still appreciate the good badness of the '80s: Lionel Richie, *Back to the Future*, "The Facts of Life." It was an era of confusion: excess and indulgence and synthesizers, backlit by the Cold War and the rise of multiculturalism. It was a bad-fashion, teased-hair decade in which to grow up, but it did teach me something about irony and complication. The '80s provided a lesson in aesthetics, and in how notions of taste and beauty can be entirely culturally constructed.

JF: *In your book, you often connect cultural differences to food. Do you think this has always been the case or is it more prevalent today among immigrants? Why?*

BMN: I would say that if there's one thing immigrants always retain, it's their food culture. It's a way to keep heritage going, and to provide comfort. Food can also mark the boundary between cultures, creating a dichotomy between what's eaten inside the home (within the "immigrant" culture) and what's eaten outside the home (within the "dominant" culture). Happily, this separation has lessened a great deal over the years. Now just about every town has Thai and Indian restaurants, for example, along with Mexican-American restaurants, Italian-American restaurants, and so on. The landscape of American cuisine seems to me vast, and very much influenced by all of the different immigrant cultures that have shaped it.

JF: *We are very pleased to unveil your work for the 2009–10 Great Michigan Read. What were your thoughts when you realized that your title was chosen?*

BMN: I was surprised, delighted, moved, and so honored. I've always been proud to call myself a Michigander, and all of my schooling took place in this state, in public schools. Michigan is

definitely one of my subjects, and the setting of Michigan finds its way into almost all of my work.

JF: *What are your plans for the future?*

BMN: My first novel, *Short Girls*, will be published this July 2009. It revolves around two sisters: Van, an immigration lawyer who lives in Ann Arbor, and Linny, an aspiring chef who lives in Chicago. The sisters haven't gotten along in years, but they are bound to each other by their demanding, eccentric father, who is a failed inventor of products to improve the lives of short people. Also, Van and Linny are both keeping secrets: Van is hiding the fact that her husband has left her, and Linny is hiding a relationship with a married man. Through these complicated relationships, the novel explores the idea of what it means to be short in a tall world—to be sometimes overlooked, for instance, or simply to feel overlooked. Of course, the sisters have to come to terms with things they cannot change—their face, race, family, and height, and in so doing try to make progress in a world that often feels out of reach.

I'm currently at work on my next book, a novel about Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Breaking Silence

ESSAY BY ANNE-MARIE OOMEN

This essay is a resource for classrooms exploring the personal impact of **CONTEMPORARY HISTORY**, a theme in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The popular conception of combat is often at odds with the actual experiences of veterans. Why might this be the case? Why did the author choose the title, “Breaking Silence,” for this essay?
- How does the author demonstrate the impact of large, historical events—in this case, wars—on her life? Does it matter that she was not a direct participant in the wars? Why or why not?
- What is the purpose of the details (“iambic pentameter,” “pulling pigweed,” “she stirs oatmeal,” etc.) the author incorporates into her essay?

I have a natural inclination, maybe it's a guy thing, to protect. If the specifics of a certain situation are a little on the nitty-gritty side, I just tend to breeze over them and talk about other things in more detail. It's the only thing Julia and I have ever fought about. When I get home . . . that may change.

—SIX FOOT SKINNY, EMAIL

I. First Silence: World War I

In the farmhouse where I grew up, at the oak kitchen table, I am learning to read. My mother is helping, she thinks, by introducing me to family history. I hold a pale letter of strange, tissue paper from the “Great War.” My grandfather Joseph VanAgtmeal, who died just this winter, sent this letter after he enlisted as a soldier and fought in France. On a map Mom shows Meuse-Argonne and Marne, battles where he fought. I am excited, but when I stumble through the words, he sounds like every farmer I know. He writes about weather, food, nice people.

“Why doesn’t he tell about the battles?”

“There are things a soldier cannot say.” At the stove, she stirs oatmeal.

“Like what?” I ask. I hate oatmeal. I want a war story.

“Sometimes soldiers are forbidden

to say because the enemy might find the letters and learn where they are.”

Wow. I’m thrilled.

Then she says, “Or sometimes they don’t want to remember.”

I think of pictures I have seen. “Because people blew up, huh?”

She answers too quickly. “He was a good soldier.” Suddenly, she folds the letter, says, “He didn’t tell me anything else.”

I am left with a thousand questions. Or maybe only one.

I know a soldier who says, “Don’t ask if I shot anybody. Do you really want to know that? What will you do with that information?” Meaning, how will that piece of knowledge affect you and your understanding of the war, of me?

No, I haven’t killed anyone. I feel like that’s always the unasked question, so I usually try to answer it right away. Maybe because that’s the prevailing idea, that soldiers don’t talk about war . . . I do what I can to take that on directly.

—SFS, EMAIL

II. Second Silence: World War II

On a farm we hunt, fish, garden, taking food off the land. My father is a good hunter, but he does not like to clean his kill. He asks my

mother to remove innards and skin to prepare the meat. But she has laundry; she has the garden; finally she says, no, he must do it.

We are in the bean patch, pulling weeds. I ask my mother why he doesn't, and she says in a voice like slow water, "Because of the war."

My father, drafted in 1942, re-enlisted, doing two tours in Africa and Italy. I have seen the maps; his big fingers have pointed to Kasserine Valley and Anzio.

I stop pulling pigweed. "What's that got to do with cleaning his kill?"

She hesitates. "It reminds him of the bodies."

I look at her. She looks at me. We do not speak. We pull the weeds.

My dad tells me Grandpa is hesitant to talk about the war because he feels like he didn't do anything worth talking about. In the face of Band of Brothers, Saving Private Ryan, The War, and the rest, I think he feels guilty he wasn't in direct combat. His brothers were.

—SFS, EMAIL

III. Third Silence: Peacetime Service

In sixth grade I have a crush on a neighbor boy who is funny and "dark-haired handsome." He goes

"into service." There is no war right now but he must help "keep the peace." He is sent overseas and when he comes home on leave, dressed in his dashing uniform, he visits. He sits on our blue brocade davenport but tells no jokes. Says it's boring. Dad sighs, says they should go hunting. That night, they poach a deer. My mother, who is pregnant, hollers about this so they go to the barn and drink beer. I stand under the yard light and watch them from a distance, listening to voices too far away to be understood. When they see my shadow, they go silent. They are soldiers. They close ranks. I am jealous. I want to know.

There are the silences that are silent because words aren't necessary, and the silences because of experience. . . . Now, say something blows up far away, or there's a certain smell in the air. All we have to do is look at each other, or maybe say a word or two, and that's enough.

—SFS, EMAIL

IV. Fourth Silence: Vietnam

My first year at college the draft lottery is instituted. On December 1, 1969, we watch a small TV in one of the student lounges. People in suits pick blue capsules from a tub, call the birthdates, match them with a number. Three acquaintances who have low numbers are drafted. The one who flirted with me in

Shakespeare class, who, with flashing eyes, compliments me on how I read "iambic pentameter," does not come home. Another, who maybe isn't a student but who attends student folk masses, who I teased for singing off key, doesn't return. The silence of their absences, the noise of newsreels piercing our living rooms, makes me bitter. I attend anti-war demonstrations, protests; I write letters. My third friend returns, but this war has become so unpopular, he refuses to speak his experiences because so few support what happened. This time, he is silenced by people like me.

There are some really horrific wounds, and these guys and gals have to pick up the pieces and try to live as civilians again. Some of them make it admirably . . . and some of them end up drinking themselves to death in a dark house because the power got shut off. I worry about guys, especially in this economy, who are seriously disabled by wounds that would have been fatal even ten years ago, who are waiting on VA benefits or unable to hold or find a job, who will just disappear. Completely silent. That's not fair.

—SFS, EMAIL

V. Breaking Silence

Years pass. Like many people, I recognize my wrong-headedness, not in protesting the war, but in

my self-righteousness, treating returning soldiers with a distance they did not deserve, in essence, initiating the silence. I feel ashamed. Is that what soldiers feel when we do not tend their stories, do not recognize their service? My anger drains, replaced by sorrow. I live my life, grateful for the relative peace in my homeland and to the people who keep it.

Then, I am again touched. At a backyard barbecue, I meet a soldier; call him “Six Foot Skinny.” He is dating Julia, a beloved young friend, who whispers that SFS is “someone important” to her. She tells me he joined the Reserves shortly before September 11 because his dad told him if he enlisted, he would pay to fix his old car. He’s been in Iraq for one tour already. In that picnic moment of summer light and burned bratwursts, I watch SFS and Julia. They are beautiful, in love. I see dreams in their faces. But they make no plans, waiting for him to be discharged. Then, news comes. He will deploy a second time to Iraq. I think of them holding hands, then not. I hear the old silence. My bitterness rises.

But this soldier is different. SFS writes, blogs, emails, and teaches us how to know him. Until now. His blogs have stopped. He is there but quiet. I am afraid of the silence. And because I care for him and adore Julia, I decide to ask. I force

myself to find a way not to silence this thing we call war. I sit at the computer and try to break silence. Is it like breaking down walls or like breaking bread? I start. I ask about sounds. He likes this question.

Diesel engines, foul language, generators, yelling in general, bad music, snoring, farts, helicopters, Arabic, the sound of mortars being launched. Crunching gravel. Traffic. In the last tour, the call to prayer from the minarets at dawn (gorgeous, I miss it).

—SFS, EMAIL



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne-Marie Oomen’s memoir, *Pulling Down the Barn: Memories of a Rural Childhood*, was published by Wayne State University Press in 2004. Other work includes *House of Fields: A Rural Education* and *Un-coded Woman*. Her play, *Northern Belles*, has been performed in Traverse City, Chicago, St. Louis, and Iowa City. Oomen teaches in the creative writing department at Interlochen Arts Academy and lives in Empire, Michigan. She is a former board member of the Michigan Humanities Council.

Six Foot Skinny enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserve in 2001 and has served multiple tours of duty in Iraq. He blogs at open.salon.com/blog/six_foot_skinny and utilizes the “SFS” moniker to maintain anonymity.

A Drop of Hot Peppah Sauce

This essay is a resource for classrooms exploring issues related to **CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**, a theme in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The author opens with the sentence: “Two main things stand out about my family: politics and food.” Throughout the essay, the references to food are obvious. The references to politics are more veiled. Identify the political references. Why might the author say, “And to me everything is politics”?
- The author was born in Detroit, but she states that she “didn’t quite grasp American cuisine” until she went to college. What does she mean by this? How might this happen?
- Consider what the author says about the history of Trinidad and Tobago, whose culture is an amalgam of Arabic, French, Spanish, African, and indigenous influences, among others. How does this history compare to America’s history?

Two main things stand out about my family: politics and food.

My parents arrived in the United States of North America through Miami, Florida from the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago (Trinbago) as World War II was winding down and at a time when the steel band music associated with their homeland was just emerging from biscuit tins and oil barrels. So, they never really grasped the sound but remained ambassadors of old-fashioned calypso music, which was political by definition. Their lyrical accents and knife-sharp observations about American culture were like the songs on the calypso albums they brought here that I danced to rapturously as a young girl.

They followed my only sibling Leo as he sought to further his education in Detroit where my mother’s sister and her husband were already established. So there you have it, a typical migratory pattern. I should note that my mother and her siblings were born in St. Vincent, another English-speaking island in the Caribbean. She met and married my father in Trinidad, where she had migrated to for a better job.

Why this family of Trinbagonians and Vincentians ended up in a city of harsh unfriendly winters and

gray industrial skies always baffled me. Why didn’t everyone just stay in Miami? Better yet, Trinidad? But family connections and opportunity beckoned. They all assimilated as well as could be expected considering the overt racism they faced, especially duplicitous since, in my parents’ case for sure, their entry papers into the States categorized them as white in spite of their brown skin. Of course, daily life in the city reminded them otherwise.

But in their feisty way, my parents fought back with food. I didn’t quite grasp American cuisine until I went to university. But what I understood of it, I wanted. I used to beg mama to put aside a little of her chicken seasoned for island stew to make fried chicken for me. Now that was a big concession for her, because not much island food is fried. Except for bakes, a Trinbago bread, which was either fried or roasted. Crazy? No crazier than tea. When I grew up, almost all liquids were called “tea.” So there was cocoa tea, coffee tea, tea tea and so on. Perhaps the “tea” moniker reflected the years under British rule, which ended for many colonies worldwide, including Trinbago, with the independence struggles of the sixties. Trinidad and Tobago are two islands that form one nation. Trinidad is only seven miles off the northeast coast of Venezuela. It was “owned” by

ESSAY BY LOLITA HERNANDEZ

the Spanish for five hundred years before the French established a presence and then the British grabbed it. So the island of Trinidad embraces many cultures, including Amerindian, Spanish, African, East Asian Indian, Chinese, and Arab. And, the list goes on.

Consequently, the food reflected all of the above. I grew up eating East Indian curry, African-based *callaloo*, as well as stews and ground provision native to the island. And bakes. Daddy and I liked them fried; mama liked them roasted. The most important food for me was the Spanish *bacalao* (salted codfish). De-salted *bacalao* became the dish *buljol* when mixed with green pepper, tomato, and onion, then drizzled with olive oil and spiked with a drop of hot *peppah* sauce to wake up the tongue. Mama always hid *bacalao* somewhere in the back of the refrigerator, and I would try to sniff it out. Then like magic she would produce *buljol*. In those days we waited for Señor Garcia, the owner of a Puerto Rican market in Southwest Detroit, to call us when Caribbean provisions arrived. These days you can go to any large super market and buy ethnic foods.

Bacalao buljol was mama's special conversation with me from the back of the refrigerator, a way to keep me connected to the culture. Today when I share meals with my brother's daughters and our

families, we carry on the tradition of lively political discussions and island food. Always we are parsing out the struggles facing this country over bites of *callaloo*, curry, *pelau* or any of the other dishes passed down to us. We often zero in on the auto industry where I was a UAW worker for over 33 years at General Motors, 21 of them at the Cadillac Plant on Detroit's southwest side. As early as the '80s Cadillac workers sensed the factory's slow disappearance from

the area and impending job losses. That has proven true beyond our wildest imagination.

I was born and raised in Detroit with incredible Caribbean influences that few understand around this town. If, as they say, you are what you eat, then I am a mush of *bacalao buljol* and good old Michigan hot dogs. My dancing style is somewhere between a calypso wine-up and Motown shuffle. And to me everything is politics.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lolita Hernandez's debut short story collection, *Autopsy of an Engine and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant*, won a 2005 PEN/Beyond Margins Award. She spent 33 years as an auto worker, including more than 20 at Detroit's Clark Street Cadillac plant. Hernandez has published two collections of poetry, and her work has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Metro Times*. She teaches creative writing at the University of Michigan Residential College.

This essay is a resource for classrooms exploring the issue of **IMMIGRATION**, a theme in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you agree with the author's assertion that fear—and our response to it—plays a dominant role in defining and shaping our lives? How is this true—or not true—in your life?
- Compare the author's experience (immigrating to a new country at the age of 17) with Bich Minh Nguyen's experience (immigrating to a new country as an infant). Was one experience easier than the other? Why or why not? Which scenario would you choose, and why?
- The author notes that “one of the most common affinities Americans of any given generation share with one another is the television programs or movies they have watched while growing up.” Do you agree with this observation? Is America different from other countries in this regard? Why or why not?

Plato once declared in his writings that, a good life is one that has attained *total virtue*, a state in which we have everything we could possibly wish for and without any lingering desires. In short, it is a state of true happiness. Though I understand the appeal of Plato's total virtue, I disagree with its central idea that true, or perfect, happiness—by way of total virtue or any other spiritual or worldly means—is what characterizes a good life.

To me, a good life is one that has managed to confront and overcome the fear that comes with our day-to-day existence. Being anxious animals by nature, Fear is present with us from the moment of birth, when we experience the anxiety of leaving the coziness of the womb and are thrust into the world, to our last moments, when we contemplate our physical disappearance. And in between the beginning and ending of life, we encounter Fear in different stages of our lives—from the fear of drowning when taking the first swimming lesson, the fear of commitment to significant others, the fear of success that hampers the potential of many humans, to the classic and mother of all fears: the fear of Fear itself.

For someone who was raised by two loving and compassionate parents, it seems paradoxical that it was from my mother and father that I

first experienced true fear. From the ages of 11 to 14, my father traveled quite often—to Nigeria, where he purchased suiting fabric in bulk to resell in Ghana, where we lived. He also took long trips to the northern part of the country, where my perpetually entrepreneurial father was then trying to start a building construction company, the venture from which he got his life's biggest financial break.

I was troublesome and stubborn in my pre and early teens, and my rascally exploits in and around our neighborhood often brought many headaches to my mother, who at that time was raising me and five other siblings. (Mother eventually succumbed to death from complications that arose from the birth of her eighth child.) Frustrated with my delinquent behavior Mother, who was never one to raise a hand or even scream at a child, waited for my father's return from his trips to tell him of my misdeeds. And even though Father was lenient and philosophical with my siblings and me, he had on two occasions used the rod on me, and those were whippings I will never forget. For days, and sometimes weeks before Father's return from a trip, I would be filled with anxiety, especially if I knew I had misbehaved in his absence.

Perhaps Mother had felt guilty or had gotten scared by the bad

whippings that had resulted from her snitches. Or it may well be that Father, on his part, had realized that beating wasn't the most effective behavior modification tool to use on a child. But for whatever reason it was, Father never touched me after the second time, even though Mother continued to threaten that she would report me to him.

By the time I turned 13, Mother no longer needed to report me to Father; I was quick turning into a serious student and I therefore spent less and less time with the friends that got me into trouble. And naturally, my primary source of anxiety shifted from Father's whip to passing the dreaded Common Entrance Examination, which guaranteed a student's admission into the best secondary schools in Ghana. At 16 my biggest worry was passing the Secondary School Admissions Test (SSAT), the scholarly test used to assess a student's readiness for the rigorous academic work of America's elite boarding schools.

I entered a whole new era of anxiety in 1988, when I was barely 17. On October 15 of the same year, my family put me on a New York City-bound transatlantic plane, with my final destination being the Northern Michigan town of Interlochen, where I had gained admission to begin sophomore year as a creative writing major at the

world-renowned Interlochen Arts Academy. I was just as nervous as I was excited about the prospects of attending an American high school and living in an entirely different cultural, social, and religious environment from the one I grew up in.

Within 24 hours of my arrival at Interlochen, I felt homesick. I was gripped by the fear that I may never fit in. My accent, my clothing, my ignorance of the prevailing cultural icons, and the film or television program of the moment—all barred me from joining many a high school conversation. Americans, I quickly realized, take their cultural icons seriously, and that one of the most common affinities Americans of any given generation share with one another is the television programs or movies they have watched while growing up. Additionally, a nagging toothache that I thought had been permanently subdued before I left Ghana suddenly reared its ugly head a week after my arrival—the bad tooth may have been aggravated by the punishing cold weather my body was experiencing for the first time. For the next three weeks before the tooth was removed, I spent each night sobbing in the single bed of my shared room, wondering if I would ever make it at Interlochen, in America.

Over the years my fears and anxieties have changed in tune

with my life's pursuits, hurdles, and obsessions. I had become quite "Americanized" during the three years I spent in Michigan, and the four I spent at Bennington College, in Vermont. Out of nowhere I suddenly developed an enormous fear of returning back home to Ghana. And by the time I had begun to establish myself as a writer and music composer in New York, it became apparent to me that I would no longer fit in if I returned to Ghana and to my Hausa-Islamic culture, even though this was not the main cause of my anxiety about home. My biggest fear at this time was the outcome of reuniting with my father, who had made clear his displeasure with me (in long letters he used to send me) for abandoning home and taking on the ways of Americans. This fear was exacerbated by the other equally epic anxiety of marrying someone I had never met. My father had picked a bride for me when I was a sophomore in college, and with me having been Americanized and the young woman having not traveled outside Ghana, my automatic reaction was: this marriage will never work. As it turned out the woman and I immediately fell for each other during my January 2000 trip to Ghana, and we got married less than a week after my arrival.

Three months after my wedding my father passed away. Family members intimated to me that

Father had been ready for about a year before my return, but he had wanted to fulfill his last wish before he left us: to see me, his first son, get married. Father's death, instead of ushering in yet another era of epic anxiety and fear in my life, became a moment of great inspiration for me. His death and my marriage became twin metaphors that symbolized the passing of a torch, to carry on fearlessly into the world, to help my siblings and me to attain the fulfilling and honorable lives he had worked hard to give all his children.

I now live in Brooklyn, New York, with my wife (yes, the same woman my father had picked for me to marry) and our three children. I have made considerable progress at overcoming my fears and anxieties, staying away from the self-centered, ambition-driven, and survival-of-the-fittest kind that most people in large cities found themselves trapped under. These days, what keeps me awake at night is the fear of failing to instill in my children the love and affinity for their African roots, alongside their American culture. My ultimate goal is to raise them as Americans, as Africans, and as Muslims. To successfully mold them into social and cultural creatures that have no fear to navigate the complex, differing, and sometimes conflicting social and cultural landscape that is America.

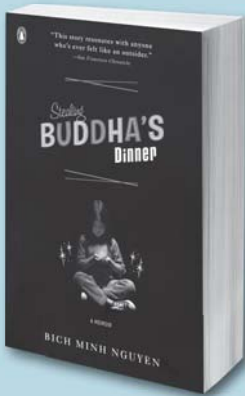
I would consider any modest success in any of these areas as my personal triumph over Fear. And if I were to ever have enough material or the philosophical mind to write a book about what a good life ought to be, my thesis would be simply this: A good life is one that has managed to turn anxiety into hope, and fear into success. And that is what I call total virtue.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohammed Naseehu Ali is the author of the short story collection, *The Prophet of Zongo Street*. His short stories and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Mississippi Review*, and *Essence*. Ali penned Michigan's essay for *State by State: A Panoramic Portrait of America*. Born in Ghana, he came to Michigan when he was 17 to attend Interlochen Arts Academy. Ali currently lives in Brooklyn, New York with his family.

Additional Resources



Bulk copies of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* are available for purchase through Meijer; contact gerry.wilding@meijer.com or mark.chenier@meijer.com for details. Michigan Humanities Council grants may be used to support bulk purchases; see www.michiganhumanities.org/grants/ for details.

Chapter 9 of *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* ("Down with Grapes") will appear, along with the three reflective essays featured in this teacher's guide, in a special section of the October 9, 2009, *Detroit Free Press*. Teachers may register online for free copies of this resource; see www.michiganhumanities.org for details.

Anchor Texts

LITERARY NONFICTION: MEMOIR

Stealing Buddha's Dinner, Bich Minh Nguyen

LITERARY NONFICTION: REFLECTIVE ESSAY

- "Breaking Silence," Anne-Marie Oomen (theme: contemporary history)
- "A Drop of Hot Peppah Sauce," Lolita Hernandez (theme: cultural understanding)
- "Fear," Mohammed Naseehu Ali (theme: immigration stories)

Linking Texts

LITERARY NONFICTION: MEMOIR

Pulling Down the Barn: Memories of a Rural Childhood, Anne-Marie Oomen

LITERARY NONFICTION: GRAPHIC NOVEL/MEMOIR

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood, Marjane Satrapi

LITERARY NONFICTION: PHOTO ESSAY

Escape from Saigon: How a Vietnam War Orphan Became an American Boy, Andrea Warren

LITERARY FICTION:

SHORT STORIES

- Autopsy of an Engine and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant*, Lolita Hernandez
- The Prophet of Zongo Street*, Mohammed Naseehu Ali
- We Should Never Meet: Stories*, Aimee Phan

LITERARY FICTION: NOVEL

What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentine Achak Deng, Dave Eggers

POETRY

- "You, Whoever You Are," Walt Whitman. www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1856/poems/10
- "The New Colossus," Emma Lazarus. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_Colossus

MEDIA: FILM

- Journey From the Fall*, Ham Tran, 2007, Imaginasian, 2:15 (R; "some violence")
- Avalon*, Berry Levinson, 1990, Baltimore Pictures, 2:06 (PG)
- Freedom Writers*, Richard LaGravenese, 2007, Paramount Pictures, 2:20 (PG-13)

Informational Texts

The articles below are available at www.time.com/time/archive. To read an article, search for its title in quotes.

MAGAZINE ARTICLES

- “Fed Up and Turned Off,” *Time*, April 14, 1975
- “Why They Flee,” *Time*, April 14, 1975
- “Troubled Trips to Safety,” *Time*, May 5, 1975
- “A Cool and Wary Reception,” *Time*, May 12, 1975
- “The Agony of Arrival,” *Time*, May 12, 1975
- “Journey to ‘Freedom Land,’” *Time*, May 19, 1975
- “Painful Act of Being Born Again,” *Time*, May 26, 1975
- “Blunders, Breakdowns—and Action,” *Time*, July 21, 1975
- “Getting a Foot on the Ladder,” *Time*, January 5, 1976

Exhibits

The Great Michigan Read

“Vietnamese in Michigan” Touring Exhibit. Touring multiple venues statewide; see www.michiganhumanities.org for details. A traveling exhibit depicting the story of Vietnamese immigration to Michigan, including a section on Bich Minh Nguyen and *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*. Produced by the Michigan Humanities Council for *The Great Michigan Read*. Gerald R. Ford Museum, Grand Rapids. On display is the actual rooftop staircase used to evacuate the United States Embassy in Saigon in 1975.

“Newcomers: The People of This Place.” Public Museum, Grand Rapids. Highlights 45 ethnic groups that make their home in West Michigan, including the Vietnamese.

Additional Teacher Resources

- Teaching Tolerance: Vietnamese Americans, Southern Poverty Law Center.* www.tolerance.org/kit/vietnamese-americans
- Flight to Freedom: The Story of the Vietnamese of West Michigan,* Gordon L. Olson (editor)
- The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings,* Sucheng Chan (editor)
- From Saigon to Sanctuary: The Story of Vietnamese Refugees in West Michigan,* Grand Rapids Historical Commission, 2002, Grand Rapids Historical Commission, 0:58

For Younger Readers

At the teacher's discretion, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* is appropriate for high school students, college students, and some middle school students. Educators may wish to explore the book's themes—cultural understanding, immigration stories, and contemporary history—with younger students. Below are suggestions for social studies and English language arts activities. A list of age-appropriate resources follows.

Activities

FAMILY SHOW & TELL:

SHARING OUR HISTORIES

- THEMES: Cultural Understanding, Immigration Stories, Contemporary History
- SUBJECT: Social Studies
- GRADES: K–2

Choose a relevant theme and ask students to recruit a family member to appear before the class and share their related experiences. Students should introduce the family member and provide some background regarding why they asked him/her to appear; students in the audience should be encouraged to question their guest. Depending on the grade level, teachers may have to work directly with students' families to facilitate and explain the project. In terms of administration and engagement, this activity may work best on a periodic basis (e.g., weekly).

- OBJECTIVE: Students understand their families' heritage.

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

- THEMES: Immigration Stories, Cultural Understanding, Contemporary History
- SUBJECTS: Social Studies/English Language Arts
- GRADES: 1–6

Choose three books focusing on the experiences of young people living

in or immigrating to new countries (see list below for examples). Read the books aloud to the class and lead a discussion on what it might be like to move to a place where the language, customs, people, and food are different from what you are used to (some students might have experienced this directly). For older students, ask them to write a guidebook for newcomers moving to their community; for younger students, discuss what might be in this guidebook as a class.

- OBJECTIVE: Students understand cultural differences.

MY STORY

- THEMES: Cultural Understanding, Contemporary History
- SUBJECT: English Language Arts
- GRADES: 3–6

In many works of literature—especially those for young people—the protagonist learns a lesson and undergoes a personal transformation. After reading one or two examples of this as a class, ask students to reflect upon a moment in their life when they learned an important lesson. Then, have them write an account of the incident, the lesson, and the transformation. Encourage them to explore creative writing styles or to mimic the style of the sample texts. Why is it important to reflect upon the past? Why is it important to develop methods of personal

expression? How does the use of poetic license add to or detract from the process?

- OBJECTIVE: Students understand the importance of learning from the past.

WHY WE EAT WHAT WE EAT: AMERICAN FOOD CULTURE

- THEME: Cultural Understanding
- SUBJECT: Social Studies
- GRADES: 4–8

Ask students to keep a journal documenting their diet for an entire week. As a class, list all of the foods on a whiteboard or chalkboard, eliminating duplicates. Then, identify the ethnic heritage and/or origin of each food. Explore the diversity of the diets. How often do we eat “beyond” our ethnic heritage? Is this unique to America? Discuss the variety of foods (or lack thereof). What about processed or fast food? Why do we eat what we eat? How do cultures borrow and share food with each other as they interact?

- OBJECTIVE: Students recognize that cultures borrow from each other.

GROWING UP: A CROSS- GENERATIONAL DIALOG

- THEMES: Cultural Understanding, Contemporary History
- SUBJECT: Social Studies
- GRADES: 5–8

Ask students to interview an older family member (at least one generation removed) regarding their coming-of-age experiences. Students should record the responses, and after the interview is complete, switch roles with their subjects, who will ask the students the same questions. What was it like to grow up 25 years ago? 35 years ago? 50 years ago? How does this compare to now? Students should document both responses and include an essay regarding their similarities and differences, along with a discussion of why some rites of passage change over time—or stay the same.

- OBJECTIVE: Students recognize that culture changes over time.

Resources

PICTURE BOOKS

- When I First Came to this Land*, retold by Harriet Ziefert, illustrated by Simms Taback. GRADES K–2
- Hannah is My Name*, by Belle Yang. GRADES K–3
- No English*, by Jacqueline Jules, illustrated by Amy Huntington. GRADES K–2
- One Green Apple*, by Eve Bunting, illustrated by Ted Lewin. GRADES 1–3
- I Have an Olive Tree*, by Even Bunting, illustrated by Karen Barbour. GRADES K–3

Going Home, Coming Home / Ve Nha, Tham Que Huong, by Truong Tran, illustrated by Ann Phong. GRADES K–2

CHAPTER BOOKS

- Leaving Vietnam: The True Story of Tuan Ngo*, by Sarah S. Kilborne, illustrated by Melissa Sweet. GRADES 1–4
- Drita My Homegirl*, by Jenny Lombard. Grades 3–5
- The Irish Dresser*, by Cynthia Neale. GRADES 2–6
- Goodbye, Vietnam*, by Gloria Whelan. GRADES 4–8

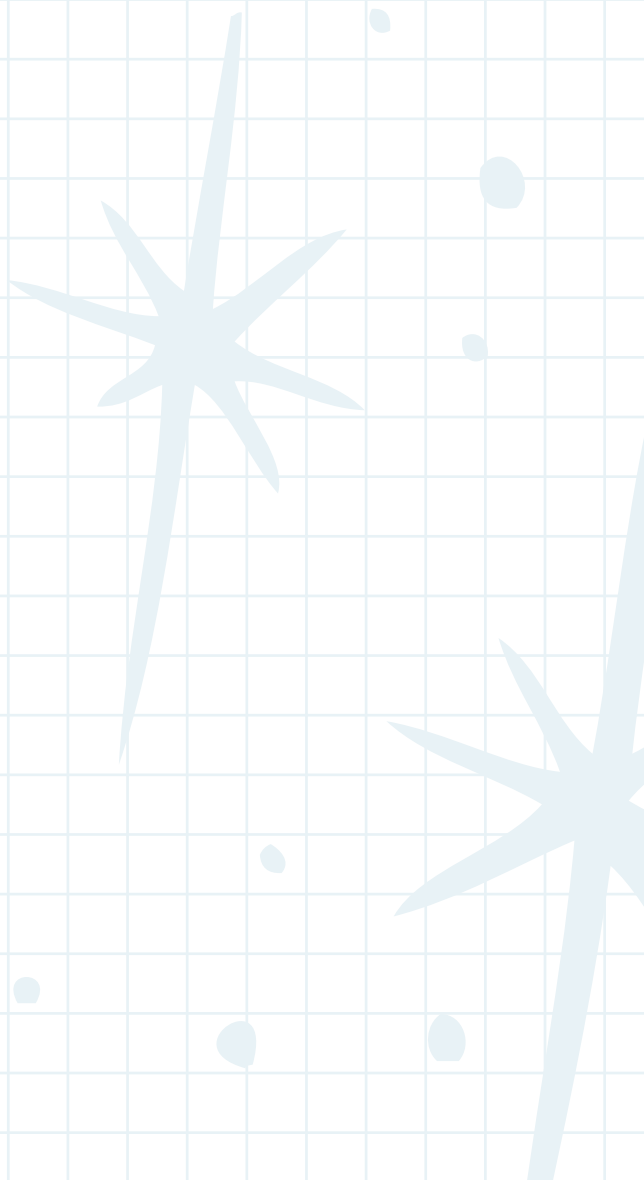
FICTION: GRAPHIC NOVEL

The Arrival, Shaun Tan. GRADES 4–12

NARRATIVE NONFICTION

Living as a Refugee in America: Mohammed's Story, by Helen Howard. GRADES 4–9

Notes





The Michigan Humanities Council connects people and communities by fostering and creating quality cultural programs. It is Michigan's nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since 1974, the Council has supported thousands of cultural programs exploring the humanities in Michigan.

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