

Review of “My Father, The Panda Killer” by Jamie Jo Hoang

Why I Chose It: First, the cover art by Marcos Chin deftly captures what will be the story of an emotionally charged young woman shown standing with fists clenched against a yellow, orange and tan terrain. Hoang, the American-born daughter of two refugees from the Vietnam War, “boat people,” prefaces the first chapter with the statement “This Book Is Not a History Lesson,” a disclaimer that appeals to the Social Studies educator in me. However, “boat people,” the Vietnam War, humanitarian treatment of refugees, acculturation, post-traumatic stress, and the American sociopolitical response to refugees and migrants are issues aligned with high school curricula these days. Furthermore, the book offers a goldmine of intergenerational, Vietnamese perspectives and cultural commentary from a war refugee who was separated from his family contrasted with an Asian American teen’s perspective of a last summer in San Jose prior to entering college in Los Angeles.

The work is derived from the author’s background, her family members’ stories and her visits to Vietnam. But as with all great works of literature that intentionally illuminate culture and its changes over time, this work resounds with the cultural conflict, generational clash, silences and conversations arising at the crux of existence as adulthood beckons. Jane at age 17 faces such a shift from being the eldest child in a family ruled by a domineering father to a college life just ahead. This is complicated by her mother’s abandonment of the family three years prior, placing June as the mother figure for brother Paul who is now seven. Jane needs to leave for college, but wants Paul to know she will never abandon him unlike their mother.

Maturity was thrust upon Jane even earlier at age 7 when she began working in the family store. She also must wrestle with her emotions when her father hits her for breaking his rules. Despite this, Jane loves her father and has mixed feelings about the Vietnamese cultural values to which her father clings. She is full of questions about his refugee story, knowing that his secrets will help her comprehend why he is so intractable.

The search for familial secrets, the struggle over whether or not to carry forward elements of the older generation’s cultural identity is essential to young adult literature. It is a conversation that can be approached by connecting fictional narratives to the personal lives of the students, who are in the midst of these complex shifts and personal redefinitions themselves. Thus “My Father the Panda Killer” is a book that will resonate beyond the increasing numbers of students coming from refugee and migrant homes. It is a work that will engage the conversations, challenges, and concerns facing students through its powerful fictional narrative. Finally, the topic of the parental right to punish children is one legally, socially, and culturally rife with discussion and disagreement. That is precisely why it will engage teens. Readers will be able to see that there can be more than one way to approach punishment. This book is far more than a Vietnamese American YA fiction. It is a touchstone rite of passage work.

What I like about this book: This YA book highlights with a harsh glare an “adult” reality, best seen in age 15 and older appropriate fictional narratives. It does not soften or simplify the mixed emotions, the physical pain, the emotional conflict, nor the ironic respect that Jane brings to living with her father. In fact, the book emphasizes how in real life, anticipated heated arguments or confrontations among family members often never happen, while routine events can end in catastrophic blow ups that are life changing. Part of the “growing up” process is piecing together parental pasts and their formative events, relationships and cultures that shaped them. This story with its alternating narratives of American-born Jane at 17 poised to leave for college from a stable if strict childhood contrasted with the narrative of her father Phuc, who spent years of his young life as a refugee before arriving in the United States to reinvent himself alone, helps Jane and teenage readers grasp why external events and experiences shape family members. Jane’s conflicted cultural pride contrasted with various degrees of affirmation or lack thereof will resonate with the mixed feelings so many diverse students have. Furthermore, the fact that Jane and her best friend Jackie avoid and mock new Vietnamese immigrants as “fresh off the boat” sadly rings true in the real world of American schools. Students who are self-conscious and conflicted about their own reality seek to bully vulnerable cultural peer newcomers rather than embrace and support them.

What I like most about this book and what I have observed as an educator, is the impact on children of refugees and migrants that traveling to the ancestral country and staying with family members still there has. Jane’s understanding of her father is transformed by her visit to Vietnam. She experiences the home where her father was raised, feels the same mud beneath her feet, and meets her grandparents. Despite many phone calls over the years to this family, it takes the trip and stay to help Jane realize why her father is who he is. She takes what she can from these insights and moves forward with her own style of cultural affirmation. In the process, she breaks away from her self-hating best friends and stops mocking younger peer newcomers.

As author Jamie Jo Hoang states in a note at the end of the book, Jane’s story “is ultimately a search for connection to the past, so she can curate a sense of belonging in the present.” Despite her disclaimer of “My Father the Panda Killer” not being a history lesson, it is quintessentially a history engaging opportunity given the underlying search for a connection to the past to belong in the present.

In a poem titled [Pebbles in My Palm](#), Hoang wrote:

I am the bud of a new generation,
Rooted in the old and nurtured by the new.
...
Knowing where I come from
Helps me to become
The me I want to be.

Squeezing pebbles in my palm,
Think of my heritage in Vietnam,
And remember that home
Is where I am.

Teens work to define who they are and what they will be. This book's figurative pebbles will inspire YA readers in identifying their cultural "where."

Author: Dr. Rose Reissman, Teacher Educator

January 2025