

How teachers can use *My Father the Panda Killer* in their classrooms

Here are some strategies for using this book for independent reading, a research start, or a class/small group study selection.

For ESL and ELA students:

1. BEFORE READING THE BOOK - SURVEY STUDENT'S SELF OPINION / POINT OF VIEW

Conduct a prior knowledge and attitude survey of students. Emphasize that these are open-ended prompts about how they feel personally and that Americans are divided about definitive responses to these questions, although some locales have taken certain actions. Emphasize that as they become participating and active citizens, they will help develop answers to these questions and/or become voices in the conversation about them:

1. Is it true that all Vietnamese immigrants and refugees and their American-born children or relatives respect and look out for each other, backing one another up.

Yes _____ No _____ IDK (I do not know.)

2. Should a refugee or immigrant to the United States parenting an American-born teen maintain traditional family hierarchies of respect and demand precise adherence to house rules as defined by the elders?

Yes _____ No _____ IDK _____

3. Regardless of individual federal, state, or local laws about the parental right of corporal punishment, should a parent whose native culture allows and encourages the use of a stick to punish children have the right to punish a family member born in the United States that way?

Yes ____ No _____ IDK _____

4. If a child becomes aware of American laws prohibiting child abuse and wants to inform the authorities about a parent carrying out such punishment, is it right to do this even though the child is connected to the parent's native culture?

Yes ____ No _____ IDK _____

5. Since the majority of refugees or border crossing migrants fled their countries out of fear or a desire for better opportunities, is it logical or realistic for them to still miss their native country, its food, culture, scent, climate, etc.?

Yes ____ No _____ IDK _____

6. Why do you think so many refugees or migrants want to see again-even briefly-a country they had to flee even though realistically they cannot return there or actually would not return because their children are now natives of another country? Record your responses in sentences, hashtags, or art.

2. DURING READING THE BOOK - CHANGE NARRATORS / STORY SHIFT

While we are the narrators of our own story each day (even if we do not record it in some fashion), we know the narratives we tell ourselves, our teachers, friends and family are often unreliable, deliberately or unintentionally so. Although there are multiple narrators in “My Father the Panda Killer” and the story lines seem to vary, we learn that the story ultimately is told by Jane the American-born daughter of Phuc, a Vietnamese who fled his homeland as a teenage “boat person.” Phuc had been unwilling to reveal the experiences he had as a child, so his narrative is crafted by his daughter Jane from what she gleaned from his family and friends, and even from overheard comments.

There is a glossary of characters at the back of the book. Ask students to choose at least one about whom they would like to know more, or whose reaction to events in the narrative can be anticipated based on textual evidence in the story. Using that evidence, have them write a short (350-500-word) exploration of that character voicing its point of view. For example, how does Jackie, Jane’s best friend for many years, feel about Jane’s actions, comments, and final leave taking? Will Jackie correctly interpret the changes Jane undergoes? How does Phuc’s mother, Ba Noi, whose comments Jane had heard during phone calls and then hears more extensively during her trip to Vietnam, really feel about being physically separated from the son she sent away? How does she feel about the grown man who visits her with his two American-born children? How has she weathered the war-influenced split of her nuclear family that rocked the life she was born to live? A narrative from her viewpoint based on her comments to Jane in the text could answer such questions.

3. AFTER READING THE BOOK - SEQUEL SUGGESTIONS FOR SEQUEL START

In her note at the end, Jamie Hoang mentions that she is in the process of writing the sequel to “My Father the Panda Killer” focused on Paul and his mother. We know from the story that Paul’s mother left him just before his fourth birthday and he is now a highly articulate tech-savvy seven year old. At four, he certainly grasped in a deeply emotional and physical way this abandonment. Given his father’s personality and the realities of his responsibilities within the Vu family business, what would Paul feel, know, or want to learn about his mother?

It is always interesting to anticipate the plot and character shadings in a sequel. We only have the mother’s name, Ngoc Lan, and a smattering of rumors about where she is in “My Father the Panda Killer.” Students can anticipate the sequel storyline and how the relationship between

Paul and his mother develops. These ideas then can be shared and discussed among their peers and later even shared with the author via her publicist at jho@penguinrandomhouse.com.

4. OBJECT STORIES: WHAT WE COLLECT DEFINES CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION. The objects we love and collect as we grow up often communicate much about what we value and who we are. Tell students to choose either Jane or her father. List at least five objects either one of them has collected over time; draw or describe each one. Then explain what the object means for the character and how that meaning helps us understand the character's values and purpose in life.

5. CULTURAL COMMENTARY COMPARISON WITH YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Author Jamie Hoang is also a blogger and frequently writes pieces for magazines on cultural issues. Have students choose at least one of her writings from the list below and read it with an eye to the way it affirms or differs from messages conveyed in "My Father the Panda Killer" about Vietnamese identity for Asian Americans. Ask them for any insights these readings offered about the purpose, plotting or character development in Hoang's book, and to react the ideas posed in these pieces from their own personal perspective.

1. Finding Joy After My Family's Traumas During the Vietnam War
<https://time.com/6308965/family-trauma-vietnam-war-essay/>
2. "From lost to found: How I dropkicked assimilation in favor of being me"
<https://www.salon.com/2023/09/02/from-lost-to-found-how-i-dropkicked-assimilation-in-favor-of-being-me/>
3. Pebbles in My Palm <https://open.library.okstate.edu/justya/chapter/pebbles-in-my-palm-jamie-jo-hoang/>

For Social Studies students:

1. DIGITAL MOMENT IN TIME DROP IN

Before using the book with students or having them start to read it, show a video of actual footage of "boat people" such as the CBS news program for 60 Minutes aired on June 24, 1979: "Vietnamese Boat People -The Price of Freedom" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TsZVgQf4Ss>. Focus the students on taking notes and being ready to respond with comments, feelings, writings, and art to the following:

1. What is happening in this video?
2. How are the people feeling as these events take place? Can you detail their emotions? How are they interacting with one another? Do you see kindness being shown? Do you see evil or harm being done? What other emotions or gestures do

- you notice? Are these people brave or are they pitifully weak? Back up your response with details from the video.
3. Detail your emotions as you watch this video. How would you have felt if you were onsite filming it? What actions might you have taken had you been an adult or teen watching this in 1979?

AFTER the students have read the book, show the video again. Challenge them to explain if and how the book changed their reaction to the video.

2. TEXTS FOR YOUNG ADULTS: DOES THE TEXT ACCURATELY DETAIL A MESSAGE AND POINT OF VIEW FOR YOUNG ADULTS? COMMENT, CRITIQUE, CURATE, DEBATE.

Tell students that we are examining this acclaimed YA work because it is set in a time we have been studying, the Vietnam War. Though it is a work of fiction, it conveys a powerful story based on the author's family's own experiences and her extensive research on the perspectives of "boat people." Given these perspectives, how would Hoang or Phuc react to the texts and lessons in our curriculum? What comments or information would they have contested? What issues or concerns would they have felt were not emphasized sufficiently or even left unsaid?

Throughout the book, various characters who were born in Vietnam and now are United States citizens comment about the fact that Vietnam's history is presented in America from an outsider's perspective, not theirs. There is an African proverb "Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter." Does this proverb mean there is no point in studying a variety of print, film or oral historical resources? Does it call for another kind of action if we want to understand what actually occurred? If so, what actions should be taken?

There obviously is no single correct answer, since even today, many new history textbooks are told from the perspective of the "hunters." Ask students what can we do as Americans in the 21st century immersed in a history unfolding before us to gain a deeper understanding of an event or issue. Have them create commentary, art, or a list of steps to take when presented with just a single perspective to broaden their perspective.

3. HISTORY FORGES HIS AND HER STORIES, SKILLS, VALUES, SPENDING AND RECREATIONS

Many students and adults view history as just a stream of events, laws, names, dates, clothing, shelter, places, etc. While it certainly is that, it also is how the experience of events changes individual lives. Challenge students to consider how Phuc's experience as a teenage "boat person" still plays out years later in San Jose as a parent, business owner, and community member. In what way does his budgeting, clothing, fixing up, repairing, relationship choices, or survival skills reflect his years as a refugee? Students should support their responses with at least 5-8 details from the book.

4. SHARING PERSONAL STORIES: ORAL HISTORIES, A PARTICIPANT'S RECORD

Jane comes to understand that the father she has is still very much the teen who was on that boat. Share with students curated selections from the resources below, actual histories and firsthand experiences of individuals who were “boat people.”

“Getting Here: Journeys from Vietnam” from Houston Public Media

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gtTikWQf3E>

“How A Sailor Reunited with Vietnamese Refugees He Rescued After The Fall Of Saigon”

from NBC News https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2rNh_BmY_U

Ask students to react to one video and consider:

1. In what ways does this account differ from the video watched earlier that showed many refugees arriving on shore?
2. Is it a completely true account because it is a person's story of what happened that is told as they remember it?
3. Should history books include oral history accounts or are these just a frill added on to the text? Explain your point of view; why you think so?

At the beginning of “My Father the Panda Killer” Jaime Hoang states: “This book is not a history lesson.” If you are using this work as part of a history or a humanities lesson, do you agree with her or not? Explain why. Not all history teachers infuse YA books into their classes, even if the book references or is about the exact topic, theme, or unit in their curriculum. Are they correct in sticking to their course content and leaving the YA book to ELA/ESL teachers and librarians? There is no consensus or correct answer. What do you feel based on this book?

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