Kay Whaley

Dr. Warner

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**Unit of Study on Courage and Survival**

This unit of study is meant for middle school aged students. The unit of study will focus on Thanhha Lai’s *Inside Out & Back Again.* This story is about courage and survival as Ha and her family have the courage to make their way from war torn Vietnam to the United States and not only survive but learn to lead a new life. Stories about courage and survival are good for middle school aged children because typically there are elements of excitement in the stories and the stories have characters who are relatable such that the characters experience feelings like anger, loneliness, joy and happiness. These characteristics make books interesting and real. Books with themes of courage and survival can help students realize they are not the only ones going through difficult experiences. They can also help students understand the feelings of their classmates who might be going through a tough situation. According to *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning,* “Adolescents can meet characters that have faced seemingly insurmountable difficulties and have yet overcome them. A source of hope for anyone in a tough situation is the story of someone else who has made it through a similar struggle” (109). Books about courage and survival can teach students empathy and help students to understand the struggles people can go through and the struggles can make you stronger. According to *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, “There is refreshing honesty in stories that show readers they are not the only ones who get served that kind of ball and that the human spirit, although totally devastated in this particular set, may rise again to play another match” (40). Middle school is a time when students are trying to figure out who they are and how they can get through life – this is what the main character Ha is trying to figure out too. This is why *Inside Out & Back Again* is a good book for this age group.

*Inside Out & Back Again* is set in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War. The main character, Ha, and her family are forced to flee Saigon, the only home they have ever known. They board a ship headed for America without any idea of where they will live. They end up in Alabama. For some of the locals, Ha and her family are the first and only Asians they have ever seen. At the first, the family is not treated well. Most of the people do not welcome Ha and her family into their homes, rather they are stared at from behind curtains. The story is how Ha is forced to learn a brand new language, English, and learn a new culture all the while she is experiencing prejudice and is being bullied at school and is called nicknames like “pancake face.” The story explores identity, loneliness, prejudice, as well as family and sense of home. These are all themes students struggle with and can identify with. By looking at Ha’s situation and learning her frustrations and vulnerabilities, students will both identify with some of her struggles and see her struggles in some of their classmates and hopefully giving these students a better understand of others.

**Introducing the Unit**

The book Inside Out & Back Again has several themes to introduce to the students. As such, the introduction to the book will take several class periods. To introduce the unit on *Inside Out & Back Again* I will show the YouTube video [Sea of Memory.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNe897ereaY&t=23s) This video shows a young boy interviewing his dad and his dad’s story escaping Vietnam at the end of the Vietnam War. After the video we’ll discuss what we watched and go over the main themes of *Inside Out & Back Again*. The main themes of the book are family, home (Vietnam and then the United States), loneliness, identity and prejudice. I’ll start the conversation by asking my students their thoughts on each of themes. I’ll capture their ideas on paper which I’ll leave posted for the duration of the unit and add to it a needed.

We’ll talk about Vietnam. I will ask the students what they know about Vietnam: do they know what kinds of foods the Vietnamese eat; do they know what kinds of fruit grows in Vietnam; do they know what the weather is like in Vietnam; do they know what language is spoken? Then, we will talk about Alabama, which is where Ha and her family end up. I want them to begin to understand the big differences that Ha and her family experience moving from Vietnam to the United States. Then, we’ll discuss moving and I’ll ask the students who has moved and what difficulties they experienced, whether it was making new friends or maybe having to learn a new language. We’ll talk about family and how important family is to everyone. We will talk about loneliness and how lonely it can be when there’s a new school to attend and it’s hard to have a sense of identity. The last topic will be prejudice and what it means to be prejudice or to experience prejudice. This last topic will lead into a discussion about empathy. I want the students to start thinking about how they can help others who are going through difficult real life experiences; I want the students to start thinking about how they would feel if they were going through this experience so when we start reading the book, they can be engaged with Ha’s character and have empathy on their mind. This relates to the sixth Exeter quality stated in *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, “informing truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns” (9).

*Inside Out & Back Again* is written in verse and the book has a lot of poetry. To help get the students comfortable with poetry we will end our introduction to the book with the “I Am” poetry exercise. This is a good way to get students to open up about things and to help them understand that poetry can be fun. I will hand out an “I Am” poem that I wrote and read it to them and then I will hand out the “I Am” template and have each student write their own “I Am” poem. I’ll ask students to volunteer to read their poems. As a class we’ll listen to see if any of the thoughts the students used to describe “I Am” are on the sheet where the ideas were on the main themes of the story.

**Centerpiece Work**

Homework will be to read several chapters a week. Each day we will discuss the reading which was assigned to be read for that day. We’ll discuss which of the five themes were in last night’s reading assignment. Did we read about Vietnam? Did we read about family? Was there any talk of moving? Did anyone in the story experience any prejudice? Did Ha indicate if she felt lonely. I’ll ask the students to sit in groups of four and I will give them some time to discuss the reading assignment. After the group discussion time is up, the students will have ten minutes for in-class writing. I will give out a prompt which reflects the theme of the text which was read the night before and the students will write to that prompt. Some topics we’ll go over are: how does Ha feel about leaving Vietnam; what does Ha think about school; what does it mean to be a refugee; what kind of prejudice does Ha face; how does Ha feel about her brothers; how is living in Alabama is different from living in Vietnam, describe some of the differences. At what times does Ha feel lonely? Do you ever feel lonely?

**Expanding the Unit**

*Inside Out & Back Again* is a novel in verse. Ha is the writer of the story and she writes her story in a journal, or diary. During the time the novel is being read by my students, I’ll have them keep a journal and write in it a minimum of four days a week. This activity will help them with their writing and will also help them express their thoughts and emotions in a non-threatening manner.

To explore other types of writing and novels, a requirement for my students will be to read the graphic novel *Vietnamerica: A Family’s Journey* and compare and contrast that family’s experience of escaping Vietnam and fleeing to the United States with the experiences of Ha and her family. I will give them the alternate option of writing a book report if they’d rather do that.

The final activity for this unit of study will be a report on Vietnam. The students can decide what aspect of Vietnam they’d like to research and then write their report. In the story *Inside Out & Back Again*, Ha talks about papayas, so food could be a topic. The students can write about a city in Vietnam, or the Vietnam War; any topic that interests them. The last part of this final activity will be for the students to stand up in front of class and give a summary of their Vietnam report.

**Suggested Reading Lists and Summaries**

Some of the books below are in the same category as *Inside Out & Back Again*, in that they are about refugees and have to do with courage and survival. However, some of the books have more to do with real life experiences which is also relatable to Ha and her family’s experience about escaping war torn Vietnam. All of the books have teachable moments and encompass some of the themes of *Inside Out & Back Again* whether it’s about family, home, loneliness or prejudice.

***Forgotten Fire*** by Adam Bagdasarian

“In 1915 Vahan Kenderian is living a life of privilege as the youngest son of a wealthy Armenian family in Turkey. This secure world is shattered when some family members are whisked away while others are murdered before his eyes. Vahan loses his home and family, and is forced to live a life he would never have dreamed of in order to survive. Somehow Vahan's incredible strength and spirit help him endure, even knowing that each day could be his last.”

<https://www.goodreads.com/search?q=forgotten+fire>

***Children of the River*** by Linda Crew

“Sundara fled Cambodia with her aunt's family to escape the Khmer Rouge army when she was thirteen, leaving behind her parents, her brother and sister, and the boy she had loved since she was a child. Now, four years later, she struggles to fit in at her Oregon high school and to be "a good Cambodian girl" at home. A good Cambodian girl never dates; she waits for her family to arrange her marriage to a Cambodian boy. Yet Sundara and Jonathan, an extraordinary American boy, are powerfully drawn to each other. Haunted by grief for her lost family and for the life left behind, Sundara longs to be with him. At the same time she wonders, Are her hopes for happiness and new life in America disloyal to her past and her people?”

[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/238821.Children\_of\_the\_River?from\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6561164-the-day-of-the-pelican?from_search=true)

***I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican* *Daughter***by Erika Sanchez

“Perfect Mexican daughters do not go away to college. And they do not move out of their parents’ house after high school graduation. Perfect Mexican daughters never abandon their family. But Julia is not your perfect Mexican daughter. That was Olga’s role.  Then a tragic accident on the busiest street in Chicago leaves Olga dead and Julia left behind to reassemble the shattered pieces of her family. And no one seems to acknowledge that Julia is broken, too. Instead, her mother seems to channel her grief into pointing out every possible way Julia has failed. But it’s not long before Julia discovers that Olga might not have been as perfect as everyone thought. With the help of her best friend Lorena, and her first kiss, first love, first everything boyfriend Connor, Julia is determined to find out. Was Olga really what she seemed? Or was there more to her sister’s story? And either way, how can Julia even attempt to live up to a seemingly impossible ideal?”

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29010395-i-am-not-your-perfect-mexican-daughter?from_search=true>

***A Time of Miracles*** by Anne-Laure Bondoux

“Blaise Fortune, also known as Koumaïl, loves hearing the story of how he came to live with Gloria in the Republic of Georgia: Gloria was picking peaches in her father’s orchard when she heard a train derail. After running to the site of the accident, she found an injured woman who asked Gloria to take her baby. The woman, Gloria claims, was French, and the baby was Blaise. When Blaise turns seven years old, the Soviet Union collapses and Gloria decides that she and Blaise must flee the political troubles and civil unrest in Georgia. The two make their way westward on foot, heading toward France, where Gloria says they will find safe haven. But what exactly is the truth about Blaise’s past? Bits and pieces are revealed as he and Gloria endure a five-year journey across the Caucasus and Europe, weathering hardships and welcoming unforgettable encounters with other refugees searching for a better life. During this time Blaise grows from a boy into an adolescent; but only later, as a young man, can he finally attempt to untangle his identity.”

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7932010-a-time-of-miracles?from_search=true>

***The Day of the Pelican*** by Katherine Paterson

“Meli Lleshi is positive that her drawing of her teacher with his pelican nose started it all. The Lleshis are Albanians living in Kosovo, a country trying to fight off Serbian oppressors, and suddenly they are homeless refugees. Old and young alike, they find their courage tested by hunger, illness, the long, arduous journey, and danger on every side. Then, unexpectedly, they are brought to America by a church group and begin a new life in a small Vermont town. The events of 9/11 bring more challenges for this Muslim family--but this country is their home now and there can be no turning back.”

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6561164-the-day-of-the-pelican?from_search=true>

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