

# When Clouds Touch Us

AUTHOR

**THANHHÀ LẠI**



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RECOMMENDED FOR: Upper Primary

## SYNOPSIS

It has been two years since Hà and her family fled war-torn Vietnam for America, a place so different from everything she knew and loved back home. Just when she starts to adjust to life in Alabama, Hà's mother makes the difficult decision to move the family to Texas to better secure her children's futures.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thanh Hà Lại is a Vietnamese-American writer of middle-grade and young adult novels. She lives in upstate New York with her husband and daughter. Her dog Pico assists her by stepping directly onto the keys of her computer as she types. Her first novel, *Inside Out & Back Again* (2011), which won the National Book Award and a Newbery Honor, was partly based on her childhood as a refugee growing up in the southern United States. Other books include *Listen, Slowly* (2015) and *Butterfly Yellow* (2019), her YA debut. *Hundred Years of Happiness* (2022), Thanh Hà's first picture book, is available now.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF NOTES

Christina Wheeler, who is a practising teacher librarian with a background in the Australian curriculum (English).

## THEMES

- Family
- Love
- Acceptance; Belonging
- Relationships; Friendship
- Vietnam; Vietnamese Culture; Lunar New Year
- Refugees; Migration
- Hope

## STUDY NOTES

- What is the significance of the text's title? Why has the author chosen this title?
- The first poem shares how birthdays are acknowledged differently in western and Vietnamese cultures. Why do you think the author has decided to open the story with this? How does this position Hà as a character who is trying to acclimate herself to her new homeland while still respecting her Vietnamese heritage? If applicable, share

experiences of having to do likewise in your own life.

- What role does Hà's friend Pam play in *When Clouds Touch Us*? Why has the author included 'her religion's no-music rule' (p 2)? What connections can be made between this detail and Hà's circumstances?
- Why does Hà say that she and Pam are 'each / a maple seed, / spinning unclaimed / until we rooted / as best friends' (p 2)? How else is the 'root' motif used in *When Clouds Touch Us*?
- In what ways is leaving Alabama reminiscent of Hà's experiences leaving Vietnam?
- Why does Hà's family remember her father 'quietly'? Why does her mother urge them to 'allow the story to quiet' (p 3)? Why does Hà describe her father's fate as 'the loudest quiet' (p 4)? Discuss the use of contrast as a literary device.
- In the role of Hà, write a reflection about shopping at Kmart, unable to afford gym shoes for school (p 5). How is this returned to later in the text?
- Discuss Mother's 'vow / to ensure our future' (p 6). How does this impact Hà and her brothers throughout the story?
- Discuss Hà's recurring feeling of 'dragonflies / lolling in [her] gut' (p 9). What are your stress signals? What strategies do you use when feeling this way?
- Throughout *When Clouds Touch Us*, the author, Thanh Hà Lại, highlights the differences between the Vietnamese and English languages. Why has she included this detail in the text?
- Why does Mother say that 'Rebuilding demands / needlework patience' (p 12)? How does she demonstrate such patience throughout the story?
- What does Mother mean when she urges 'each child / to withstand / must above want' (p 14)? How do her children show this in *When Clouds Touch Us*? Discuss the precision of vocabulary choices made by the author in this passage (ie. urge, withstand). How do such word choices reveal Mother's understanding of the challenges facing her children? When have you had to put needs above wants? Share in a reflection.
- In the role of Hà, write a journal entry upon discovering Mother wants to move to Texas.
- The theme of hope emerges on the very first page. How is this explored throughout *When Clouds Touch Us*?
- Compare the first and the last poems in the text. How are they similar and different?
- How does the author share the different character traits of Hà and her family? Create character profiles of each family member using evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- What do the lantana plants symbolise? How is this motif woven throughout the text?
- What evidence is there in the text of Hà's spirited nature?
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language throughout the text. Examples include:
  - fewer / purple quail eggs / on my swollen knees (p 1)
  - I return the shoes / as if settling eggs (p 6)
  - I tickle and fluff / tough thick leaves, / cat-tongue scratchy (p 84)
  - She chants in a voice of / cool breeze, cucumber water (p 111)
  - Mother' eyes mist / in feathery rain (p 148)
- Reread 'Belly Heart Mind' starting on p 27. Discuss Mother's wish for her children. Why does she whisper so often to her husband?
- How can we tell how Hà is feeling when she says her mother's 'octopus arms / snatched [Vu Lee] home / for the final vote' (p 45)?
- What does Hà take with her to Texas? Why does she take these things? If you had to relocate quickly, what precious things would you take with you? Why? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Hà describe herself as 'half happy, / half sad' (p 52)? Have you ever felt this way? Share with a friend.
- Why must Hà remember to 'stop complaining / to an after-war mother' (p 55)?
- Write a series of journal entries in the role of Hà sharing your experiences of junior high in Texas.
- Why does Hà ask Brother Khôi if he feels 'blank as a page' (p 70)?
- Why does Hà feel 'desolate' (p 72)?
- Reread 'Refugee Luck' starting on p 79. In your own words, explain what Mother means when she advises Hà: 'lengthen your gaze / toward where / land meets clouds' (p 80). How can you apply this wisdom to your own life?
- Discuss the imagery used on p 82. How does this help readers get inside Hà's head?

- Hà pretends to be accepting of her circumstances and feelings, even when feeling unsure. Why does she do this? What prompts her to finally stop pretending? Have you ever felt like Hà? Share in a reflection.
- Why does Hà refer to her family as a clock with gears (p 86)? How is this metaphor used to reflect how the family is functioning?
- Why doesn't Hà give her plant to Mother on Mother's Day (p 90)?
- How does playing soccer help Brother Khôi to feel settled in his new hometown? Why has this been included in the text? What would help you feel more settled if you had to move?
- In the role of Hà, share what it has been like to meet Diggy. How did you feel when Diggy went home to her grandmother's place? What does Hà learn through her friendship with Diggy?
- What does Hà mean when she wonders when her family will know 'what to absorb, / what to ignore' (p 116)?
- Why does Hà start referring to Brother Khôi as Việt Pelé (p 117)? How does this show his gradual acclimation to Texan life?
- Why does Hà describe herself as a 'fledgling cocoon' (p 128)? How does this show the development of her character?
- Discuss whether *When Clouds Touch Us* is more about loneliness or friendship.
- Write a reflection of a time when you had to 'sacrifice now' to get a reward later (see p 136).
- How does Hà help herself when feeling intimidated by the other students at school? What can you learn from her?
- Why has Hà become 'an outsider / to [her] own war' (p 171)?
- When talking about atrocities such as Mỹ Lai, why does Mother choose to subdue her anger in favour of kindness (see pp 174–176)?
- Discuss Five-0's comment that 'everyone in junior high / suffers from nerves / of a plucked guitar; / a few hide it better' (pp 178–179).
- Five-0 tells Hà that 'it takes only one / really good' friend (p 183). What does she mean? How has this been true in your experiences?
- What role does Five-0 play in Hà's life? Why has a character like this been included in the text?
- What does the school's assumption that Hà is being neglected reveal about attitudes towards Hà and her family?
- Hà realises that her family has 'spots of tiny stabbings' (p 185). What does she mean by this?
- Why is it so disturbing that the court talks down to Mother? What comment is the author making?
- What does the Lunar New Year mean to Hà? How does it help her?
- How did you feel once Hà and her family could buy their own 'house home'?
- What is the significance of planting Piggy Poop in the backyard?
- How does Tùm Lum help Hà to move forward?
- Reread 'Piggy Poop' starting on p 190. How is this verse a turning point in Hà's journey?
- How has the author used Hà's illness to reveal the true nature of her relationship with her mother? Discuss how and why Hà's relationship with her mother strengthens as the text progresses. What does Hà learn from her mother?
- Why does Hà really have a 'hurricane mood' (p 219)?
- Discuss how the rhythm of the hammock swinging back and forth replicates the verse 'Gain, Relinquish' (starting on p 241).
- How does the story of Hà's doll and Brother Khôi's dead chicken share important details about their relationship (p 25)?
- Why does Mrs Washington give Hà a plastic pot with 'eleven woody stems / bald as toothpicks' (p 53)? What is the importance of her telling Hà to 'wait and see'?
- Once in Texas, the family faces a whole new set of challenges. Write a reflection about this move in the role of one of Hà's brothers.
- Using the three parts of this text (*Again!*, *Tết-Sát-Xi*, *Our Anchor*), together with the titles of each verse, create a story map that plots the main events in *When Clouds Touch Us*.
- Using evidence from the text to support your thinking, discuss the concept of 'balance' in *When Clouds Touch Us*.
- The narrative starts and finishes with Tết, the Vietnamese New Year. Discuss the circular structure of *When Clouds Touch Us* and Hà's personal journey during the year.
- Find out more about Vietnamese celebrations of the Lunar New Year. Why is Hà grateful for her 'red / [. . .] box of

treasures' (p 159)?

- Why does Hà choose to sign 'the hill / of floppy papers' at home (p 168)? What consequences does this have?
- Why does Hà love the thought of holding the coin her father gave her mother?
- Choose a scene or event from *When Clouds Touch Us* to write in prose form. Likewise, try writing some of your own verse poetry based on themes of hope or friendship.
- What aspects of Vietnamese culture and customs are evident throughout the verses? As you read, keep a journal that records examples.
- After reading *When Clouds Touch Us*, discuss the sentiments shared in the letter from Thanh Hà Lại at the beginning.
- How would you describe Hà's voice? What helps her voice to be so clear?

AUTHOR OF NOTES

**CHRISTINA WHEELER**