

"A cleverly narrated and perfectly
paced powerful dive into healing
generational trauma."

—ANGELINE BOULLEY, author of
Firekeeper's Daughter

MY MOTHER, THE MERMAID CHASER

JAMIE JO HOANG

DISCUSSION GUIDE

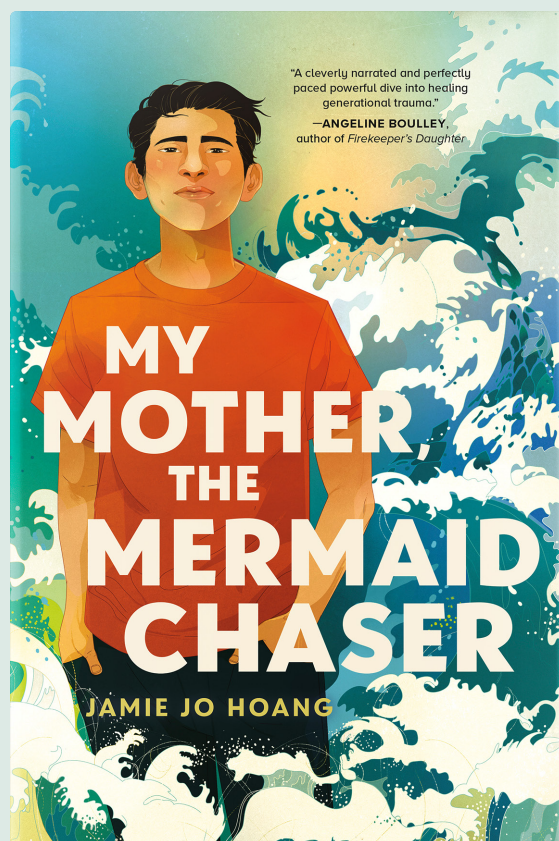
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Told in the alternating perspectives of Paul and Ngọc Lan, *My Mother, the Mermaid Chaser* is a haunting story about the intergenerational effects of war, estranged family bonds, and how a teenager discovers a new connection to a lost part of himself.

San Jose, 2008: Paul yearns to know more about the mother who abandoned his family, but she is the only topic no one discusses. Now he's in Vietnam, feeling displaced and considered an outsider. Plus, a ghost is haunting him even though he doesn't believe in ghosts. His cousin and the grandmother he's never met before now keep telling him that he'll get answers only if he's willing to open his ears.

Vũng Tàu, 1975: Ngọc Lan is eleven when her family breaks apart: Her brother is drafted into the army, and her father leaves on the last helicopter to the United States. She and her sister are sent from Vietnam on a harrowing journey by boat. Only Ngọc Lan survives. But what is the American dream when you are haunted by the death of your sister, missing your homeland, seeing ghostly mermaid sightings, lost in an abusive marriage, and struggling as a parent?



The companion
to *My Mother,
the Mermaid Chaser*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ryan Eslinger

Jamie Jo Hoang is the daughter of Vietnamese refugees. She grew up in Orange County, California—not the rich part—and worked as a docuseries producer before shifting to writing full-time. Her debut young adult novel, *My Father, the Panda Killer*, was named one of NPR's Books We Love and received an honorable mention from the Freeman Book Awards. Hoang is also the author of the award-winning adult novel *Blue Sun, Yellow Sky*, which was named one of the best books of the year by *Kirkus Reviews* and won a silver medal at the Independent Publisher Book Awards. Her work has been published in *Time*, *Salon*, and *Tiny Buddha*. When she's not writing, Hoang loves to take long walks, travel, and scuba dive. She lives in a house covered in Post-it notes with her husband and son.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is divided into pre-reading topics and questions, supplemental resources, project ideas, and discussion prompts. Discussion prompts are presented in chronological order by chapter sections so that a block of chapters can be assigned. Discussion prompts are grounded in direct quotes from the book to situate readers in the text.

First, explore the pre-reading topics for discussion, related multimedia, and select bibliography before reading the book together. These additional resources will provide further context and offer multiple perspectives to enrich discussions and interpretations of Jamie Jo Hoang's story.

AUDIENCE

Keep in mind that many aspects of this book will be read differently across different audiences. Before reading, consider both your students' and your own familiarity with the cultural and historical content in the book and how that might affect discussion. For a class with students from predominantly refugee and immigrant backgrounds, class discussions may center more around connections to and reflections on the content. For a class with students who were born in the United States and have ancestry who have lived in the United States for multiple generations, class discussions may focus more on processing previously unknown or differently accounted historical information and cultural perspectives. It is worth examining the variety of experiences in your classroom and tailoring your focus based on student interests.

This book deals heavily with the subjects of mental health, depression, family dynamics, and loss. Before leading a discussion with this book, it is important to be prepared for how students might respond to the text. Do research on local resources and community groups that can support students, and be sure to connect with your school's social workers or counselors. At the end of Hoang's story, the author and publisher provide contact information of national resources to support those who are experiencing or have experienced abuse at home or mental health struggles. Take note of these resources, and point them out to students, too.

PRE-READING TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Before (or while) reading the chapters, explore these questions to define key terms, spark critical thinking, and prepare readers for complex concepts that are brought up throughout the book. These questions are grouped by five themes (superstitions and ghosts, family, refugee and immigrant experiences, mental health, and literary devices) that will initiate conversations among students.

1. Superstitions and ghosts

- What do ghosts typically signify or symbolize?
- In groups, brainstorm ghost stories that you're familiar with. Do you notice these stories falling into certain themes/categories? Who is the audience for these stories? How do these categories make you feel? What reactions do these stories spark inside you?
- Are there any ghost-related superstitions that influence how you and your community move/act/make decisions in your day-to-day? What lessons do these stories tell?

2. Family

- What is a family unit (nuclear, extended, chosen, etc.)?
- Do you have any non-blood relatives who you consider family? What are the names/honorifics that you use in your family and/or community?
- In what situations have you seen families separate? In what situations have you seen families reunite?

3. Refugee and immigrant experiences

- What is the difference between immigrants and refugees?
- Review the different types of immigration statuses according to the [League of Women Voters of Wisconsin website](#). Discuss how each status might create and reflect different experiences.
- Migration journeys are often understood in four phases: (1) preparation, (2) journey, (3) resettlement, and (4) return home. Discuss what each phase might entail. Return to this question as you read.

4. Mental health

- What is mental health? What is trauma? What is depression?
- How do you think conversations and understandings about mental health have changed between your generation, your parents', and your grandparents'?
- Write on your own, then discuss activities that you do to support your mental health. What coping mechanisms and self-regulation techniques do you do when you're feeling overwhelmed, anxious, etc.? (Note: Reference the mental health resources at the end of the book. You can also introduce students to [Teen Line](#).)

5. Literary devices

- Review the different types of narrator points of view. Come up with a list of media (books, games, podcasts, etc.) that fall into each type.
 - How do the different points of view (POV) affect the reading experience? Is there a POV that comes across as more trustworthy or authoritative? Are there POVs that feel emotional or immersive? Pay special attention to the three different types of third-person POV—do they feel meaningfully distinct despite all being third person?
 - When writing, which POVs do you gravitate toward, and why?
- Review the different types of story structures (episodic or serialized, fragmentary, linear or nonlinear, braided structure of past and present, etc.).
 - Produce examples of existing works that fall into each story structure type. How does the structure of a story impact the storytelling, characters, plot, or reader/audience experience?

RELATED MULTIMEDIA

This section includes an extensive list of related materials available online that pair well with the book. This can range from additional nonfiction books, memoirs, archives, audio-visual materials, and supplemental teaching materials to frame and prepare readers with the voices and lived experiences of contemporary Vietnamese Americans sharing their stories through more accessible mediums, such as oral histories, podcasts, dance, food, etc. Assign one to two media resources for students to explore.

- An art essay by Aaron Ngan, “Refugee Redactions,” published in The Critical Refugee Studies Collective Refugee Archive on July 8, 2022
- A podcast episode produced by *The Vietnamese Boat People*, “Breaking the Silence”
- A podcast episode produced by *The Vietnamese Boat People*, “Do You Speak Vietnamese?”
- An essay written by Z.M. Quỳnh, “We Only Lose . . . If We Forget . . .” published in *diacritics* by Diasporic Vietnamese Artist Network (DVAN)
- An archived collection in the University of California, Irvine Southeast Asian Archive, *Viet Stories: Vietnamese American Oral History project* (including hundreds of audio/video oral histories with transcripts in English and Vietnamese)
- Historical and contemporary explainers about topics relevant to Vietnamese and diaspora relations published by Cầu Kiêu Collective
- Teachers’ Resources Web page from the Vietnam Center Archive at Texas Tech University
- A talk show and podcast episode *ÁCCENTED* #16, “The Art of Healing: Mental Health in Diasporic Communities,” published on January 31, 2022
- An episode from the *Second Wave* podcast, “My Family Escaped Vietnam. Others in Their Boat Were Not So Lucky,” published on November 14, 2017
- A multimedia research publication by Friend of Little Sài Gòn, *Sàigòn to Seattle: 50 Years After the War* published in April 2025
- The book *My Father, the Panda Killer* and discussion guide

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PROJECT IDEAS

Here are creative project ideas for literary analysis and writing, and opportunities for readers to conduct additional outside research to contextualize the story within their experiences.

Literary Analysis and Writing

1. Write a missing scene (understanding themes)

- a. Select one of the “ghost sightings” in the story. Consider the following questions: Why did the ghost appear? What does the presence of the ghost represent in the story?
- b. Imagine the ghost as a more fleshed-out character. What is the ghost’s backstory? Why is the ghost unable to move on? Why is a character in the book able to see or feel the ghost? Has the ghost changed since death? What does the ghost want?
- c. Write a short “missing scene” to give the ghost closure.
 - i. Some options for this scene can include a conversation between the ghost and a living character, a living character creating a change in the environment, the natural or unnatural end of something or someone that the ghost was holding on to, a more formal recognition of the ghost’s life or passing, a ceremony, or perhaps revenge.

2. Adapt the story (understanding plot)

- a. Consider a basic plot structure of a story: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. This will help in the following steps.
- b. This book contains multiple storylines that alternate between the two main characters: Paul and Ngọc Lan. Select either Paul or Ngọc Lan. Simplify one of their story arcs by adapting their story into another storytelling medium such as a TV show, movie, or video game.
 - i. Think of any major conflicts, journeys, or changes present in the book that the characters experience that could be plotted into an arc. Possible examples include Paul’s changing relationship with his mother, Ngọc Lan’s changing relationship with her sister, Paul’s journey

to Vietnam, Ngọc Lan’s journey to the United States, Paul’s search for his mother, and Ngọc Lan opening a grocery store.

- ii. Make sure that the arc contains the necessary elements of a plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Make sure that there is a clear cause and effect that holds these parts together. Identify and summarize any scenes in the book that correspond to these parts of the plot.
 - Note: Some scenes can cover more than one part of the plot. For example, sometimes falling resolution can combine with a resolution.
 - If the selected character or theme does not have enough scenes, summarize what would be needed from a missing scene in order to complete the plot.
 - If there needs to be two or more missing scenes, try another arc.
- c. Map out the scenes in a presentation or timeline format. Make notes on how you would adapt it for your medium.
- d. Have students “pitch” their adaptation with classmates in partners or small groups to compare and contrast different interpretations.

3. Make a character chart (understanding relationships, conflicts, and terminology)

- a. Review the main character guide (pp. 361–362) and honorific guide (p. 365).
- b. Create a character map of the book. Begin with Paul and Ngọc Lan as the biggest circles in the center of the map. As you are reading, place the other characters branching out from Paul and Ngọc Lan on the map.
 - i. For each character, write a brief description of the character, including notable personality traits or character flaws. Use the honorifics guide to include their relationship to Paul and Ngọc Lan.
 - ii. If there are characters outside the main character list that felt impactful to you, add them as well.

- iii. Use lines between the characters to add any notable interactions or any preexisting sentiments or resentments that influence the story or how the characters act toward each other.
- c. After completing the character map, discuss:
 - i. Who are your favorite characters? Why?
 - ii. If there were any characters outside the main character list included, why did you include them?
 - iii. If you were to explain the book to someone, which three relationships would you highlight to explain the story? Why did you pick those three?

Real-World Connections and Research Projects

1. Travel brochure

- a. Come up with a list of the most vivid scenes in the book. Examine the settings. What do you know about the time (year and season), the place (town, city, region, country), and the environment (a beach, a store, a street)?
- b. Choose one of the places on the list to investigate through outside research.
- c. Create a trifold travel brochure for the location in the present day to share with the class. Feel free to cover the following subject areas: governance, nature, notable landmarks, notable historic events, notable holidays, local culture, etiquette, food, language, and activities. Include lots of pictures!
- d. Discuss: How did the present-day images of these locations compare to how you imagined the places while reading the book? Did you learn anything that surprised you? How has the present-day location changed since the time of when the story took place? What are the most significant changes? Do the scenes that take place in this location feel different now that you know more about the location? Do you have any lingering questions about these places or the setting of the story?

2. Potluck

- a. As you are reading, keep track of the foods mentioned in the story.
- b. Assign students to groups and give each group a different dish to research.
- c. Re-create for a potluck! On potluck day, have each group present their dish:
 - i. How was this dish introduced in the story? Either summarize or quote the scene(s) that the dish was mentioned in.
 - ii. Does this dish have cultural significance? On what occasions do people usually eat this dish? Is there anything else interesting about this dish that came up in your research (notable taste, presentation, or smell; special modes of preparation; modern variations).
 - iii. What was the process of creating this dish? Which recipe did you use, or did you purchase the dish? How did you find the ingredients? If any ingredients were modified, what substitutions did you make and why? Were there any other shortcuts that you made? How do you think these changes affected the dish?
 - iv. For the American foods (e.g., cereal, PB&J, milkshakes), compare and contrast the taste, preparation, and feel of these dishes with the Vietnamese dishes. How do you think the refugees in the story felt adjusting to these new foods? Note: This can be adapted into a cookbook activity or you can order the dishes from a local restaurant.

3. Mental health

- a. How was mental health presented in the book?
- b. As a class, look through some resources for mental health and reflect on what information is available and how it is presented. What do you like/dislike about the website? Do you find it easy to navigate? Do you find it useful and relevant?
 - i. National Alliance on Mental Illness
 - ii. 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
 - iii. Heathline

- c. In pairs or small groups, research local or national organizations that work to address mental health for a specific group (e.g., teens, the elderly, immigrant groups, refugees, women, trans kids, people experiencing homelessness).
- i. Write a guide about the organization. What does the organization do? What resources do they offer? How can people access their resources? How can individuals and communities support these organizations?

- d. Discuss: Why do you think the group that you selected would need a more specific guide for mental health? Are there specific challenges that are unique to this group? How did the more targeted resources differ from the more general resources? Were there any groups that had more or fewer resources than others? Why do you think that is? Were there any notable differences between local groups and national groups? Was there anything you learned that surprised you?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

CHAPTERS 1–5

Literary devices and comprehension

- Refer back to the pre-discussion topic 5.
 - What is the point of view of the narration?
 - When do Paul and Ngọc Lan’s stories take place? How does the author bring readers into the setting?
 - What are your first impressions of Paul and Ngọc Lan? Whose perspective do you enjoy more? Why?

Family

- Many families have different ways of connecting, relating, and sharing their feelings with each other. There is no one right way. The book starts off with “I’ve never loved my parents” (p. 1) and then proceeds to give us a glimpse into Paul’s family dynamic. We are also introduced to Ngọc Lan’s family dynamic in the beginning of Chapter 2 (p. 9).
 - How does your family express love? How is it similar to or different from how the families in this book have expressed love so far?

Role of superstition and ghosts

- Ghosts and spirits are introduced to the story (see pp. 9–11, 23–24, 27–28, 36). How is this similar to or different from your understanding of spirits/ghosts?

CHAPTERS 6–10

Literary devices and comprehension

- *Small / world. / Tranquil. / Water, / deep, / dark, / blue. // Land, / skyscrapers, / lights. / Runway, / tarmac. / Red Flag, / yellow Star; / Vietnam.* (pp. 42–43)
 - Each slash represents a line break in the book. Why do you think the author formatted these words in a special way? What is the impact?

Immigrant and refugee experiences

- What does *Việt kiều* mean, and what is its significance in the story (pp. 59, 77, and 78)?
- Close read pp. 53 & 54.
 - What are the attitudes shown in the book from the Vietnamese locals toward the US soldiers?
 - What attitudes do the family members (Ngọc Lan, her sister, brother, father, and mother) have toward the United States? Is there a difference in attitudes in the flashback compared to the scenes with Paul?

CHAPTERS 11–15

Literary devices and comprehension

- Why does the author include banter between Paul and Jane in the beginning of Ngọc Lan’s chapters? Does this change how we interpret the flashbacks?

Superstition and ghosts

- On pages 87, 88, 91, and 94, ghosts reappear in the story, and characters make two assertions about ghosts: (1) They haunt evil people, and (2) they prey on the weak. What does this mean to you?
- What does the presence of ghosts represent in the story (depression, mental illness, guilt, etc.)?
- In Vietnamese culture, the color white evokes death, while in Western cultures, it’s often the color black. Why do you think cultures gravitate toward these two colors?

CHAPTER 16–20

Literary device and comprehension

- At this point in the book, why do you think it is titled *My Mother, the Mermaid Chaser*?

Superstition and ghosts

- When Dì Diễm is sick, the family heals her by going to the ocean (pp. 112–114). What is the significance of bringing the sister to the ocean? How has the imagery of water been used in the story so far?

Family

- In this section, we finally meet Paul’s grandmother in the “modern” story. What are your impressions of their reunion, and how she has changed from the flashbacks?

Immigrant and refugee experiences

- Throughout the story, the author depicts suffering. Are there gendered differences in the suffering of men and women?

CHAPTERS 21–25

Superstition and ghosts

- What is the purpose of the ghost that’s haunting Paul? What type of living human qualities does the ghost have? What are the implications?

Immigrant and refugee experiences

- *Children of US soldiers, claimed or not, were given priority admittance into the United States. Thảo was purchased to help the family cut through the bureaucratic red tape of immigration.* (p. 200)
 - These children of US soldiers are also known as Amerasians, adoptees from the Việt Nam War, or children of war. Who were the parents of these children? What do you think life was like for them in Vietnam? What do you think life was like for them in the United States? What does it mean for Thảo to be purchased? Why was Thảo purchased?

Mental health

- *Bà Ngoại says to Paul, “In every person’s life we are given one bowl of rice. When you’re rich, you can supplement the rice with fish, meat, vegetables, things like this. But when you’re poor you eat one grain at a time to stave off total starvation. Your mom, after Dì Diễm died, she wasn’t the same. She didn’t have a taste for life—Bà Ngoại thinks maybe she craved the feeling of hunger.”* (p. 210)
 - What literary device(s) does the author employ? What does it mean to have “craved the feeling of hunger”?

CHAPTER 26–30

Immigrant and refugee experiences

- Why was everyone poor after the war? Why did Americans leave Việt Nam? How did American money influence the Vietnamese economy (money, food, resources, etc.)? Other than leaving Việt Nam, can you think of any alternate options that could have helped people in Việt Nam survive after the war?
- *In geography class, when they studied the world, Ngọc Lan found Vietnam. She found Indonesia. But Kuku Island wasn’t listed anywhere. Every time she passed a map or saw a globe, she searched. How could a place where she’d lived for months not exist? Hope dwindled.* (p. 263)
 - What is the purpose of a map? Where are Indonesia and Việt Nam on a map? Why is Kuku Island not included on the map Ngọc Lan was looking at? Can you find Kuku on any map today? Why are some maps different from others?

Mental health

- Reread the conversation between Paul and Anh Sáu in the market square (p. 247). Consider character motivation. What is the conflict in this scene?

Family

- Paul reflects on Bà Nội's story about his grandmother: "This is a Vietnamese thing. The family unit operates as one, so if one person does something bad, it reflects on everyone else" (p. 267).
 - Do you see this in your own life? Why do people feel affected or connected to the behaviors of their family members? What are the pros and cons to this way of thinking about family?

CHAPTER 31–35

Superstition and ghosts

- *Ngọc Lan's heart raced as she stared at the flowing water. The universe wanted her to let go. She wasn't ready. She reached into the tub. "Ah!" she shrieked, jerking her hand out. The water was scalding hot despite the knob being turned to warm. Steam, which had not been there before, rose from the bath. Chị Diễm's anger was present in the moisture.* (p.275)
 - How does the author represent the presence of a ghost?

Immigrant and refugee experiences

- *For Ngọc Lan, seeing the pageantry and vestiges of home reinforced her notion that they never should have left in the first place.* (p. 278)
Hearing Bác Nga speak about Bác Hồ, Ngọc Lan, reflects: "This overgenerous way of speaking was so utterly Vietnamese that Ngọc Lan felt herself tugging at the hem. She wished that wearing it would transport her home" (p. 294).
 - How do the concepts of nostalgia, remembrance, longing, and yearning relate to the scenes in these quotes? How do these feelings influence the characters' refugee experiences?

Family

- Ngọc Lan and Phúc compare a round and square sticky rice cake:
 - *"Yet somehow, the round one tastes better," he said.*
She knew what he meant. For him the southern version, the one he grew up with, was sweeter on his tongue. But Ngọc Lan didn't see it this way. Similar to how governments arbitrarily divided Vietnam into North and South, the different shapes of this same cake felt unimportant. What mattered was the inside. The fact that they were made of the same ingredients meant that deep down they were the same. (pp. 279–280)
 - What is the difference between northern and southern Vietnamese food? Why is this difference significant to Vietnamese people? In terms of literary devices, what does the difference between the square and round sticky rice cakes symbolize? What is the author trying to convey when she narrates "the different shapes of this same cake felt unimportant. What mattered was the inside. The fact that they were made of the same ingredients"?
- *Ngọc Lan didn't want an engagement. Not because she disliked Phúc but because in her mind she already had different plans. Marriage had been the farthest thing from her mind as she struggled to complete the required courses and maintain her 2.7 GPA to graduate. The few times she considered it, she imagined being married to Anh Luân. He was familiar, whereas Phúc was a stranger. When she looked toward Anh Luân, he avoided her. She knew then that he had thought the same thing.* (p. 296)
 - Can you describe the gender power dynamics between Ngọc Lan, Phúc, Anh Luân, and Ngọc Lan's guardians? Who has the most control/power in this situation? Why?

Mental health

- Why does Paul apologize to Joe? (pp. 289–290) Why now? What is Paul recognizing with this apology and his gift? What is he accomplishing?

Role of superstition and ghosts

- *Pink, purple, green, and red streaks shot forward like glistening eels. Ngọc Lan's eyes went wide. Chị Diễm? . . .*

Warm, colorful swirls swarmed around her hands and ankles . . .

Pink and purple sparkling ribbons raced around them, but before Ngọc Lan could introduce Jane to her elders, Jane's tiny hand hit the water. (p. 330)

- What literary devices are at work? How does the author use nonhuman elements to represent the presence of a ghost? What do you feel reading these abstract descriptions in the story?

Immigrant and refugee experiences

- Mợ Bích says, “Sometimes people remember what it is like to struggle and they help us.” (p. 325)
 - Why did the Lao woman help Ngọc Lan? How is struggle related to trust in this case? What qualities or characteristics are needed to help someone who is struggling?
- Ngọc Lan fails her citizenship three times (p. 341).
 - What does a citizenship test include? Why does a person need to take a citizenship test? What is the purpose of a passport? What are the pros and cons of taking a citizenship test?

- The travel agent refers to a “large numbers of reported suicides or accidental drownings” (p. 331).
 - How does this compare to Ngọc Lan's experience on Kuku Island?
- “Everyone in America is so busy.” *The way she says “busy” sounds like she doesn't think it's a good thing.* (p. 357)
 - What does “busy” mean to you? Why is “everyone in America” so busy according to Ngọc Lan?

Mental health

- *Evette's ex-husband had been her high school sweetheart, a big Filipino man whose embrace felt like a blanket, secure and warm. But he went to Vietnam and came back a different person. Evette never needed to meet Phúc to know that his demand for control was a by-product of having none during the war.* (p. 337)
 - Why did a Filipino man go to Vietnam? How and why did he change? Why would someone have a “demand for control”? What does it mean to be a “byproduct” of war?

Family

- *For years after that day, Ngọc Lan would wonder what might possess a man to be that kind, to drive them nearly an hour out of his way with no expectation of anything in return.* (p. 336)
 - Why was the man kind to Ngọc Lan? What effect did it have on her? What qualities or characteristics are needed to go out of your way for someone else?

This guide was created by Sarah Nguyễn, an archivist and researcher of information science, and Helen Li, a teen librarian at the Kansas City Public Library. Both Nguyễn and Li are University of Washington Master's of Library and Information Science alumni and members of the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association. Nguyễn has been co-chair of the Family Literacy Focus Committee, led the Talk Story Grant and Li has served as a member of the YA Literature Award Committee. Their works center the practice of disaggregating information when representing Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander peoples through community-centered, intergenerational, information, media, and data literacy practices created in collaboration by and for community members.



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