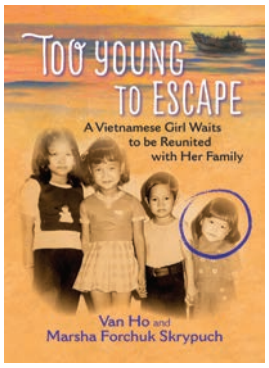
Too Young to Escape

READING GUIDE



Story Summary

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Van wakes up one morning to find that her mother, her sisters Lan and Loan, and her brother Tuan are gone. They have escaped the new communist regime that has taken over Ho Chi Minh City for freedom in the West. Four-year-old Van is too young—and her grandmother too old—for such a dangerous journey by boat, so the two have been left behind.

Once settled in North America, her parents will eventually be able to sponsor them, and Van and her grandmother will fly away to safety. In the meantime, Van is forced to work hard to satisfy her aunt and uncle, who treat her like an unwelcome servant. And at school she must learn that calling attention to herself is a mistake, especially when the bully who has been tormenting her turns out to be the son of a military policeman.

In 1980, **Vanessa Ho Gatensby** was just three years old when her father and eldest sister escaped from their home in South Vietnam. A year later, her mother, brother, and two older sisters also escaped in the middle of the night. For the next four years she waited to be reunited with her family while living and working in the home of her aunt and uncle. Today, Van is an account executive, and she lives in Brampton, Ontario, with her husband and two children.

Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch is an award-winning author of historical fiction for young people. Her middle-grade biography *Last Airlift: A Vietnamese Orphan's Rescue From War* was a 2013 Cybils Award finalist and a Bank Street Best Books of the Year for Children selection. Her picture book *Adrift at Sea: A Vietnamese's Boy's Story of Survival* has also been shortlisted for a number of awards, including the Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award. Marsha lives in Brantford, Ontario.

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BISAC Codes
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JNF025140 JUVENILE NONFICTION / History / Modern
JNF053100 JUVENILE NONFICTION / Social Topics / New Experience
JNF053240 JUVENILE NONFICTION / Social Topics / Emigration & Immigration
JNF019030 JUVENILE NONFICTION / Family / Multigenerational

Additional Resources
Adrift at Sea: A Vietnamese Boy's Story of Survival by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch and Tuan Ho, ill. by Brian Deines

Book Clubs

This guide has been developed for use in classroom book clubs/literature circles. Book clubs support and develop the love of reading as well as help students build comprehension and support the development of collaborative learning and critical thinking.

In book clubs students:

- meet in small groups (4–8) to discuss a book they are reading
- take turns assuming a leadership role within the group
- meet regularly and set the pace for their reading
- take ownership for their learning by:
  - selecting the book they will read (usually from a predetermined list provided by the teacher)
  - determine the pace of the reading
  - prepare for and run their discussions.

Prior to beginning with book clubs, teachers:

- take time to develop and nurture whole class discussions about books while modeling the skills and behaviors needed to collaborate and work together as a book club
- provide guidance, modeling, and support
- become familiar with all texts prior to making them available to students

During book club discussions, teachers:

- develop a schedule for book clubs ensuring they provide time for reading and discussion
- provide mini-lessons for any needs that may arise
- monitor through observation and conferring as well as supporting student self-assessment

Key elements:

- Groups meet on a regular basis, with time provided in class to read and discuss their book
- Students use a "reader's notebook" to write notes, comments, insights, and questions while they read
- Students bring their reader's notebook to each meeting to support their discussion
- Discussion topics may emerge from the students as they read; however, the teacher provides discussion topics and provocations to help students engage in rich discussions (suggestions are provided in this guide)
- Group meetings are collaborative, with each group developing a set of norms for their group
- The teacher serves as facilitator
- Assessment is grounded in teacher observation, student conversations, and student self-assessment
- Book clubs promote a love of reading

Thinking about Assessment…

This Discussion Guide offers a range of prompts, tasks, and provocations to support Book Club discussions. While using this guide in the classroom, teachers have a number of opportunities to use observation, conversation, and product to assess student thinking and learning. The tasks and prompts offered in this guide are designed to support discussion, sharing, and student thinking while providing an opportunity for students to demonstrate comprehension, extension of thinking, and critical literacy. Assessment can include: self-assessment and peer assessment, conversations with students through teacher/student conferences; group discussions; and products created by the students.

For the teacher and student to have a clear, common understanding of the expectations and criteria to achieve success while reading the novels, educators develop learning goals based on curriculum expectations and share them with the students in language they can understand. Then together, the educator and students co-create criteria to make the path to success visible and clear.

These success criteria are posted in the classroom, are visible to all students, and may be revised and edited based on the learning and understanding of the students.

As the Book Club meetings are collaborative and begin with the groups developing a set of norms for their group, it is suggested that all groups open each meeting with a reflection of the previous discussion. These reflections can highlight what went well during the discussions; what needs to improve in these discussions; and considerations for the current discussion.

Discussion Guide:

This discussion guide will offer a variety of tasks, discussion prompts, and questions to provoke thinking and deepen comprehension before, during, and after the reading of the novel. These are suggestions only and it is certainly not necessary to complete the entire list of suggested activities/questions. Educators are encouraged to make choices based on the strengths, needs, and interests of the students.

Highlighted Curriculum Expectations
Ontario Ministry of Education Language Arts Curriculum K–8

Oral Communication
1.2 Active listening strategies
1.3 Comprehension strategies
1.4 Demonstrating Understanding
1.5 Making Inferences/Interpreting Texts
1.6 Extending Understanding

Reading for Meaning
1.4 Demonstrating Understanding
1.5 Making Inferences/Interpreting Texts
1.6 Extending Understanding
1.7 Analyzing Texts
1.8 Responding / Evaluating Texts

Reading: Understanding Form and Style
2.1 Text Forms
2.3 Text Features
2.4 Elements of Style

Reading: Reflecting on Reading Skills and Strategies
3.1 Reading Familiar Words
3.2 Reading Unfamiliar Words
4.2 Interconnected Skills

Writing: Using Knowledge of Form and Style
2.1 Form
2.2 Voice
2.3 Word Choice
2.5 Point of View
2.7 Revision

Applying Knowledge of Language Conventions / Presenting Written Work Effectively
3.4 Punctuation
3.5 Grammar
3.6 Proofreading

Before Reading

1. Most of the story takes place in the country of Vietnam. Locate Vietnam on a map and, as a group, research to find a few fun facts about the country. Share this information with the entire class in a discussion about Vietnam.

   As an alternative to this discussion, the teacher can assign different topics to student-partners to focus their research. Some suggested topics could include: largest cities and population, common Vietnamese foods, first language spoken in Vietnam, countries that border the country of Vietnam, cultural facts about the Vietnamese people, form of government in the country, historical facts about Vietnam, etc.

Due to the complexity and nature of the subject, the below task may be more appropriate for older students:

2. The story offers some insights about the repercussions of the Vietnam War to the Vietnamese people. The teacher can share some background information about the war: causes, the countries involved, the dates the war took place, the outcome of the war, and the effects on the people of Vietnam.

   The following links may be helpful:
   Vietnam War Simplified!
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoXySB-WIZE
   The Main Facts About the Vietnam War
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgK2dfWHADw

During Reading

Chapters 1–4

1. Create a timeline of the chores Van is required to do before leaving for school every morning. Are you expected to do any chores during your morning routine? If so, create a timeline of your chores and compare it to the one created for Van.

2. According to what you have read so far in the story, why do you think Van's father had to leave his family and escape in order to protect his life?

3. How did the Vietnam War affect Van's family? Make a list of the changes and losses her family has had to endure. Compare this to a time in your life when you had to adjust your lifestyle as a result of a big change.

4. In this part of the story, the reader reads about many of Van's family members and the roles they fulfill in order to help the family function on a daily basis.

   • Create a list of these family members in the story and describe the roles/chores they have in the family.

   • Have the students create a chart listing their family members and the roles they are expected to fulfill to help their family function on a daily basis.

   • As a large group, discuss these charts, highlighting the importance of how families come together to help and support each other.

5. As a class, discuss how awful it must have been for Van to wake up one morning and discover her mother and siblings had escaped in the middle of the night without saying goodbye to her.

Chapters 5–9

1. In chapter 5, we read about Van's trip to the market with her grandmother, Bà Ngoại. Using Van's descriptions, make a chart of the smells and foods in the market.

   • Share your descriptions with a partner and then, together with your group, highlight the adjectives used by the author to describe the food.

   • Have a group discussion about the importance of adjectives in writing to help readers visualize what is being described by the author.

   • Take turns recording the highlighted adjectives on chart paper for future reference when writing your own descriptions.

2. Record the ways Van found comfort whenever she missed her mother and siblings.

   • Have a group discussion about how you and your peers find comfort when you are sad or upset.

3. In partners, think about and discuss Ma's decision not to take Van with her when she left for Canada.

4. Van is bullied by another boy in her class. Describe how she feels about the situation. Why doesn't her grandmother help her in this situation?

Chapters 10–11

1. Bà Ngoại shares a story with Van about her own childhood. How does this story affect Van? Think about how this conversation changed the relationship between Van and her Grandmother, Bà Ngoại. Share your thinking with the large group.

   • Have a conversation about how everyone has a story about their past. Ask your parents/caregiver about a family story and record it in a narrative format.

   • If possible, bring in photos to accompany the story.

   • Create a class book of the family stories.

   • Your teacher can take time to read each student's story during a daily read-aloud period.

2. On page 63 in the story, Van writes, "I had been so focused on my own troubles I hadn't really thought of anyone else." Explain why Van said this. Describe a time when you had similar thoughts or feelings.

3. On page 64, Bà Ngoại and Van have a heartfelt conversation. Bà Ngoại ends the conversation at the end of chapter ten with a very important message: "Be thankful for what you do have, instead of fretting about what you don't have."

   • Think about what you are grateful for.

   • Create a class Gratitude Wall by recording your thoughts of gratitude on colored paper. Include a drawing to accompany your thoughts.

Chapters 12–15

1. Brainstorm various adjectives to describe how Bà Ngoại and Van felt when they started to receive the packages from their family in Canada.

   • Record these adjectives on the chart paper created earlier in the discussion guide.

2. With the group, discuss how these packages from Canada gave hope to the family in Vietnam.

3. With a partner, share how life continues to challenge Van and her family. Consider how Van is able to cope with these challenges. Discuss with your group.

4. Why do you think Van reacted the way she did when her Bà Ngoại shared the news about the plan to leave Vietnam and join their family in Canada? Provide evidence from the story to support your thinking.

5. What did Van and her friend Trang have in common? Why do you think these similarities strengthened their relationship and ties to each other?

   • Share a story of a person you are very close to and reasons why this closeness started.

Chapters 16–18

1. What were the gifts Van gave to her friend Trang prior to leaving for Canada? How did these gifts demonstrate her deep friendship and loyalty to Trang?

2. How was Bà Ngoại a loving support to Van?

   • Think about a family member who loves and supports you.

   • Write a letter to this person thanking them for everything they have done.

3. On page 110, Van writes, "My heart pounds with anticipation." As a group, discuss what this means and why Van would be feeling this way.

   • With a partner, share a time when you experienced a physical reaction similar to the one Van described.

4. Van and her grandmother continue to experience challenges. As a reader, what did you think about the "date mix-up" in chapter eighteen?

5. What were some of the new Canadian experiences Van encountered? Provide examples from the story.

After Reading

1. At the end of the story, the authors share notes from interviews with both Van's mother and father. The authors also include photographs taken of Van and her

family during their life in Canada. As a group, discuss the following questions:

• Why do you think it was important for the author to include this information at the end of the story?

• How did this impact your understanding or enjoyment of the story? Explain your thinking.

2. After reading the interviews at the end of the story, describe and explain how you felt about the difficult decisions made by the family members. What conclusions can you draw about their adjustments to the new country?

3. When conducting interviews, it is important for the interviewer to ask open-ended questions. These questions allow the interviewee to share detailed information and thinking. Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a yes/no reply and will often begin with words such as *explain, justify, determine, why, how, where, who,* or *what.*

• Create and record 5–10 open-ended questions to use during an interview.

• Interview someone you know who emigrated from another country.

• Conduct the interview and record the responses in your notebook

• Be prepared to share the interview with a partner in the group

• If possible, bring in photos of this person during their immigration experience.

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