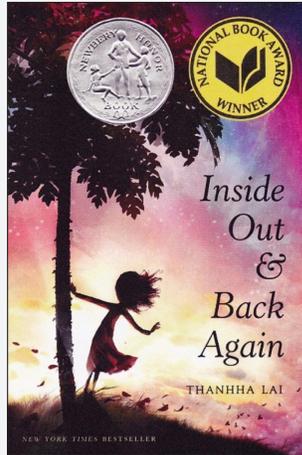


First Opinion: The Power of Poetry in *Inside Out & Back Again*

Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out & Back Again*. New York: Harper, 2011.

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In 1975, Hà and her family are forced to flee war-ravaged Vietnam. They board ships filled with hundreds of other refugees, and they wait—hoping for life, for a future, for help. So much was lost, so much left behind in Vietnam. Hà, her three brothers, and their mother take us with them as they leave their home to float on a sea of expectant anxiety and desperation; as they are taken to a tent city on Guam; and as they are finally sponsored and relocated in Alabama. The family’s struggles, far from being alleviated by their move, now include acquiring English, adjusting to new foods and new ways of living, and navigating within ignorant, lazy, or simply hateful people.

The story of Hà and her family is beautiful, poignant, heart wrenching, and inspiring. Told with a lyrical, magical narrative in a quest/journey poem akin to Homer’s *The Odyssey* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Lai’s semi-autobiographical story foregrounds the importance of language and expression to the story she is telling. Many of the poems in the book’s “Alabama” section (Part III) engage Hà’s frustrations with learning English and struggling to express herself and her truths:

I wish
.....
that I could be invisible
until I can talk back,

that English could be learned
without so many rules.

.....

Mostly
I wish
I were
Still smart. (Lai 158)

While language and communication dominate this narrative, the mode of telling the story—the use of poetry to express and refine the tale—is just as much a part of Lai’s work and Hà’s journey as the content of the novel itself. Lai’s work makes it clear that language is power, that the ability to communicate and to express oneself is a human right and a human necessity—a necessity both Lai and Hà claim through the mode of storytelling.

Poetry condenses the language of the novel to a pure, clear form: another language—neither Vietnamese nor English—but the language of the poet. Roberta Seelinger Trites contends that “The feminist character’s recognition of her agency and her voice invariably leads to some sort of transcendence; usually taking the form of a triumph over whatever system or stricture was repressing her” (7). Language, expression, and “voice,” Trites argues, are “closely related to the feminist protagonist’s agency . . . for voice often serves as a metaphor for female agency” (6). The prominence of language, communication, and expression of voice achieved through the poetic form of this collection, as well as through much of its contents, is significant to the narrative’s empowering hope and triumphant future (for both author and protagonist). Hà, as a semi-autobiographical embodiment of Lai’s childhood, struggles with and masters two languages; yet, her connections with Lai, and with Lai’s journey suggest she also masters a third—becoming a fluent poet: a master of language, voice, and expression. Language is of particular importance in this poem/novel, as is the protagonist’s (and author’s) struggle to find herself in charge of her future and her potential rather than being limited by the situations in which she finds herself or by the ignorance and hatred of the people around her—a struggle from which she eventually emerges triumphant. Hà does not let individuals, like her cruel classmate “Pink Boy,” maintain their stranglehold on the power of voice and language. Through great effort, she claims her own voice and agency, transcending the constrictions people like “Pink Boy” would force upon her, and refusing to be controlled by the silencing ethics of repression.

Hà and Lai wield the power of language for themselves, foregrounding the power of voice through the form and content of the poetry. In a poem entitled, “An Engineer, a Chef, a Vet, and Not a Lawyer,” Hà details her brothers’ decisions for their careers and futures—decisions that do not quite fall into the plans and hopes of their mother: “Mother has always wanted / an engineer, a real doctor, a poet, / and a lawyer” (Lai 256). Here, Hà further aligns herself with her creator, Lai, suggesting that, while she does not plan

to become a lawyer, there is a chance that she will become a poet, a master of voice, a triumphant wielder of personal and linguistic power.

Works Cited

Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out & Back Again*. New York: Harper, 2011. Print.

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About the Author

Arielle McKee is an American Studies master's student at Purdue University with an interest in how magical realism, fantasy, and children's literature function in American culture.