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Reviews of The Shared Room and The Most Beautiful Thing

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Book Reviews:

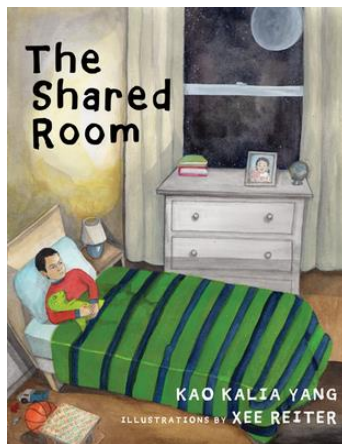
Yang, K. K. (2020). *The shared room*. 32 pp. University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 978-1517907945.

Yang, K. K. (2020). *The most beautiful thing*. Carolrhoda Books. 32 pp. ISBN: 978-1541561915

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Grief and Loss are often seen as taboo subjects to discuss openly in many cultures. However, grief is universal, perpetual, and complex. Grief can take many forms and depend on the nature of the attachment between the survivor and the dead (people, animals, living things). When Loss happens, the survivor's attachment will influence the shape and level of grief. Kao Kalia Yang (2020) has brought the topic of attachment, grief and loss to her children's books, *The Shared Room* and *The Most Beautiful Things*, to initiate this difficult conversation.

The Shared Room brings the human emotions of grief and loss through the story of a Hmong American living on the East side of St. Paul, Minnesota. Kao Kalia Yang reveals the loss of the fourth child due to accidental drowning in the swimming lake. She guides the readers through different stages of grief for both the parents and the children. The impact of grief and Loss depends on the attachment length between the subjects. Holinger (2020) discusses how the early child-parent relationship and vice versa shape adult attachment. We all learn attachments from our first interaction within our families and later in social spaces (school, work, etc.). Kao's blunt but honest writing reflects the deep emotions that are often neglected and hidden by the cultural norm.

Hmong immigrants to the United States began arriving in the wake of the Vietnam War in 1975. The Hmong are family-oriented, a subtype of collectivism, in which the interests of the family come before those of the individual (Helsel et al., 2020, p. 69). The funeral is one of the most important rituals in the Hmong community, regardless of gender or religious background (Falk, 1992; Pfeifer & Lee, 2005; Yang, 2012).

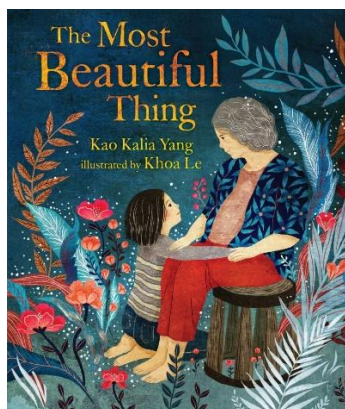
Death can be an indefinite or unexpected event. We meet our death with fear and despair because of anticipated pain and hopelessness of the unknown. Eastern and Western attitudes toward death can be very different. While many Eastern societies are associated with collective values, Western societies emphasize individualistic values. This fundamental difference in perception of existence as deeply embedded in the family instead of individualist existence is significant for understanding how East Asian people cope with grief in death and dying.



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Xee Reuters' illustrations really help highlight the storyline. The artist allows the reader to explore Asian American values through different characters in the story. Readers can see the functionality and structure of Asian American family through different illustrations. Readers can relate to the characters as son, daughter, or as parents as the illustration allows them to imagine in the storyline. As Asian American, I am thrilled to see the book represents part of my identity and cultural values. *The Shared Room* has demonstrated that grief is universal, and it impacts every culture. While this is a children's book, the writing is tailored to older children. This book is a great contribution to the subject of Asian American literatures.



The Most Beautiful Thing brings back the memories of being newcomers to a new place. The books provide young readers with the opportunity to integrate into Hmong culture and language. The book showcases the relationship between the main character and her Hmong grandmother. In Hmong culture, children are taught to listen and respect the elders. The illustrations in the book are colorful and eye catching. As the young girl describes, “My grandma came from a time and a place where creatures lurked in the jungles waiting to chase unwary children. She told us that she once looked into the gleaming eyes of a tiger and felt its hot breath on her face.” A picture of a fearsome tiger represents her grandmother's dream. The story was moving, highlighting how family love, as symbolized by the grandmother's smile, can hold people together during tough times, and bring beauty and joy to all.

Her authentic writing grabs the reader's attention and allows them to imagine being in a village in Southeast Asia. This book helps us understand more of their points of view, with both respect for the harsh history lesson and joy for the hope of the future. This book can be enjoyed by children of all ages.

Both books touch on delicate subjects. Does grief have a language? How can parents explain to their children grief and loss? When we deal with unpredictable and uncontrollable things such as grief and loss, how we allow these feelings to be felt and expressed can be significant. Unfortunately, there is no correct way to respond to grief and loss. However, Kao Kalia Yang has provided parents with some starting points for such difficult conversation.

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About the author



Bao Diep, is a PhD student in the Culture and Teaching program at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He earned his BA in Sociology, and his MSW in Social Work also from the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities. His research interest includes Southeast Asian American students' experiences in higher education; Vietnamese American students' experiences, and how their identities, particularly queer identities, impact their experiences in higher education in the U.S.



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