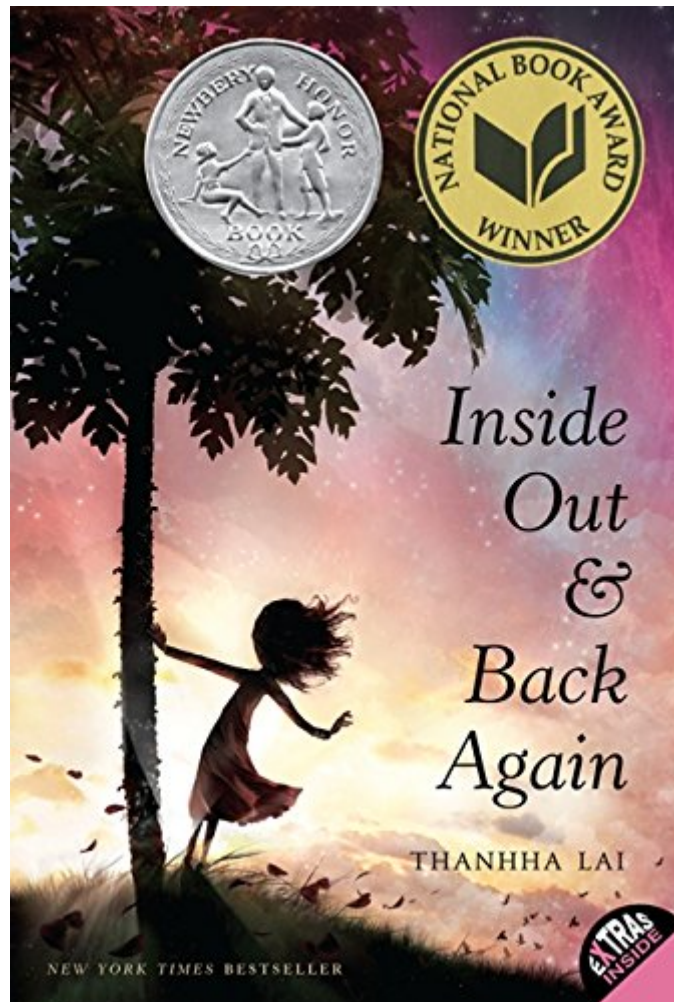


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# Inside Out And Back Again



## Customer Reviews

I love narrative poetry, and this book was no exception. At the height of the Vietnam War, 10 year-old Kim Ha is forced to leave Saigon with her mother and older brothers. Her father has been missing for several years, and the family continually hopes for his return. The decision to leave is heartwrenching, knowing that if they go, there will be no real way for their father to find them again, if indeed, he is still alive. Ha's mother gives her children the option of saving one thing... everything else must be destroyed, so as not to leave any evidence behind for the invading soldiers. Once aboard the ship, the family suffers from extremely close quarters and lack of food. The boat captain's unlucky snap judgement on the best escape route means that their journey is drawn out much longer than they had anticipated, necessitating rationing. People grow ruthless and hoard what little food they have. The ship is rescued by Americans, and the families make their way to the States. Salvation? Hardly. Ha and her family end up in Alabama in the early-70's, with racial tensions at an all time high. After everything she's been through, Ha must endure appallingly racist bullies at school, as well as condescending teachers, who don't understand that just because she hasn't learned English perfectly yet, that doesn't mean that she isn't a bright and extremely observant girl. Ha is desperately homesick and finds heavily-processed American food disgusting compared to the fresh papayas and traditional Vietnamese fare that she is used to. At this point, I really began to wish for some sort of break from the unrelenting sadness of the story - whether by comic relief, or a sympathetic character to lighten the tension. I had hoped that Ha's neighbor, Miss Washington would fill the bill, but even though she's kindly and means well, ultimately she comes across as a dotty old lady who doesn't quite get it. A semi-autobiographical story, this book is simultaneously difficult to read, and very accessible. The four "chapters" it's broken into: Saigon, At Sea, Alabama, and From Now On, neatly break up the action. The emotional turmoil that Ha goes through makes this book quite challenging indeed, but the words flow so smoothly it's hard not to get drawn in to the tale. The writing was wonderfully crafted and made reading about the immigrant experience completely compelling. As powerful, arresting and in some ways just as sad as *The Bridge to Terabithia*, *Inside Out and Back Again* could definitely be a Newbery contender.

*INSIDE OUT AND BACK AGAIN* is a beautiful novel-in-verse about a young girl who flees Vietnam as Saigon is falling and makes a new home with her mother and brothers in Alabama. Based on the author's own experiences as a child immigrant, the poems are spare and lovely, and they manage to capture both the sense of wonder and the feeling of isolation of a newcomer in a world where everything seems different. As a teacher, one thing I found especially interesting and heartbreaking

was Ha's feeling of suddenly not being smart any more when she enrolled in her new school in America - such a common experience for gifted kids who encounter a language and culture barrier in a new home. I really enjoyed this book and think readers in grades 4-7 will love it, too. It'd be great as a classroom read-aloud or for literature circles. Consider recommending it along with CRACKER: THE BEST DOG IN VIETNAM by Cynthia Kadohata and ALL THE BROKEN PIECES, an equally beautiful novel in verse by Ann Burg, as a way to explore Vietnam from different perspectives. It would also be fantastic paired with Katherine Applegate's HOME OF THE BRAVE, which is also an immigrant story in verse, from the point of view of a boy from Africa. Both books are short and poignant, and readers will come away with a much better understanding of what it feels like to land in a strange, new world and try to make that place home.

Ha has spent all of her ten years in Saigon (Vietnam). She knows the markets, she does well in school, and she loves the papaya tree that she planted behind her family's house. But the war is creeping ever closer and her mother struggles to provide enough food. As it becomes apparent that Saigon will fall to the Communist North, Ha and her family make a painful choice to flee the country in hopes of finding refuge. When they land in America things seem to be working out, but as Ha struggles to adapt to a new language, a new religion, new climate, and new food, she wonders if it wouldn't have been better to stay in Vietnam. And what about the father she has never met who went missing nine years earlier? Usually I am not a big fan of novels written in free verse. I like my poetry to be poetry and my stories to be prose. But I have had the privilege of reading this book and several others that have convinced me that done right, free verse can be particularly powerful. This story is based on the author's experiences as a child and maybe that's why they are so realistic. I promise you will not be able to read this book without feeling compassion for Ha and her family. You will cheer for their successes and feel discomfort at the poor treatment they receive from many. The book provides a thought-provoking look at a topic (immigration) that remains controversial still. Highly recommended.

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