

NINA MOINI: A new book from Minnesota children's author V.T. Bidania looks at the profound impacts of war and displacement through the eyes of an 11-year-old girl. *A Year Without Home* follows Gao Sheng and her family as they live through the wars in Laos and Vietnam during the 1960s and '70s. Eventually, they are forced to escape their beloved home in Laos, making their way to the refugee camps in Thailand.

Written as verse, the story is a break from Vong's other novels and stands as her middle grade debut. She joins me now to tell us more about it. Hi, Vong. Thanks for being with us today.

VONG BIDANIA: Hi. Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: I loved hearing about your process in writing this book and that you call it a quote, "fictional memoir." Could you tell me a little bit about what this means to you and how it is in a way a reflection of your family's story?

VONG BIDANIA: Yes. Well, I was inspired to write a novel-in-verse after reading so many beautiful novels-in-verse. And even though I don't have a poetry background, I'm not a poet, I thought I would try writing one. And that's when I decided that maybe I would write about my family's experience, our journey leaving Laos after the war, and our time in the refugee camps.

It was a great experience. It was hard. It was very emotional. This is a really personal story, a very special story. But I learned so much writing this book. I learned so much about what we went through and just about how we persevered during this really hard time. And yeah, I'm glad that I wrote the book and I feel like I'm a changed writer and a changed person because of this experience.

NINA MOINI: What about having an 11-year-old protagonist of the story and writing for that middle grade or that area, what made you want to focus in there?

VONG BIDANIA: Well, middle grade books are my favorite. I think growing up, the books for that age group were the ones that really always held a special place in my heart. And even now as an adult, I mostly read kids' books and middle grade is still my favorite. That age range of age 12-year-olds, those books are the ones that really speak to me. And so I knew I wanted this book to be a middle grade book. And usually middle grade narrators are around 10, 11, 12, and my sister was around 11 at the time. So she just seemed like the perfect person to be the narrator for the book.

NINA MOINI: That is an age where you're just figuring out what's going on and who you are. It's an interesting time. And I agree, those books stay with you forever. So you turned obviously to your own family. Where else did you turn for inspiration in writing this story?

VONG BIDANIA: Well, like I said, I had read a lot of middle grade verse novels that were all so beautiful, so powerful, and that really resonated with me. And yes, most of them did have protagonists who were immigrants, so that kind of inspired me. But really it was just talking to my sister and my family, just learning more about our journey and our experience. That in and of itself really inspired me to work on this. Yeah, it was just the books I read and then just hearing more in detail about our experience and our journey.

NINA MOINI: How did you balance-- and maybe you didn't think consciously about it but maybe you did-- just the difficulties of a journey and also the hope, the courage, the good and the bad?

VONG BIDANIA: Well, you know what? When I was writing the book, I just really wanted to focus on Gao Sheng, my main character's experience and her connection, her emotional connection to home and how much she cherished and treasured home. And so that's what I really focused on. It was really just the emotional journey she went through and the feeling of loss and then longing. That's kind of where my focus was.

And then, of course, I had to include details about the war and all the difficulties and challenges that our family and so many other Hmong families faced. And so those just came into the story naturally. But as long as I made sure that I focused on Gao Sheng's-- like I said, her love for home and her missing home, then that was what I really wanted the story to be mostly about too.

NINA MOINI: I'm curious if when you're writing your stories, if you share with anybody along the way. I don't know if maybe you shared with your sister a little bit because she provided some inspiration. At what point do you kind of let people in on what you're working on?

VONG BIDANIA: Well, I definitely early on I did include her a lot. I asked her a lot of questions. So I did include her a lot and she read a lot of my drafts early on. But as I got more into the book and it got longer, then I stopped because then you start getting so many opinions from different readers. I shared some parts, excerpts, with other siblings, too, and my brother and other sisters as well. But like I said, that was earlier on. Once I got further along in the book, then I just stopped and I just worked on it myself.

NINA MOINI: Sure. Well, I'm curious to too what you're hoping readers will take away from this story, especially because it does focus on younger people and children and the trauma of displacement through that lens. What are you hoping people could learn?

VONG BIDANIA: Well, first and foremost, I hope that the book can educate readers, regardless of their age, about this moment in history, this time in history that so few people know about. How the Hmong were allies to the US and how we fought for the Americans in the war. And how our soldiers fought alongside US soldiers. And how we suffered so much and lost so much. And when the US lost the war, that's why we had to leave our home and that's how we ended up in this country.

I think a lot of people don't know that. So I hope that the book can teach them about that. It's not something that's taught in schools, in history books, and it's not included in textbooks. That's what I want people to get from it. But I also want people to see a more fully dimensional picture of Hmong people because for so long, really the only inclusion or representation that's so often shown of Hmong people is of the sad, struggling refugee facing challenges, trying to assimilate. And just those same stories.

And I wanted to show another side, like I said, a more fully dimensional picture of us. And yes, the war does talk about war-- I'm sorry, the book does talk about war and have sad moments and does talk about being in a refugee camp and how hard it is to be a refugee. But at the same time, I didn't want it to just be another refugee story. I wanted it to be a human story. And I'm hoping that people will get that as well. Learn about this moment in history and then also see the Hmong in a more fully dimensional light. Read this human story.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. Thank you so much Vong for stopping by and sharing about your work. I really appreciate it.

VONG BIDANIA: You're welcome.

NINA MOINI: That's author V.T. Bidania talking about her new book called *A Year Without Home*.