



Make Me a World, 2023

2023 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Curriculum Connections

My Grandfather's Song

by Phùng Nguyễn & Huỳnh Kim Liên

Fiction, set in Vietnam

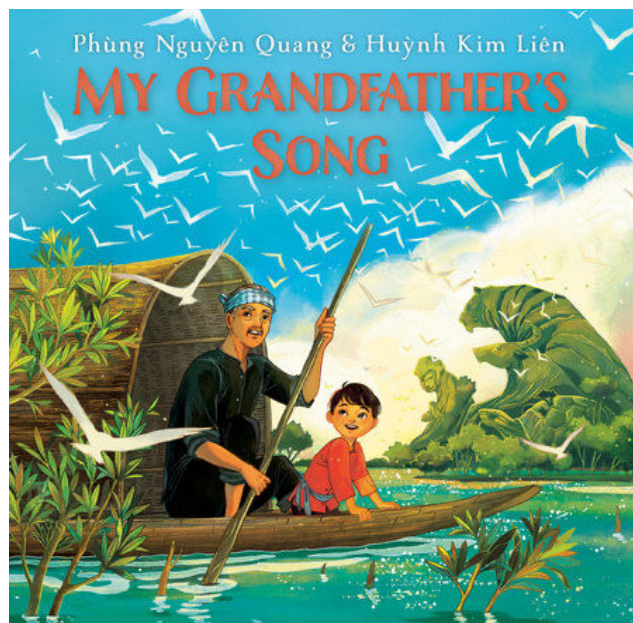
We are a symphony of generations.
—*My Grandfather's Song*

Appropriate for Grades: K–9

Best for Grades: K–5

Introduction to the Book

With lyrical writing, imaginative visual combinations, and a vivid color palette, *My Grandfather's Song* is a startlingly beautiful reading experience. Though clearly well matched for a younger audience, its themes tap into the deep roots of humanity for meaningful discussions with students in upper grades as well.



No matter the age group reading the book, it lends itself to at least three readings aloud. The first should be uninterrupted with special attention to the musicality and the sound of the words—the whole book is centered on sound. The second should allow time to pause the reading to focus on the sounds depicted. And the third should engage with the images accompanying the words.

Best Matched Curricular Units

- Humanity in Nature (Ecology)
- Figurative Language (Language Arts)
- Foreground and Background (Art)
- Settling in a “New” Land (Social Studies)

Essential Questions

- How can nature and humanity thrive together?
- How do we remember those before us?
- What do generations share with one another?



Make Me a World, 2023

2023 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Curriculum Connections

My Grandfather's Song

by Phùng Nguyễn & Huỳnh Kim Liên

Fiction, set in Vietnam

Key Vietnamese Vocabulary

đàn nhị (pronounced: dan-nee): A classical two-stringed instrument played with a bow; similar to the Chinese erhu; often used for more mournful, nostalgic melodies.

Here is a list of suggested activities followed by suggested discussion/writing prompts. The book is not paginated, so no page numbers are provided.

Suggested Activities

Cover Predictions. What kind of birds are depicted on the cover? Because the book is called *My Grandfather's Song*, how do you expect the title to connect to the images on the cover?

Front Matter. On the first page, two monkeys look out from a tree. What are they looking at? What might they be thinking?

On the title page, we see birds. How do these connect to the cover? What kind of birds are they? Research cranes and their significance in East Asian culture and, more specifically, in Vietnamese culture. As students discover symbolic meanings associated with different species around the world (and in Vietnam), consider assigning an art project that focuses on a species chosen by the student.

Music of Words and Nature. On the second reading of the book, have students generate a list of sound-related words the authors use (for example, "listen," "lullaby," "voices," "crash," "loud," and "song" appear in the first six pages).

Students might try to vocalize the sounds and imagine what the authors are trying to convey. They could also look at a spread and consider adding additional sound-related words.

If available, take the students on their own walk through nature, and have them gather a list of sounds they hear. As a class, ask them to come up with their own lyrical ways to describe those sounds.

Grandfather's Words (His Song). Grandfather uses many metaphors in his speech with Ti. Assign groups of students to work on "unpacking" the meanings of his quotes



Make Me a World, 2023

Curriculum Connections

My Grandfather's Song

by Phùng Nguyễn & Huỳnh Kim Liên

Fiction, set in Vietnam

2023 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

and then sharing with the class. See if there is consensus or disagreement across the groups' interpretations. Here are few of Grandfather's memorable metaphors:

"This is music and we must learn the song."

"The bamboo we cut is a melody we raise high as a roof."

"We hold the earth in our hands, Ti."

"There are tigers inside of you, Ti."

"You do not have to shout down the storm."

Hidden to Seek. The illustrations in the book frequently hide things (some more obvious than others). The students could go on a search for all of the hidden—and not hidden—animals. They might also seek the less obvious secrets in the pages (the moon as an eye after the storm, the fish hooks as music notes on Grandfather's boat, and many more).

Symbolic Animal Illustration. Invite students to select a strong emotion they recently experienced. Then ask them to choose an animal that symbolizes their emotion (no pets—dogs, cats, goldfish, etc.) and illustrate it as part of the scene where they felt that emotion. Students will determine whether the animal should be in the foreground or background of the scene, what pose it should have, and what look its eyes should have—using a color palette that resonates with the emotion of the scene.

Metaphor Search and Development. As a class, students could search for and identify all of the explicit metaphors in the text. Why did the authors rely so heavily on musical metaphors for this story? Would music be an effective metaphor to describe their own contemporary lives? If not, what might work better? Encourage them to collaborate on developing an extended metaphor for the average day in the life of schoolchildren.

Suggested Discussion/Writing Prompts

Ti through the Ages. What evidence can you find that Ti grows older as the story progresses? How many years do you think pass from the beginning of the book to its end?

Water and Sky. Sky and water are major images in this book. Pay close attention to how much water takes up some pages versus how much sky takes up on other pages,



Make Me a World, 2023

Curriculum Connections

My Grandfather's Song

by Phùng Nguyễn & Huỳnh Kim Liên

Fiction, set in Vietnam

2023 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

and pay extra attention to how water and sky interact with one another. How do you think they fit into the meaning of this story? How do they impact the lives of the characters as well as the animals who share the pages with the characters?

Animal Symbolism. Choose one of the “hidden” animals in the story. Use the written words on the page in combination with the way the animal is illustrated to determine its symbolic meaning. What do you think the animal stands for? How do its colors, its actions in the scene, and its eyes reveal its nature?

Grandfather's Departure. When Ti and his son send a prayer for Grandfather, we see a boat with a white figure guiding it toward an island of stone-sculpted animals. Why do you think the illustrator included those four animal shapes in the island, and can you guess who is guiding the boat?

Generational Connection. The words on the first pages and on the very last pages of the book are identical: “Listen, do you hear it?” Why did the authors choose this repetition? How are these pages similar and how are they different? Besides the identical words, what connections do the pages have? How are they disconnected? What are some of the links between them (perhaps found on the intervening pages)?

Author: Josh Foster, Educator and Learner
2025