



Curriculum Connections

A Two-Placed Heart

by Doan Phuong Nguyen

Tu Books, 2024

Fiction, set in Vietnam and United States

2024 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / Middle School Literature

How can two countries on the same planet be so opposite?

—*A Two-Placed Heart* (p. 232)

Appropriate for Grades: 6–11

Best for Grades: 6–9

Introduction to the Book

Narrative poetry is an immensely inviting genre for a broad spectrum of readers; struggling readers are drawn to its brevity while stronger readers enjoy more time to delve into the precision of language. Doan Phuong Nguyen's *A Two-Placed Heart* is an example of narrative poetry that gives voice to the complicated feelings of wanting to belong yet also wanting to retain the separate uniqueness of one's own origins. The protagonist, Bom, and her family emigrate from their home in Vietnam to Nashville, Tennessee. Assimilation comes (too) easily for Bom's younger sister; however, for Bom, the cost of assimilating feels too great.



Best Matched Curricular Units

- Identity (Between Worlds)
- Immigration & Assimilation
- Generational Effects of War

Essential Questions

- What is a 100% American?
- Does our language determine who we are?
- What role do traditions play in who we are? How do they link us to our past?



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Suggested Activities

Pre-search. Prior to reading the novel, explore information regarding the following topics:

- French colonization in Vietnam
- Viet Cong communists and the Republic of Vietnam
- Map of Vietnam (especially Quang Ngai, Da Nang, Saigon)
- Vietnamese refugees to America

Book Cover. Looking at the title, the author's name, and the book cover, try to infer what themes this book might explore. Make predictions about the protagonist as well as the plot.

Weight of Words. In English-language poetry, typically the final word of any line carries the greatest weight in that particular line of poetry, and the final line of any poem carries the greatest meaning for that particular poem. Select a poem to practice analyzing theme using this method. Highlight or circle the final word of each line as well as the final line of the poem. Using only the marked words, develop an argument around how these specific words illuminate a major theme in the poem. *Extension: Look for various poetic devices and examine how they support or refute the proposed theme.*

Opposites Log. Bom consistently highlights the many points of opposition between Vietnam and America. Create a table with two columns, labeled "Vietnam" and "America," and list the various opposites Bom identifies as you read the book. *Extension: Add any opposites you notice that Bom may be unaware of and highlight them for later discussion.*

Diction S p a c i n g. In many of the poems, the author adds additional spacing within specific words. As a class, go hunting for such words. Try to determine how or why the author selects these words. What purpose does this technique serve? Is there a link among these words—across poems or only within the poems where they appear? *Extension: Poetry is often thought of as, first and foremost, an oral tradition. How does the author challenge this idea with her writing techniques?*



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Two Names. In the poem “My Name” (pp. 174–175), Bom writes her two names, one she uses at home and her formal name used at school, and then she describes the different personalities she exhibits when using each.

Option 1: If you use two names (perhaps a nickname and a formal name), write your own version of the poem, telling of the different personalities each name reveals in you.

Option 2: If you go only by one name, try the activity for a parent or grandparent (for example, a mother might go by “Mommy” as well as “Iris Chen”).

Food for Love. In the poem “Bahn Uot and Ba Ngoai” (p. 218), Bom writes about how a specific food (*bahn uot*) always reminds her of Ba Ngoai (her grandmother). Write a poem about a specific food that you connect with someone you care deeply about.

Suggested Discussion/Writing Prompts

Themes to Explore. Multiple identities. Family and culture. Sisterhood. American-ness and Vietnamese-ness. Assimilation and tradition. Home.

Trusting Family. Ba advises his children, “Only your family is to be trusted wholly...Friends should only be believed fifty-percent” (p. 27). Explain why you agree or disagree with Ba’s advice. If you disagree and you were writing your own poetic lines of advice, what additional (or different) lines would you include?

Citizenship. The Viet Cong will not let Ba be a citizen in Vietnam because he is unwilling to give up his stance against them. What does it mean not to have citizenship in the country of your birth? What is lost with a loss of citizenship, both practically and emotionally? What power does this reveal that the state holds over all of us?

Ba’s Motivation. Ba is left at an orphanage as a child, loses a war, gets locked in prison for seven years, loses numerous family members during that time, constantly endures the spying eyes and threats of the Viet Cong, and has to relocate his family to an entirely unfamiliar place. What motivating force drives Ba not to give up?



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Prologue to Epilogue. In the Prologue, Bom writes, “The past bleeds into the present, shapes our future. / But to know who we are, we have to look back” (“What If,” p. 21). In the final lines of the Epilogue she writes, “Maybe Bo and I are...not fully Vietnamese or American, a blend of the two. / Our identities and our futures are ours to mold” (“Past, Present, Future,” p. 329). By the end of the book, how has Bom’s understanding of identity, of herself, changed?

Poetry Analysis. Several poems of note are provided below, as well as a suggested line worth exploring:

“Paris by Night” (p. 18). “The missing of a que huong—homeland—is something foreign to her [my sister].” An incredibly complex combination of words to untangle.

“A Cold Car Ride” (p. 157). “*I want to go home. / We are home*, Ba says.” These lines reveal much about the characters’ differing mindsets, specifically how the concept of “home” is shaped for each.

“Mysterious Neighbors” (p. 161). “We live side by side / but are strangers.” This is a recurrent theme throughout the book. Though set in the 1990s, the idea remains relevant.

“The Missing” (p. 177). “One day, you will forget the pain, / take comfort in the memories.” A very difficult concept to absorb for anyone, much less a child.

“Sticky Notes” (p. 211). “No more English at home, / Vietnamese only. / I never want you to lose our language.” Why does language matter?

Final Considerations. Consider these important questions after reading the novel:

1. Does culture come most from food, family, language, or something else?
2. What advantages are gained by settling on and then into your own identity? Conversely, what advantages does an ambiguous identity afford?
3. Did this book have a happy ending?

Author: Josh Foster, Educator and Learner
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