



Mèo and Bé

written by Doan Phuong Nguyen

About the Book

Genre: Historical Fiction

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Reading Level: Grade 9

Interest Level: Grades 7-12

Guided Reading Level: Z+

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:
N/A

Lexile™ Measure: N/A

*Reading level based on the ATOS Readability Formula

Themes: Friendship, Coming of Age, Child Trafficking and Abuse, Adoption, Coping with Death, Grief, Mutism, Courage, Empathy and Compassion, Families, Historical Fiction, Forgiveness, Vietnam, History, Kindness and Caring, Middle Grade, Overcoming Obstacles, Persistence and Grit, Hope, Refugees, Sharing and Giving, War (Vietnam War), Southeast Asia (Vietnam), Asian/Asian American Interest

Resources on the web:

leeandlow.com/books/mèo-and-bé

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

SYNOPSIS

Just before the United States enters the Vietnam War, eleven-year-old Bé and her three-footed kitten Mèo must rise above the injustices of war to find the comfort, safety, and love of a found family.

Eleven-year-old Bé hasn't spoken a word since her mother left. She hangs on to the hope that one day they will be reunited, but after two years of waiting, it's becoming more difficult. Her father--who is now frail and helpless after a stroke--can do little to protect her from her stepmother, Big Mother, who treats Bé like an animal and a servant. Thankfully, Bé has a secret friend, her little kitten Mèo, to comfort her in the worst of times. Maybe if she just steers clear of Big Mother and is obedient, everything will be okay.

Unfortunately, Big Mother has other plans. She accuses her of stealing, and Bé is drugged and sold. When she wakes up, she finds herself in a locked underground bunker being held captive with a group of young women. Bé is too young to understand why they're prisoners, but at least she still has Mèo! He was hiding in her shirt when she was taken. As weeks pass, Bé makes a friend her own age, Ngân, even without speaking, and Mèo becomes a solace for the women--being available for cuddles and catching the mice that annoy them. Suddenly, a violent uprising enables the imprisoned women and girls to escape, only to realize the wider world of war is just as dangerous. Can Bé and Mèo, and their newfound friend, Ngân, find their way to a safe place they can call home--even though the world is literally exploding all around them?

A beautiful literary work, full of kindness and compassion amidst the devastation of war.

BACKGROUND

Author's Note from Doan Phuong Nguyen

"Although I was born in the generation after the Vietnam War ended, I've always been deeply affected by it. All my relatives (my parents, their siblings, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents) lived through the war, and I grew up hearing their stories of what life was like in wartime. Their stories always made me sad, especially knowing the suffering my people went through during that time, and in the years after the war ended.

My very existence is tied to this terrible war, which killed an estimated two million civilians on both sides. If the North Vietnamese communists hadn't won the war, my mother would have continued her schooling as a Catholic nun, and my father would have been a priest. However, when the war broke out, my father joined the South Vietnamese Army, and my mother was sent home to her parents' house. Then, my father spent almost a decade in a "reeducation" camp as a prisoner of war, and they weren't married until after he returned home.

Most novels about the Vietnam War revolve around South Vietnamese refugees fleeing the country after the fall of Saigon, or they are from soldiers' perspectives. These novels are heavily focused on the war after America entered the conflict. However, I wanted to tell a story from a different perspective.

In *Mèo and Bé*, I allude to the death of President Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963, setting *Mèo and Bé* in the spring and summer of 1964. The conversation that Bé's brothers and father have around the lunch table in part two is taken from my father's own opinions after the death of President Ngô Đình Diệm.

I come from a patriotic South Vietnamese family. Like most Vietnamese refugees in America, we are strongly anticommunist and very loyal to our roots. If you go to any Vietnamese gathering, festival, or event in the United States, you will see the South Vietnamese flag—a yellow flag with three red stripes—on proud display. Although this flag is technically defunct (it was the flag of the Republic of South Vietnam, which was overthrown in 1975 when the war ended), it is displayed with pride by the Vietnamese American community. You will never see the official flag of Vietnam, which is red with a yellow star, on display in America. That flag is seen as a symbol of communism and hated by the Vietnamese American community.

Because my roots are South Vietnamese, the Việt Cộng are seen negatively in this book. They caused a lot of fear among my family members who lived during the war, and they cause fear to the characters in this novel.

However, I didn't intend for *Mèo and Bé* to be a book about the Vietnam War, but about a girl who lives during that time. This is a story about how you can find the light amid the dark. It's a story of courage and never losing hope, even when things seem hopeless. It's a story about finding your voice after you've lost everything.

Although *Mèo and Bé* is a work of fiction, I have weaved some of my family's personal history

into this novel. The character of Bé is based on my adopted aunt's life. My Cô Hiếu was the child of a landowner and his concubine. Her mother abandoned her as a young child, and she was mistreated by her father's first wife. The tattoo scene actually happened to my aunt, and she still has a green cross on her forehead from her stepmother's abuse. The Monkey Hill scene also happened, witnessed by my father when he was a soldier in the South Vietnamese Army. The character of Cô Huệ is based on my grandmother. My aunt, however, was never sold. What happened to Bé after she was kidnapped and sold is pure fiction. In real life, my aunt was abandoned at a church as a young child, and some of the neighborhood women wanted to raise her to be a slave in their households. My grandmother saved her from that terrible future.

During the Vietnam War, an entire sex industry sprang up around American soldiers stationed in the country. It is not a stretch to imagine that vulnerable women and children were trafficked and held against their will during this chaotic time. Human trafficking is, sadly, a phenomenon that still occurs in Vietnam today. As of 2021, for the third consecutive year, Vietnam was placed on the Tier 2 Watch List from the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Previously, Vietnam was ranked Tier 3 (which is the worst ranking). The Tier 2 Watch List means the country "do[es] not fully comply with the Act's minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards, and:

- a) The estimated number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is very significant or is significantly increasing and the country is not taking proportional concrete actions; or
- b) There is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking in persons from the previous year."

The description of the orphanage is based on my father's recollection of living in an orphanage at a young age—he had been placed in an orphanage after my grandfather had been murdered by the Việt Cộng and readopted by his biological mother later in childhood. Bé's home with her father and Big Mother is based on my maternal grandparents' property in South Vietnam, and the cathedral and Cô Huệ's house (with the train tracks) at the very end are based on where my paternal grandmother lived in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War began in 1954 and ended on April 30, 1975, when North Vietnam won the war. The war scarred the landscape of Vietnam. Bombs destroyed roads, railway lines, bridges, and canals. Unexploded shells and landmines were scattered in the countryside, often hidden in the paddy fields. As a result, since the end of the war, 40,000 Vietnamese people have been injured or killed from these hidden explosives. During the war, U.S. forces sprayed more than twenty million gallons of herbicides, including Agent Orange, which destroyed 7,700 square miles of forests. Some 400,000 people were killed or permanently injured, and half a million babies born with birth defects due to exposure to these herbicides. It is also estimated that two million people suffer from cancer and other illnesses due to Agent Orange.

Life in the years after the war was difficult. There was a widespread food shortage, and lots of fear for people who fought for or supported the South Vietnamese Army. The new regime rounded up

former South Vietnamese officers and soldiers and sent them to reeducation camps. Later, former government workers and supporters of the old government of South Vietnam were also imprisoned.

Today, Vietnam remains a communist country. The Communist Party has a monopoly on political power, and restricts freedom of expression, opinion, and speech. Anyone who speaks ill of the government is subject to physical harm, harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment. According to Amnesty International, the 2015 Criminal Code criminalizes “making, storing or spreading information, materials or items for the purpose of opposing the State of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam.” The government regularly cracks down on independent journalists, political commentators, bloggers, and anyone who is critical of them.

I keep all of this in mind whenever I go home to visit my family. We are always careful about our conversations and never discuss the communist regime.

The Vietnam War is taught from a different perspective in Vietnam than we are taught in the United States. For example, the Americans are viewed as foreign invaders and seen as the bad guys. When I was learning about the Vietnam War in my U.S. high school, I had to learn how to separate the American version from the version my father was telling me at home. They are two different perspectives of the war. Through the years, I've realized that there are always multiple perspectives or points of view to history, depending on who is telling the story. As you, my readers, learn about the Vietnam War, I hope you are able to see the war from the Vietnamese perspective too, not just the American one.

Despite the restrictions on freedom of speech, Vietnam is a beautiful country that has fully recovered from the war. It's grown from one of the poorest countries in the world to a middle income one. Vietnam has become a tourist destination in recent years. It is amazing to visit. The ample paddy fields in the countryside of Vietnam are lush and green. The mountains look magical, like they're out of a fairy tale. The southern beaches have powdery white sand and clear water. The food—especially the street food and the exotic fruits sold in the open-air marketplaces—is delicious and fresh. The countryside still retains its charm with old-fashioned country homes, ancient citadels, and pagodas. Ho Chi Minh City (still called Saigon by the locals) looks like any American city with its skyscrapers, chic modern stores, and high-class restaurants.

Vietnam has changed a lot since I was a child, and I am always surprised at how much more Westernized it becomes with each passing visit. I always feel at home with my family in Vietnam, and I look forward to every extended visit I have in my home country.

I hope you too will get a chance to visit Vietnam one day when you grow up.” – Doan Phuong Nguyen, author of *Mèo and Bé*

A Note to Readers from author Doan Phuong Nguyen

Mèo and Bé takes place in Vietnam in the 1960s, and there are many Vietnamese names and words throughout the story. Invite any colleagues or families who may be able to provide additional recommendations on speaking Vietnamese. Below is a pronunciation guide and a glossary. In the glossary's sound spellings:

"a" sounds like "cat"

"ai" sounds like "eye"

"e" sounds like "let"

"ee" sounds like "feet"

"ew" sounds like "few"

"i" sounds like "sit"

"o" sounds like "more"

"ow" sounds like "ouch"

"oy" sounds like "boy"

"ock" sounds like "sock"

Cảm ơn bạn đã đọc! (Thank you for reading!)

Vietnamese Names & Vietnamese Glossary

For a list of Vietnamese names and words used in the book, consult the Vietnamese Names and Vietnamese Glossary sections in the front of the book.

Teaching About the Vietnam War

For more resources on the teaching about the Vietnam War, consult the following organizations:

PBS Learning Media: <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/teaching-the-vietnam-war/>

EDSITEment! Vietnam War Resources: <https://edsitement.neh.gov/vietnam-war-lesson-guide>

Zinn Education Project: Rethinking the Teaching of the Vietnam War: <https://edsitement.neh.gov/vietnam-war-lesson-guide>

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund: Teaching the Vietnam Era: <https://www.vvmf.org/education/>

The New York Times' Teaching the Vietnam War With Primary Sources: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/learning/lesson-plans/teaching-the-vietnam-war-with-primary-sources-from-the-new-york-times.html>

Stanford University's Teaching Diverse Perspectives on the Vietnam War: <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/teaching-diverse-perspectives-vietnam-war>

Human Rights Watch: Vietnam: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/vietnam>

Additional Background for Teaching About Sensitive Topics

Below are resources for those who may be affected or who wish to support who is a victim of abuse.

- Childhelp: childhelp.org: A 24-hour, seven-days-a-week child-abuse hotline with professional counselors. Childhelp provides crisis intervention, information, literature, and referrals.
- Mental Health Awareness Month: <https://www.nami.org/Get-Involved/Awareness-Events/Mental-Health-Awareness-Month>: The month of May is Mental Health Awareness Month. This initiative aims to fight stigma, provide support, educate the public and advocate for policies that support people with mental illness and their families.

The themes in this story must be addressed and handled with deep sensitivity and open mindedness.

Teachers must be aware and prepared that by teaching this novel (and the corresponding topics addressed in it) they may be addressing a legacy of harm and violence, specifically within largely minority and underrepresented socioeconomic groups.

Set the example of what culturally responsive teaching looks like:

- Collaborate with students to establish guidelines early on. This will serve as a reminder for discussion etiquette as thought-provoking topics are developed.
- Anticipate how your students will respond to controversial topics presented in the novel (abuse, war, etc). While teachers should encourage students to share their views without fear of judgment, teachers should consider how to respond to emotion, and use this to guide instruction and for future instructional planning.
- Don't be afraid to share your own learning journey as it pertains to cultural identity and trauma. This will create a positive classroom climate and an overall feeling of sameness.
- Aim to include and discuss outside materials that align with the text and essentially address underrepresented groups' experiences in ways that do not trivialize or marginalize their experiences.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

- Ask students to think about their family and what family means to them. How is family important to you? How do you interact with your family members? Does your family live close or far apart? What brings your family together? What creates tension within your family?
- Why do you think learning family stories is important? Have you ever asked your grandparents, aunts or uncles, parents, or other adults in your life about what it was like for them when

they were kids? What did you learn?

- What do you know about the Vietnam War (1955-1975)? Note: students may have direct family history and experience connected to Vietnam while other students will not. What caused the war? What have you been taught about this time period? What struggles did Vietnamese people against the war have to face in Vietnam? Where did you learn about the Vietnam War (in school, at home, in the media, etc.)? Why did the Vietnam war end? What is the legacy of the Vietnam war and how does it impact your life in the present day? Students may share personal and family reflections or geopolitical understandings.
- What strategies do you use when you're sad or upset? Some of the history and stories told in this book are difficult to read because they describe painful events and experiences. What can we do to take care of ourselves when something is both important to hear and difficult to hear/read?
- Ask students why it's important to acknowledge traditions and cultures that are different from their own. Why is it essential to learn about different cultures in the United States and around the world even if you do not identify with that particular culture or tradition?
- What does it mean to be brave? Think about a time when you had to be brave. What did you do? How did you feel?
- What does it mean to be resilient? How do you demonstrate resilience even though something may be challenging? Why is it important to be resilient? Do you think it can be learned? How so? Who is someone from history that you consider to be resilient? Why?

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- Talk about the title of the book and the book cover image. Ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?

Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- how young people show resilience through difficult times
- the different ways the Vietnam War was experienced by people in Vietnam
- what family means to Bé and how it changes over the course of the story
- how faith and spirituality can influence a person's life
- the impact of the Việt Cộng in Vietnam
- how living through a war impacts a person's childhood

- how trauma during wartime and after a life event can affect a young person

Encourage students to consider why the author Doan Phuong Nguyen would want to share this story with young people today.

VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below.

Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word. (Many of the Spanish words can be found in the book glossary, but there are also some that are not included. Students could be encouraged to create a log of these words—they will not be listed here.)

Content Specific

pellets, pho, Bà Nồi, bánh mì, valise, tamarind, mandarin, abdicate, Việt Cộng, concubine, mangosteen, artillery, con, con khi, Tết, diocese, nuisance, lotus, tirade, gorged, khai sinh, solemn, bulbous, manure, ferment, kennel, kerosene, mortars, volley, paddy fields, orderlies, xe dò, refectory, infirmary

Academic

satchel, lavished, faltered, mythical, conical, laden, prying, pigsty, imperial, destitute, disarray, traitorous, lattice, loitered, enclosure, intrusion, retorted, meticulously, taut, disposition, fatigued, prosperity, matriarch, vigor, trellises, dahlias, trowel, inconsolably, tendril, profanity, tresses, assassination, pillaging, adjoining, fracturing, morale, sabotage, gorge, somber, calloused, ascent, haste, begrudgingly, cacophony, unblemished, ornate, chiffons, diligent, ominous, monsoon, dejected, coarse, translucent, corpse, emanated, strenuous, incoherently, delirious, deceiving, vacant, profanity, ominous, miniscule, decimated, ravenous, remnants

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.**

Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

Part 1

1. Who is the main character and what do we learn about her in the first chapter?
2. What date does the first chapter take place?
3. What gifts does Ba bring Thương?
4. Who is Thương's best friend?
5. Why does Ba want Thương and Má to move?
6. What truth about Ba's life is revealed in chapter 2?
7. Who is Big Mother?
8. How many siblings does Thương have?
9. What observations does Thương make about where Ba lives?
10. How does Big Mother greet Thương and Má?
11. Who is Bà Nội?
12. How many half siblings does Thương have?
13. What does Thương's name mean?
14. Why does Thương need to go by the name Bé around Big Mother?
15. Describe the relationship between Bé and Xuân?
16. Describe Bé's first few months at Ba's house.
17. Why does Xuân play with Bé less often over time?
18. What is Tết?
19. What reputation does Big Mother have to those who know her?
20. How does Bà Nội die and what impact does it have on the family dynamics?
21. What sickness befalls Ba after Bà Nội's death?
22. Where does Má go at the end of Part 1 and why can't she take Bé?
23. Why does Big Mother cut Bé's hair?
24. What causes Bé to stop speaking?

Parts 2 and 3

25. How long has Bé gone without speaking at the beginning of part 2?
26. Provide examples of the different ways Big Mother abuses Bé.
27. How does Xuân's withdrawal from Bé, impact Bé?

28. Why does Bé identify with Mèo?
29. Why does Bé wish she could run away? What stops her?
30. What is a rosary? Where does Bé find one? What does it represent to her and what does she do with it?
31. What does Bé dream and wish for at night?
32. What does Big Mother do when she finds Bé's rosary? How does she punish Bé?
33. What religion is Big Mother?
34. What does Bé do with the broken rosary?
35. What does the green cross on Bé's forehead represent?
36. Who helps Bé keep Mèo a secret? What happened to Mèo's paw?
37. Describe what happens to Bé at the end of part 2.
38. Describe how Bé is feeling at the beginning of part 3.
39. Who is in the room with Bé when she wakes up from being poisoned?
40. Who is Ngân? Describe her. What circumstances led to Ngân being sold?
41. How do the women who are underground feel about Mèo?
42. How are the women who are underground treated?
43. How does Bé communicate without words?
44. Who is Cô Bích and what happens to her? What does Bé learn from Cô Bích?
45. What happens the night Bé is transported from the underground dungeon?
46. How does Bé escape the men who bought her?
47. Where do Bé and Ngân end up at the end of part 3?

Parts 4 and 5

48. Where does Bé wake up after her escape? What condition is she in? What condition is Ngân in?
49. Why is Bé devastated to learn what happened to her favorite shirt?
50. Who is Cô Huệ? How does she help Bé?
51. Why is Bé angry?
52. Where is Mèo when Bé is in the hospital?
53. What differences does Bé notice between the city she is in and her village back home?
54. Why are Bé and Ngân sent to an orphanage? How do they first feel about the orphanage?
55. What will happen after 30 days of being at the orphanage?

56. Who comes to visit Bé at the orphanage?
57. Why do Ba and Xuân leave Bé at the orphanage? How does Bé react?
58. How does the thought of being separated impact Bé and Ngân?
59. How do Bé and Ngân escape the orphanage? How does Mèo help them?
60. Who is Hiếu? What does that name mean and why was it given?
61. What happened to Má? What happened to Ba?
62. How is Xuân's relationship with his little sister by the end of the book?
63. Describe Hiếu's life by the end of the book.

Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. Return to the book cover. What does the illustration mean to you after reading the book?
2. What is an arranged marriage? Why are arranged marriages important in certain cultures?
3. Describe the dynamic between Big Mother and Má. Support your descriptions with evidence from the text.
4. What does *Mèo and Bé* teach readers about the impact of war on families?
5. How do different religious and spiritual beliefs play a role *Mèo and Bé*? What do you learn from these beliefs?
6. What is Mèo's significance throughout the story?
7. How are the Việt Cộng described throughout the book? What do you learn about them?
8. How is Bé treated differently than her brothers?
9. What role do the macaque monkeys play in the story?
10. What is the significance of the tamarind tree throughout the story? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
11. How do the older women who are underground help protect Bé and Ngân, who are the youngest there? What do these women teach the young girls about community and care?
12. Bé questions why Cô Bích fought back in Chapter 23. Why do you think Cô Bích spoke up even though she knew the consequences were dangerous and even deadly? Have you ever had to speak up against something even when you were afraid?
13. Throughout the story, Bé tries to hope for the impossible. Why does her hope falter? Why is it important to hold onto hope during difficult times?
14. Towards the end of the book Bé believes, "Grown-ups are not to be trusted...trusting adults had only hurt her" (p274) Why does Bé not trust adults? Do you agree with Bé? Why or why not? How have the adults in her life failed her? Who are the adults that have supported her?

Give examples.

15. Where does Bé find the strength to speak?
16. What different feelings come up for Bé as she remembers all she has been through? Support your descriptions with evidence from the text.
17. Analyze the evolution of the character Ba. Is there any evidence over the course of the book that reveals a different layer to his character? How so? How not? Provide examples from the story.
18. Have you had a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a peer, or an elder that has been impactful in your life? What did they teach you? What kind of stories did they tell you? How are they meaningful to you?
19. What is the significance of names in the story? What does your name mean? Have you ever wanted to choose a different name for yourself? Why or why not?
20. How does war impact men and women differently throughout the story?
21. What do Bé and Ngâm gain from their sisterhood with each other?
22. The story is told from Bé's perspective. How would the story have been different if it were told from Má's perspective? Ngâm's perspective? How does the perspective of the narration affect how you experience the story?
23. How did you feel about the way *Mèo and Bé*, ended? Were you satisfied with the ending? Why or why not? Describe the significance of the name change at the end, and what that signified for Bé's new life.
24. What does Bé learn about herself by the end of the story?
25. Compare and contrast the novel's main character with a real person you know or with similar character in another book. What factors contributed to your choice?
26. If you could give the novel a new title, what would it be? Rationalize your reasons for the new title.
27. Why do you think the author chooses to write this story in the perspective of a young girl? Do you think other stories set in Vietnam or wars include enough young people perspectives?

Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. **Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion.** You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. What do you think the authors' message to the reader is? Think about possible motivations to write the book. What do you think they wanted to tell her readers?
2. Have students make a text-to-self connection. What is your role in your own family? What do Bé's experiences, thoughts, and feelings mean to you?

3. Have students make a text-to-text connection. Did you think of any other books while you read *Mèo and Bé*? Why did you make those connections?
4. Have students make a text-to-world connection. What kind of connections did you make from this book to what you have seen in the world or on the news? Why did *Mèo and Bé* make you think of that?
5. What is one big thought that you have after reading this book? Think about different character changes, the setting, and the relationships. What did you learn from reading *Mèo and Bé*?
6. Loss can result in deep sorrow and/or harmful behavior. Have you or someone you know experienced loss? What behaviors did you notice? Why is loss a powerful emotion? What are some ways get support as someone processes their loss?
7. If you could interview the author, Doan Phuong Nguyen, what questions would you ask her? Why? What do you want to know about her writing process and how she came up with the ideas to write *Mèo and Bé*?

Multilingual Learner Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)
(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ML students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. Have each student write three questions about each part as they read the book. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Have students give a short talk about what family means to them, and how they or their family have overcome obstacles in their life.
4. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose Multilingual Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.
5. In the story Bé often draws when she is trying to communicate with others. Have students draw illustrations to summarize parts 1-5 of the text.
6. Consider consulting <https://www.multilinguallearningtoolkit.org/> for more ideas on how to support Multilingual Learners.

Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. There are many kinds of families in the world. How does *Mèò and Bé* show the difference between healthy family dynamics and abusive family dynamics? What are the characteristics of a healthy family? What are the different ways people show respect and care for one another in healthy families? What are the characteristics of an abusive family? Who can help if someone is experiencing abuse? Students can brainstorm ideas on chart paper that can be presented and accessible for the whole class.
2. Have students go on a Social and Emotional Learning scavenger hunt in the text, looking for evidence in the details from the book. Assign students to relevant Social and Emotional Learning themes, such as: empathy, problem-solving, perspective taking, perseverance, and recognizing and managing emotions.
3. This book covers an important part of world history. Part of that history includes gender violence, traumatic events, and grave injustice. What are some of the different ways that the characters in the book took care of themselves when confronted with traumatic events? How did they support each other? How do you take care of yourself when faced with traumatic situations or difficult truths?
4. It is often difficult for Bé to feel trusting of others, particularly adults. What does it take to trust someone and feel secure with them? Cite evidence from the text as well as personal experience.
5. Loss is a theme in this story. Have you ever dealt with a loss of someone you love? Why do some people become angry during times of sadness or trauma? What are some other grieving processes people usually go through when dealing with the loss of someone they love?
6. How do the living conditions during the war affect Bé? How does the constant need to survive affect them mentally and physically?
7. *Mèò and Bé* have a very important relationship throughout the book. Describe how Mèò makes Bé feel, and how Mèò supports Bé during difficult times. Do you have a pet in your home that you love? How does your pet make you feel? How did Mèò inspire Bé to keep going, even if she didn't want to?
8. Why is it important to have empathy for those we don't know, who may live across the globe or down the street? Discuss how empathy is beneficial to social and emotional wellbeing.
9. Bé experiences mutism after her mother leaves her. Have students research what selective

mutism is, why it happens, and how trauma can play a role in its development. Consult the following resources for more information on selective mutism (<https://www.cedars-sinai.org/health-library/diseases-and-conditions---pediatrics/s/selective-mutism.html>) (<https://selectivemutismcenter.org/whatisselectivemutism/>) (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/selective-mutism/>).

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

English/Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Assign students in groups for an in-depth character study analyzing Bé.** Have the groups and/or partnerships brainstorm about a guiding question: What and how can this character teach us? Have students share their findings: What lessons did this character teach us over the course of the story? How did their actions develop the narrative, and why are they crucial to understanding the meaning of the book? Students can present their findings to the class.
- **The phrase “chosen family” represents non-biologically related group of people established to provide ongoing support to one another.** Write an essay that focuses on the ways in which the concept of chosen family shows up in *Mèo and Bé*. Support your answer with evidence from the text.
- **Students can complete a critical essay.** Have students identify 3 major themes of the story and use details from the book to support each theme. Why did students select those 3 themes? How did they come to understand that they were the most important events?
- ***Mèo and Bé* uses rich figurative language.** Challenge students to search through the book and identify two examples of each: simile, metaphor, personification, and hyperbole. Encourage students to record their answers in their journals.
- **Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese American poet writes on the legacy of the Vietnam War and says, “Yes, there was war. Yes, we came from its epicenter. In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name- Lan- in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping...All this time I told myself we were born from war- but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence- but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it” (Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/on-earth-were-briefly-gorgeous>).**

[npr.org/2019/06/05/729691730/on-earth-is-gorgeous-all-the-way-through](https://www.npr.org/2019/06/05/729691730/on-earth-is-gorgeous-all-the-way-through); <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/06/10/ocean-vuongs-life-sentences>). In an essay, analyze this quote and how it is related to for *Mèo and Bé*. Show whether the characters in the text demonstrate the message of this quote.

- **Bé and Ngân have a significant impact on one another.** How has a family member or friend close to you impacted your life? Have you had a friend, family member, or other person who really changed your life? What were some things that person did that were significant to you? Students can write a poem, essay, or display their work in any other visual format that works best for their learning needs.
- **Write a book review for *Mèo and Bé*.** Explain what the story is about and how you felt about the characters and events in the book as well as how the story was told. If you would recommend the book to others, give reasons for your recommendation.
- **Has there ever been a time you experienced or witnessed abuse or injustice?** How did it make you feel? How did it affect you? Which adult or peer did you trust in your life to talk about this with? In an essay, explain what the responsibility is of a child versus an adult versus society at large to tackling this injustice and what steps each could take.
- **Conduct a research study on how names and being named can have different meanings and significance in different cultures.** Medium's "The Evolution of Naming in Vietnamese Customs" is a place where students can begin, and focus on the importance of names in Vietnam (<https://medium.com/travel-is-to-think-in-terms-of-experiences-rather/the-evolution-of-naming-in-vietnamese-customs-44f94a8a0e11>). Facing History & Ourselves has a lesson plan, "Language, Names, and Individual Identity" (<https://www.facinghistory.org/en-ca/resource-library/language-names-individual-identity>) for additional research. Students can share out their findings with a partner, small group, or whole class.

Social Studies & Geography

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3; Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9; and Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3; Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9; and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, and Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Encourage students to research Vietnam to become familiar with its geography and history.** Students should consult family members as well or include their personal experiences if they are comfortable. Encourage them to build a profile of the country based on questions such as:
 - What nations are Vietnam's neighbors?
 - What bodies of water border its western and southern parts?
 - What is the Pacific Rim?
 - What is the capital city of Vietnam? What are some other cities? What was Ho Chi Minh City once called?

- Why was this region once called French Indochina?
- Who was Ho Chi Minh? Who was Ngô Đình Diệm?
- What is the climate like in Vietnam?
- What are its chief products?
- **Design a lesson or unit the Vietnam War** (<https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/teaching-the-vietnam-war/>). Make sure to include resources that center the voices and expertise of Vietnamese Americans and sets America's presence in the region into context. Refer to the Background section of this guide for additional context. Guiding questions to ask include: What caused the Vietnam War? When was it? What are some of the major differences between World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War? What were some of the tactics used during this time period? Which countries got involved? How did the Vietnam War end? How does the war still impact lives today? Encourage students to use primary sources, not only from the United States but from Vietnam as well.
- **One effect of the Vietnam War was the expansion of immigration of Vietnamese to the United States.** The Migration Policy Institute has a great primer on Vietnamese immigrants in the United States: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states>. See if your district or public library has additional resources to share with students about Vietnamese in your state. Encourage students to investigate if their city or capital has a sister city in Vietnam and look into which states have the largest Vietnamese populations today.
- **Have students create a timeline of the historical events mentioned in the book.** As a class you can go through the book and make a list of all the historical events and people that are mentioned in the book. Then, split students into small groups and assign groups vocabulary words and events to research. Pass out sentence strips or large notecards to each group and task them with writing a summary of their person, place, or historical event. I would also recommend having students locate and print off a primary source to attach to their vocabulary note card. Then, assemble a large timeline in the classroom. This activity can be completed while reading the book. That way, you can continue to come back to the timeline to remember the historical events and place them in relation to other events. Alternatively, have students make a timeline of the events in the book or events that led to the Vietnam War.
- **Conduct a research project on human trafficking in Vietnam, specifically focusing on the Vietnam War.** Have students answer the following guiding questions: who were the primary victims of human trafficking? Why was human trafficking happen? Where did it happen? Why did the Vietnam War make human trafficking worse? Consult the following newspaper articles and resources for more information and to get students started (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/10/31/the-u-s-militarys-long-uncomfortable-history-with-prostitution-gets-new-attention/>) (<https://content.ucpress.edu/chapters/12178.ch01.pdf>) (<https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=sjsj>). Make sure to be aware of students' triggers and backgrounds prior to engaging with this activity.

- **Have students look up the different foods mentioned in *Mèo and Bé*.** Students can make a list of the foods and then write descriptions and provide images of them. What foods are typically consumed in Vietnamese cuisine? Students can share a visual presentation with different foods and recipes. If possible and time allows, students can make some of them in class or at home.

Art/Media

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3; Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9; and Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3; Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9; and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, and Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Bé lost a lot during the war, but still has her memories.** Create a scrapbook honoring that represents Bé's life up until she gets adopted. Think about all the kinds of mementos you would put in a scrapbook for her. Use pictures from magazines, online resources, and items from home to create a scrapbook. Be sure to have students explain the significance of what they've included.
- **Encourage students to draw another cover for the current book, *Mèo and Bé*.** What would students want to see on the cover? What was the most important or exciting thing that resonated with them in the book that they would want to show potential readers? Students can create alternate covers based on their reactions after reading the story.
- **Use a digital media platform or another similar format to create a book trailer for *Mèo and Bé*.** Consult ReadWriteThink's lesson plan for more information on how to create a book trailer (<https://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/book-report-alternative-creating-c>).

School-Home Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- **Have students interview a family member about a war they lived through.** Have students ask family members how they felt about the war and what impact it had on their lives.
- **Encourage students to share what they learned from reading *Mèo and Bé* with their families.** What was it like to read a book that takes place during war from the perspective of Bé? Have students start a discussion with their families about what it was like to read about the horrors and atrocities that people faced during that time period.
- **Assign students to look up news articles on the Vietnam war and take notes on how it was reported.** Have students survey a variety of news sources: local, national, cable, and network. What do they notice about the language and tone of the reports? What about the imagery, photographs, and film footage? How are the victims and community members talked about? Explain in advance that students should pay particular focus to the way race,

gender, and identity figures into the coverage. After their research, have students discuss their findings.

- **Have students reflect on someone in their community, who has made a difference in their life.** Students and families can discuss how this person made an important impact on their life and why.



Ordering Information

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🔒 Secure Online Ordering:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doan Phuong Nguyen was born in Vietnam and immigrated to the United States when she was in elementary school. After growing up in the South, she settled in the Midwest. Doan Phuong loves anything pink and cute but enjoys writing incredibly sad, emotionally evocative novels. She received her MFA in Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. This is her first middle grade novel. Find her at doanphuong.com.

REVIEWS

"This moving debut novel, based in part on the experiences of members of Nguyen's family, features well-developed characters, vivid depictions of wartime Vietnam, and a sense of everyday life for ordinary Vietnamese people during this period...An unsparingly brutal but ultimately uplifting story; readers will cheer as Bé finally finds her voice." —*Booklist*

"This powerfully wrought portrayal of grief and perseverance sensitively depicts an underrepresented perspective of life in Vietnam during the war." —*Publishers Weekly*

"The narration is easy to digest, and Mèo's presence makes for some softer moments. . . This raw story of perseverance in the face of horror will challenge readers and their interlocutors." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"An underrepresented topic on most shelves, this page-turner explores a girl's search for love and connection while providing a unique and necessary historical perspective." —*School Library Journal*

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