

# The Paper Boat

Discussion and Activity Guide: Grades 3–6



Guide by Brendan Holker, Elementary Teacher, Toronto District School Board



## About the Book

*The Paper Boat* tells the wordless story of one family's escape from Vietnam, inspired by author Thao Lam's family's own refugee journey when she was a child. At her home in Vietnam, a girl rescues ants from the sugar water set out to trap them. Later, when the girl's family flees war-torn Vietnam, ants lead them through the moonlit jungle to the boat that will take them to safety. Before boarding, the girl folds a paper boat from a bun wrapper and drops it into the water, and the ants climb on. Their perilous journey, besieged by punishing weather, predatory birds, and dehydration, before reaching a new beginning, mirrors the family's own. Impressionistic collages and a moving, Own Voices narrative make this a one-of-a-kind tale of courage, resilience, and hope.

## About This Guide

This guide is designed for educators, librarians, caregivers, and others to facilitate conversations and lessons on the topic of refugees in the classroom or at home. Students will develop a deeper understanding of historical facts, question-answer relationships, and the author/illustrator's message using reflective writing practices. I suggest acquiring some knowledge of the Vietnam War and the refugees that fled during the conflict before using this guide, however, the book can also be used as a broader exploration of other refugee journeys. Please note these topics could be very sensitive for students whose families may have experienced their own migration journey, and those who may still have family in another country. By the end of this unit, students will further develop their empathy and open-mindedness through exploration of the challenges and struggles refugees face when leaving their homeland, and how they contribute to the multicultural tapestry of their new home.

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### CURRICULUM LINKS:

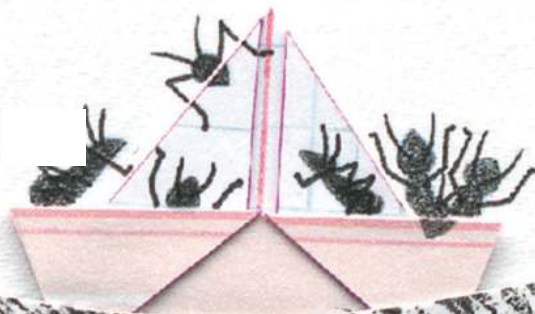
**Language Arts:** Reading Comprehension, Visual Literacy

**Social Studies:** Global Communities

### READING LEVELS:

**Fountas & Pinnell:** WB

**Common Core:** RL.5, SL.5, W.5



# 1. Reading for Knowledge

## Research

Before reading the book, explore current headlines in the news with your class. What do the headlines reveal? Students should keep an eye out for time, subject, and place.

As a class, explore the opening and closing pages (known as endpapers) of *The Paper Boat*, which show headlines. Ask students: What do you see in these headlines? What words, dates, and subjects are mentioned?

From the headlines in *The Paper Boat*, start creating a list of words for vocabulary building. Examples: war, crisis, peace, honor, innocent, victim(s), vacancy, refugee(s), march, etc. Ask students to use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words to develop and discover the definitions. As you continue through the guide, add any new words and their definitions.

In small groups or individually, ask students to perform a simple internet search of the dates in the headlines, including the word "Vietnam." For example, a search could be: "April 15 1967 Vietnam". This will enable students to find more information about the historical significance of this date as it pertains to the Vietnam War. For example, on April 15, 1967, massive anti-Vietnam War demonstrations were held around the United States. Once students have gathered the necessary information, construct a classroom historical timeline, assembling all the information in chronological order.

## Follow-up Discussion

Ask students:

- What information have we gathered about the Vietnam War thus far?
- Who? What? Where? When? How?
- What would you like to know more about?
- Is there anything that you need clarified?



## Task

Ask students to write a personal reflection on their learning from this lesson. Ask:

- What did you learn?
- What did you already know?
- What do you think the book is about?
- What other questions do you have?

## Extension

Possible topics to explore more deeply:

- Current events: are similar things happening right now in the world?
- Renaming of places, streets, sport teams, etc. to reflect less bias and prejudice
- Treatment of refugees and/or displaced people around the world
- The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and their contributions



## 2. Reading for Enjoyment!

For the first readthrough, allow students to simply enjoy the story. As you turn the pages, ask: What do you see? How do you think the characters feel? Why might these events be happening?

## 3. Reading for Meaning

Now that you've read the story once, read through a second time. This time, ask students to write down any questions that come to mind using their prior knowledge and own experiences. Write each question on a sticky note to make it easier to move questions around the chart during the followup discussion.

Create a chart with the following categories under the title *Question-Answer Relationships*:

- *Right there* — The answer is right there in a specific place in the illustration.
- *Think and search* — The answer is in the text but requires the reader to look for it and put together several pieces of information.
- *In my head* — The reader must use text and their own knowledge to find the answer.
- *On your own* — The answer can be found in the reader's mind based on inferences from the text.

### Follow-up Discussion

When you finish reading the book, have students share their questions and place them on the chart under the relevant category. Explore all possible answers with them.



#### Possible questions to explore:

- Why do you think the child saved an ant from drowning?
- Why does the family have to separate?
- How might they have felt hiding in the grass?
- Why did they follow the ants?
- Who is the younger girl at the end?
- Why is there a picture of the older lady?

### Task

Ask students to write a reflection on the following questions:

- Without words in the text, how did developing questions assist you in understanding the text?
- Which type(s) of questions help you to understand the text better?
- Were there any questions your peers asked that helped you in your understanding?

### Extension

Possible topics to explore more deeply:

- **Inferencing skills:** When do we use them while reading? How do they help us to create meaning? Inferencing skills are particularly essential in wordless picture books. How do we create meaning when interpreting a story based on images, and without text? What tools or strategies can we use?
- **Foreshadowing:** One example here is when the girl saved the ant at the beginning, and the ants ended up helping her family's journey later.



## 4. Reading for Deeper Meaning

### Brainstorm

Brainstorm with the class around the topic of symbols. What is a symbol? Where do we see them in everyday life? For example, a dollar sign symbolizes money, and a recycling icon represents being conscious of our environment. In partners or small groups, ask students to come up with symbols they know from their own lives and surroundings. Afterwards, have students share some examples with the class.

### Research

In small groups, have students research fun facts about ants using classroom technology. Compile the information on a chart. Some examples: ants live all over the world (except the polar regions), they are the longest-living insects, they are the strongest animal for their size, they are social insects, etc.

### Read

Read the story again, but this time from the ants' perspective. Have students follow the ants closely throughout the story, paying close attention to pages 15-26. Guiding questions:

- Are the ants doing the same thing as the human characters?
- Why are the ants on a paper boat?
- Who might they represent or symbolize?



### Reflect

Ask students to write a reflection on one or more of the following topics:

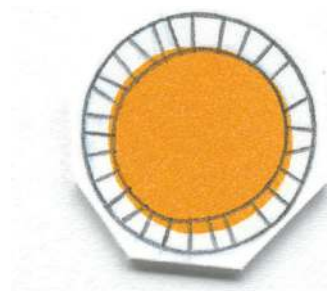
- How are the ants similar to the humans in the story?
- What inferences can be made about the humans based on the ants' journey on the paper boat?
- Has your opinion of ants changed since reading this story?
- If you had to choose a symbol to represent you, what would it be and why?



### Explore

Possible topics to explore more deeply:

- Other symbols from the text (star, moon, sun, light, food, etc.)
- Story within a story, or an embedded narrative



## 5. Reading for Connections

### Classroom Discussion

- Ask students what they think about the title of the book. What happens to a paper boat when it is put into water? Where do you see the paper boat the most in the story?
- Read the author's note with the class. Write down new words on the word list and add definitions. For example: determination, resilience, dehydration, piracy, sacrifice, etc.

### Wrap-up Discussion

After reading the book, do you think the title is effective? Why do you think the author chose this title? What does the paper boat represent?

### Reflect

Ask students to write a reflection on the following questions:

- What did you learn from exploring this story and the topic?
- What connections can you make to other historical or current events in the world?
- Did this make you think of anything in your own family's story? Invite students to share information about their own origins or immigration journeys.

## 6. Extensions and Activities

After working through the suggestions in this guide, here are some possible activities students can do to further develop their understanding of the topic:

- Create a comic strip of their own personal journey through a life event.
- Write a memoir, with a focus on a particular life event.
- Write a fable using animals to tell the story of a personal life lesson.
- Write a friendly letter or email to the author with additional questions.
- Write text to accompany the book. If there were words in the book, what would they say?
- Construct paper boats and place them in water to see how long they float.
- Choose music to go with a section of the book. How does it enhance the meaning?
- Perform tableaux to parts of the story to bring the narrative to life.
- Create a poster to bring awareness to a group of current refugees or displaced people in the world.

## Also by Thao Lam



## About Brendan Holker

Brendan is an elementary school teacher who has been working for fourteen years in the inner city schools of Toronto, Canada. Being raised by immigrants in one of the most multicultural cities in the world has led to his passion for diversity and social justice.