

The Song Poet

By Kao Kalia Yang

About the Book

In the Hmong tradition, the song poet recounts the story of his people, their history and tragedies, joys and losses; extemporizing or drawing on folk tales, he keeps the past alive, invokes the spirits and the homeland, and records courtships, births, weddings, and wishes.

Following her award-winning book *The Latecomer*, Kao Kalia Yang now retells the life of her father Bee Yang, the song poet, a Hmong refugee in Minnesota, driven from the mountains of Laos by American's Secret War. Bee lost his father as a young boy and keenly felt his orphanhood. He would wander from one neighbor to the next, collecting the things they said to each other, whispering the words to himself at night until, one day, a song was born. Bee sings the life of his people through the war-torn jungle and a Thai refugee camp. But the songs fall away in the cold, bitter world of a Minneapolis housing project and on the factory floor until, with the death of Bee's mother, the songs leave him for good. But before they do, Bee, with his poetry, has polished a life of poverty for his children, burnished their grim reality so that they might shine.



Written with the exquisite beauty for which Kao Kalia Yang is renowned, *The Song Poet* is a love story—of a daughter for her father, a father for his children, a people for their land, their traditions, and all that they have lost.

Discussion Questions

1. In the introduction to the book Kalia writes, “For much of my life I have described my father to the world as a machinist, not as the poet I know him to be.” What defines us as a person—our jobs, passions, relationships? How does our description of ourselves affect our sense of worth?
2. When the book opens, Bee says, “I only know what my mother remembered and what my brothers have told me.” Likewise, Kalia can only write from her father’s perspective based on what he has remembered and told her. How does memory play into the themes of the book? How about storytelling?
3. How does Side A of the book compare to Side B? What differences and similarities did you notice between Bee’s and Kalia’s narrative perspectives? What might this suggest about their father-daughter relationship?
4. Bee meditates on many relationships in his life—the brief one he had with his father and the ones he has with his mother, siblings, wife, and children. How do relationships shape our lives? How do they sustain us?
5. Kalia calls her grandmother “my American hero.” What makes her an American hero? How do you define an American hero?

6. Kalia calls her family’s survival in America a “battle.” What are some of the hardships they faced? What did you think about these experiences?

7. Bee often describes his hopes and dreams for his children. Thinking of your own parents and/or children, how did Bee’s experience of parenthood compare to your own? How did this book impact your idea of parenthood?

8. Because Bee wants his children to succeed in America it is difficult for him when his eldest son, Xue, has trouble at school. What contributed to the difficulties Xue experienced? Can you sympathize with his struggle? What defines Xue beyond his academic performance?

9. Prior to reading *The Song Poet*, what did you know about the history of the conflict in Laos? How did this book enhance your understanding?

10. When he returns to Laos, Bee realizes that “it wasn’t only my father, or my mother; it was Laos that had orphaned me in my journey.” What do you think he means by this? How does our connection to our homeland contribute to our identity?

11. When Yang suggested to her father that the story of how he became a song poet could be turned into a book he responded, “Who would read a book about a man like me when there are books about presidents, men like Barack Obama, written by themselves?” Why is it important to read about the lives of men like Bee? What have you gained from reading *The Song Poet*?

12. Bee clearly has great love and respect for his adopted brother, Shong. What is it about Shong that made such an impression on Bee? What does Shong’s experience in Laos represent for Bee?

13. *The Song Poet* is a book about love—the love of parents for children, children for parents, husbands and wives for each other, and the Hmong people for their culture. In your opinion, what were some of strongest examples of love in the book? What did different characters sacrifice in the name of love?

14. Many chapters open with lines of Bee’s songs. Which were your favorites? Do you consider Bee to be a poet?

15. At the beginning of Side B, Track 9, there is a description of Bee’s recurring nightmare. What do you think the debris in Bee’s mouth represents? What about the rock in his hand?

16. When Dawb calls her father a “racist” he slaps her. After this moment Kalia says, “The problem of education had entered our lives.” What does this mean? How might education change a family?



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