

## Review

### *Gathering Fireflies*

by Mai Chao Duddeck. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.

215 pp.

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I need to be a voice for the Hmong people,  
to make sure they are  
not forgotten  
in the American history books,  
to give them the proper credit they deserve  
as they make America  
their new home.  
--Kashia (in Duddeck, p. 195)

In her inaugural novel for young readers, teacher and artist Mai Chao Duddeck (2015) provides readers with a symphony of voices that will challenge, educate, and engage all ages and backgrounds. In the above excerpt, the book's central character, Kashia, gives voice to a significant lesson learned through a school project facilitated by teachers committed to empowering their students to "research a topic that is meaningful and worthwhile" (p. 2). In response to his teachers' challenges to grapple with the theme of "Conflict and Compromise" in a

meaningful way, Kashia delves into the stories of his family's perilous journey to the United States following the Vietnam War.

*Gathering Fireflies*, a novel-in-verse, is a remarkably powerful assemblage of voices which, taken together, tell a rich and complex story of the Hmong people's journey from Laos, Thailand, and, eventually, the United States. The youngest voice in the book is Kashia, a 6-foot-tall and nearly 13-year-old middle school student who loves basketball. In part, the book chronicles his quest to learn more about himself and his family. Prompted by an interdisciplinary assignment (National History Day), he collects stories from his grandparents, Ginu and Mai Lia, about their experiences as refugees who eventually ended up in the United States.

Learning about the conflicts suffered and endured by his family members, including his mother (Pa Ying), as they cross boundaries of all sorts (e.g., geography, language, tradition), Kashia gains new understandings about his history and his dualized cultural identity. As Kashia explains, he is part of “a new generation of Hmong / a hybrid of Hmong and American” (1; 215). More specifically, Kashia’s mother, the daughter of Ginu and Mai Lia, is Hmong, while his father, Josh, is European American. Like other great young adult books addressing the theme of “hybrid” or bifurcated identities (e.g., Alexie’s *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and Yang’s *American Born Chinese*), this book will not disappoint teachers and learners seeking opportunities to discuss and deliberate on the complex questions raised:

“How many Americans stop to / think about what the Hmong have been through?” (pp. 64-65)

“Do you know that even today, in 2014, / there are still thousands of Hmong people / unable to get out of the dense jungles of Laos?” (p. 83)

“How can she love a man who looks nothing like her?” (p. 165)

“What do these children in America know about / hard life and suffering? ... How dare they challenge and disobey their elders!” (pp. 140-141)

“I am sad that / our children are changing, / becoming Americans in their minds, / their needs, / their wants, / their dreams. / Individual, separate, single. / What about family? / What about us?” (p. 200)

The book also raises additional questions related to the following timeless themes:

*Identity:* Do you create an identity or are you born with one? In what ways do identities intersect to inform experience?

*Conflict and Compromise:* Why do we fight wars? How might it feel to live through a conflict that disrupts your way of life?

*Culture and Tradition:* Does culture isolate people or bring them together? What is the role of an “agent of change”?

*Individual vs. Collective:* Should responsibility to family take precedence over individual goals? When should an individual take a stand in opposition to an individual or a larger group?

The ideas encountered in this book, in other words, will challenge readers and teachers alike to go beyond the sound bites offered vis-à-vis today's 24-hour cycle of fast-paced "news," information, and entertainment in order to stand and give witness to the ambiguity, shifting contexts, and multiple perspectives that exist in history/ies and literature(s).

At a time of increasing political polarization between and within the ideological extremes of this country, this book will have immediate appeal to educators dedicated to improving the quality of classroom deliberations and preparing today's learners for a lifetime of civic engagement, political thinking, and working toward the promise of democracy. As Hess and McAvoy (2015) detail in *The Political Classroom*, a question which lies at the heart of a robust democracy is "How should we live together?" Duddeck's *Gathering Fireflies* offers plenty of opportunities for deliberating on this overarching and essential question.

*Gathering Fireflies* is more than an important contribution to a growing population of exceptional verse novels; it also offers very important perspectives. Duddeck's 215-page, nine-chapter, free-verse book of poems (accompanied with beautiful black-and-white illustrations of people and landscapes), based on the lives of real people, offers unique interdisciplinary opportunities (particularly between English Language Arts and History/Social Studies). The book will appeal to students and teachers in grades 6-9.

According to Kashia's grandfather, Ginu, "Teachers plant seeds in your minds / that take you to many roads of opportunity / where you can become somebody" (124). Who does Kashia become as a result of seeds planted by teachers and as a result of gathering his own fireflies? In part, he does become a voice for his people, and readers will be uplifted through his coming-of-age story.

**Note:** Teaching materials for Duddeck's *Gathering Fireflies*, created by the authors of this review, may be accessed at [teachingbooks.net](http://teachingbooks.net)

### References

- Alexie, S. (2009). *The absolutely true diary of a part-time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown Books.
- Hess, D. E., & McAvoy, P. (2015). *The political classroom: Evidence and ethics in democratic education*. New York: Routledge.
- Yang, G. (2008). *American born Chinese*. New York: Square Fish.

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