

A CONVERSATION WITH KAO KALIA YANG

What research did you undertake in writing your award-winning book?

All my life I had been listening to the stories of my family and the explanations for the life we were living in: the refugee camps, the housing projects, the government subsidized houses, and the moldy houses. When I decided to write a book, I began reading all that the world remembered (in English) on the Hmong and what happened in the Secret War in Laos. Collectively, the writing was a piecing together of what my family lived through and the details of a war and its consequences on a people - mostly forgotten if ever known.

How long did it take to complete *The Latehomecomer*?

I began writing the book in 2003 as my grandmother was passing away. I finished it in 2007, and it was published in 2008.

What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing the book?

The most interesting challenge was the structure of the book. I couldn't see it as such for a long time, because I was too keenly aware of how the story

would continue beyond the book - because any ending and/or beginning felt arbitrary.

What do you hope your readers take away from *The Latehomecomer*?

I hope that they will see pieces of themselves reflected in the story I've written. I hope that they will understand that the human story is more powerful than the places, the languages and the cultures that enable it.

How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

This is the BEST state in which to be a young writer. Here, people invite writers into their homes so that they can understand the story better. A writer does not come from a family alone; he or she rises from a community. This is the landscape of my experience - the foundations of my understanding of a bigger world.

What is your biggest dream?

My father says that if you dream in the right direction, the dream only gets bigger. You never wake up and the dream never dies. I wanted to be a writer. Now, I want to live as a writer. I want to inspire writers.

How do you most enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

I like to walk. I enjoy texting and emailing, two forms of exercise that enable and allow me to write. I find peace in folding laundry and doing dishes - productive daily life tasks calm me down.

The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Office of the Mayor of Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Public Library, and is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a Federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership, and a lifetime of learning; and the Minnesota Department of Education/State Library Agency, with funding under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). For additional information, please call: **651-366-6497**



325 Cedar Street
Suite 555
Saint Paul, MN 55101
651-222-3242

www.thefriends.org

A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards

21ST ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

Winner of the
**Memoir & Creative Nonfiction
and Readers' Choice Awards**

*Readers' Choice Award sponsored by the
Pioneer Press and TwinCities.com*

"This is the best account of the Hmong
experience I've ever read—powerful,
heartbreaking, and unforgettable."
—ANNE PADIMAN

THE Latehomecomer

A HMONG FAMILY MEMOIR

Kao Kalia Yang



The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir

by Kao Kalia Yang

COFFEE HOUSE PRESS

The Latehomecomer



Photo by Der Yang

SUMMARY:

Born in Thailand's Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Kao Kalia Yang immigrated to Saint Paul when she was six years old. This is the story of her family's harrowing escape from Laos, their life in refugee camps, the hardships and joys that came with creating a new life in a new land, and Kalia's experiences with American culture and education.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. Is this a family memoir or the memories of a young woman coming to be?
3. Describe the author's style of writing. How does her use of language affect your experience of her family's story?
4. What does "the latehomecomer" refer to, and why did the author choose it as the title?
5. What pieces of yourself are reflected in the story?
6. The author is fond of the book's circularity. To what extent were you aware of the circular theme, beginning with babies in the sky and ending with her grandmother's death?
7. What have you learned about Hmong culture by reading *The Latehomecomer*?
8. Is the story more about hardship or joy? What keeps Kalia's family strong, and what gets you through difficult times?

9. What title would you choose for your family memoir?
10. Are there images and/or ideas from *The Latehomecomer* that will stay with you forever?

About Kao Kalia Yang:

Kao Kalia Yang is a graduate of Carleton College, and she earned her Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Nonfiction at Columbia University. She is the co-founder of **Words Wanted**, an agency dedicated to helping immigrants with writing, translating, and business services. The *Latehomecomer* is Kalia's first published book. She wrote "The Place Where We Were Born," a film documenting the experiences of Hmong American refugees, and is working on creative nonfiction books for children. Visit www.kaokaliayang.com for more information about the author and her work.



Photo by Scott Strebler



Sponsors and supporters of the 21st annual Minnesota Book Awards included: Barnes & Noble; The Boss Foundation; Common Good Books; The Harlan Boss Foundation for the Arts; The Huss Foundation; The Katherine B. Andersen Fund of The Saint Paul Foundation; Library Networks for Literature - A Project of the Public Programs Office of the American Library Association; The Loft Literary Center; Metropolitan Library Service Agency (MELSA); Minnesota Center for Book Arts; Minnesota Department of Education - State Library Services; Minnesota Educational Media

Organization (MEMO); Minnesota Library Association (MLA); Minnesota Library Foundation; Minnesota Public Radio (MPR); Pioneer Press & TwinCities.com; The Red Balloon Bookshop; The Saint Paul Almanac; Saint Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN); Secrets of the City; and Twin Cities Public Television (TPT).

For more information, please visit us online at www.thefriends.org, or call 651-222-3242