

The Blue House I Loved

written by Kao Kalia Yang
illustrated by Jen Shin

Discussion and Activity Guide for Educators and Caregivers



Book Title: *The Blue House I Loved*

Written by: Kao Kalia Yang

Illustrated by: Jen Shin

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Recommended Ages: 5 and up

About the Book

The Blue House I Loved centers on a family of newly arrived Hmong refugees who move into the lower level of a duplex in St. Paul, Minnesota. The narrator loves her aunt and uncle's home with its mismatched furniture, but it is too small for the large family. The boy cousins sleep in the three-season porch, where their wet hair freezes in wintertime, and the rest of the family crowds into two bedrooms. Yet this is the cherished home where they live and love, their own small corner of a very large and unfamiliar place, and in this blue house, a young girl learns about her new country. Eventually, the family moves in search of more space, and years later, the house is torn down. Where it was, green grass now grows. But for this girl and her family, the ghost of the house remains, its memories a strong thread that holds time at bay and hearts close together.

Combining Kao Kalia Yang's lyrical prose with ethereal illustrations by artist and architect Jen Shin, *The Blue House I Loved* speaks to the multitude of refugee experiences around the world, honoring the challenges they face and the homes they create together.

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Notes for Adults Reading With Children

Hmong people are an ethnic group without a country of their own who have traditionally lived in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and China. Following the Vietnam War, in which many fought alongside the U.S., Hmong people were forced to abandon their homes to escape persecution by the communist Vietnamese government. Many sought refuge in Thailand before resettling in other countries, such as the United States. Many Hmong refugees began coming to the U.S. during the 1970s, and there are over 300,000 Hmong in the United States today. Minnesota is home to over 63,000 Hmong.

For more information about Hmong history and culture, check out these resources:

- “Hmong-Americans in Minnesota.” Minnesota Historical Society, <https://libguides.mnhs.org/hmong>.
- Yang, Nancy. “10 Things: Hmong Culture, Food and Language.” MPR News, MPR News, 1 Mar. 2015, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/03/01/10-things-hmong>.
- “About Us.” Hmong Cultural Center, 2018, <https://www.hmongcc.org/about-us.html>.

Key Vocabulary

- **Refugee:** a person who has been forced to leave their home because of danger, like war or violence
- **Hmong:** an ethnic group who traditionally lived in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and China. The name “Hmong” means “free.”
- **Cassette tape:** an audiotape for recording or listening to sound, used before the invention of CDs

Reflection Questions for Adults

Before you read this book, think about:

- Reflect on the places from your childhood that hold significant meaning to you. What did these places teach you about life, the world, or your own values? How did those places and the people there shape who you are today?

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- Despite the house being small, crowded, and filled with mismatched furniture from donations, the author remembers her aunt and uncle’s home fondly. How might a story like this serve as a powerful window for some children to learn about and build empathy/understanding for others? How might a story like this serve as a mirror that positively reflects identity for children like Kalia and her cousins? How will this influence your reading and discussion of this book with children?

Introduce the Book to Children

In this story, the author, Kalia, tells the story of her aunt and uncle’s home, the bottom floor of a duplex. Kalia and her family are Hmong refugees, and the blue house is a place where they create a new home together in St. Paul, Minnesota. Kalia remembers the home fondly, even long after her aunt, uncle, and cousins have moved away. Let’s read together to learn about how special the blue house was, and how it still provides comfort to Kalia all these years later.

Journal Prompts

- Write about a place that is special to you and your family. Describe that place with as much detail as you can, using all the senses.
- Tell about a special memory from when you were younger that you hope you never forget. What makes that memory stand out to you? Why is it something you want to remember?

Discussion Questions

Before Reading:

1. Look closely at the book’s cover. What do you notice? What do you wonder?

During Reading:

2. What did you learn about the narrator, Kalia, and her family from the first few pages of the book? What questions do you have?
3. What makes a place a home? How did the family make the blue house their home?
4. Why do you think some of the words in the book are in colored text? (*thump, thump, thump*; blue house; icy hair; splash of color, etc.)

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5. Most of the memories Kalia describes are special and happy. Why do you think she decides to tell about a couple of unpleasant moments, such as her first fight or when Uncle came home from surgery in pain?
6. How did Kalia feel when her aunt and uncle moved out of the blue house? How do you think she felt when the house was torn down? What do you think she missed most?
7. Why do you think the author wrote this book about her aunt and uncle's house instead of where she lived?

After Reading:

8. After reading, close your eyes and try to imagine the blue house described in the story. Which aspects of the house can you imagine clearly? How do they look, sound, feel, smell, or taste? As you continue to imagine, what things does your imagination add that perhaps the author didn't mention or the illustrator didn't include? Are any parts of the house hard for you to imagine?
9. The illustrator of this book is also an architect, someone who designs buildings. Look through the book again, and examine the illustrations closely. What evidence can you find that she is an architect? Why do you think she included those elements in this book?

Additional Activities for Deeper Connection

- **Shifting Perspectives** - Invite children to go through the book and retell the story from a different perspective, such as the aunt, uncle, a cousin, the upstairs neighbors, or even the house. Discuss how the perspective from which the story is told shifts how we understand the house's significance to Kalia.
- **"Dear Place" Letters** - Have children write a letter to a place they love. In their letter, they should describe the things about the place that stand out in their memories and have important meanings. They can also express gratitude for the things the place has given them or ask the place questions they wonder about. Use the journal prompts provided above as a starting point.

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- **The Geography of Stories Mapping Activity** – Work with children to create a [Google My Map](#) to show the places they love and that are important to them. Begin by becoming familiar with My Maps if you have not used them previously. When you're ready to begin, help children collect a list of places that are important to them or where significant memories took place. Help them find the places on the map and place pins for them. Then, they can write a brief description of the place, upload a picture, or add a link to another webpage (perhaps even to a Google Doc that tells more about the place, like what was written for the journal exercise above).
 - To do this activity in a classroom, invite each child to identify one place that is important to them, and create a class map that can be shared with them and their families. Use the map for further geography or math activities/lessons.
 - To do this as a family, encourage children to ask family members to identify a place that is important to them, and invite them to share it on your map.

Connections to Anti-Bias Education and Social-Emotional Learning

What is Anti-Bias Education? *“Anti-bias education is a critical approach to teaching and learning that...helps children strengthen their identities as capable and empowered human beings. Through anti-bias education, children identify issues and inequities in their lives, ask questions, consider multiple perspectives, and think about their lives critically, growing to actively resist prejudice and discrimination.”* (Derman-Sparks et al. Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change. Teachers College Press, 2015.)

The AmazeWorks Anti-Bias Education (ABE) tenets touched on in *The Blue House I Loved*:

- Empathy and understanding for self and others
- Healthy and complex identity development
- Respect across and appreciation of differences
- The ability to notice, name, and reject bias
- Responsiveness and taking action against bias, prejudice, and discrimination

Infused within Anti-Bias Education is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). **Social-Emotional Learning Competencies touched on in *The Blue House I Loved*:**

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- Self-awareness - Build awareness of one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- Self-management - Managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals.
- Social awareness - Build awareness of one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- Relationship skills - Establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships, and effectively navigate diversity.
- Responsible decision-making - Make ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior

About AmazeWorks

The mission of [AmazeWorks](https://amazeworks.org) is to champion equity and belonging for all. We believe that everyone should see their families, identities, and lived experiences reflected in positive mirrors and windows into the lives of others who are different from them. AmazeWorks is happy to partner with Kao Kalia Yang to offer this discussion guide because we all believe in the power of stories to inspire, educate, and connect us all.

