

- 1 Discuss the many decisions that Diệu Lan (Grandma) faced throughout her life as well as the influence of outside forces, chance, and choice that impelled her in those moments. How are lives bent to the will of events?
- 2 Discuss Diệu Lan's children and her influence on each of them. Did any characters in particular stand out to you?
- 3 The author has earned acclaim as a celebrated poet. Discuss how you think her background in this form influenced *The Mountains Sing* novel.\*
- 4 For those discussing the book who have received a Western-based education, in what ways did you feel the book either aligned or deviated from your understanding of the Vietnam conflict, historical events, and culture?
- 5 In addition to her own personal experience witnessing war's devastation, author Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai collected hundreds of true stories from families to form the basis of this novel and study the aftermath of war across generations. Discuss how trauma is handed down through the decades and how it evolves between generations.
- 6 Many proverbs and symbols handed down through generations in Vietnam appeared in this novel. Did you identify with any of them, or did any of them make a particular impression on you? What sayings or symbols from your own family or culture have reappeared throughout your own life?
- 7 How do faith, religion, and ritual play into this story?
- 8 Especially in regard to the character of Sang, discuss political ideology's potential to drive families apart.
- 9 This book is epic in both timeframe and scope and, despite all its heartache, remains hopeful in the end. What threads throughout the novel contributed to that unexpected tone?
- 10 Discuss the level of transparency with which Grandma reveals her history to her granddaughter Hương as well as the way that honesty either was appropriate for those moments or forced Hương to grow up faster. Did these details help Hương come to terms with the outcomes of her parents' involvement in the war effort?
- 11 In relation to Hương's mother, whose story was quite tragic, discuss the ideal of war versus the reality of it. How did Ngọc process that trauma?
- 12 One of Grandma's phrases of wisdom offered to Ngọc was "If you bear grudges, you're the one who'll have to bear the burden of sorrow." Discuss Diệu Lan's deep well of forgiveness and courage. How do you think she summoned such courage to release these deep wounds?
- 13 Consider the book's perspective—largely written in the voice of young Hương, to whom we could draw loose parallels to the author (born in 1973) based on age and experience. Who gets to tell their ancestors' stories, and how do those stories evolve through time?
- 14 Have you traveled to Vietnam or studied the country's history? How did this book compare to that experience? How about for other war-torn regions of the world? How did visiting or learning about those places affect you?

\*You can borrow *The Secret of Hoa Sen* by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai, for which the author collaborated with poet and translator Bruce Weigl to form a collection focused on the lingering physical and psychological effects of the Vietnam War, on hoopla:

<https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/11856163>

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