



Grades 2 – 4; Ages 5 – 9

## The Doll

Written by Nhung N. Tran-Davies  
Illustrated by Ravy Puth

Teacher's Guide

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## Summary

A young girl and her family have travelled across the world to find safety. The family is greeted by strangers, one of whom presents the young girl with the gift of a doll. Decades pass, and the little girl, now grown up, welcomes a group of newly arrived refugees. Knowing it will make her feel welcome, the woman passes the doll that was once given to her over to the youngest girl in the migrant family. This story is based on the author's experience of arriving in Edmonton, Canada, after travelling at sea with 300 Boat People.

## About the Author

Nhung N. Tran-Davies is a physician, author, mother of three, and an advocate for social justice through education. Born in Vietnam, the youngest of six children, she was only five when she and her family came to Canada in 1979, after eight months in a Malaysian refugee camp.

## Learning Opportunities

Students will have the opportunity to:

- Make connections to the text by sharing personal experiences of special belongings/toys in their lives
- Appreciate the descriptive language used by an author and how word choices help paint pictures in a reader's head
- Experience and respond to a biographical picture book
- Understand and appreciate the impact of small acts of kindness
- Understand the concept of “paying it forward”
- Learn about the refugee experience

### Vocabulary

**Boat People:** refugees who have left a country by sea; Vietnamese people who fled their country in small boats following the end of the war in 1975

**cruelty:** something that causes pain or suffering

**immigrant:** a person who journeys to a new country to live there permanently

**quiver:** tremble or shake

**radiant:** shining or glowing brightly

**refugee:** a type of immigrant; someone who has left their native country because of war, fear of being harmed or killed, often because of race or religion

**tattered:** old and torn

**weary:** very tired

## Preparing to Read *The Doll*

### *Toy Stories*

- Invite students to share stories about toys (dolls, stuffed animals) that are important to them. What is the toy’s name? Was it a present? What is special about this toy? Why is this toy important to you?

### *Acts of Kindness*

- What does “acts of kindness” mean to you? Invite students to share stories about a time when someone was especially kind to them, or a time when they were kind to others.

### *What is a Refugee?*

- Discuss with the students the concept of being a refugee or an immigrant. Why might someone need to leave their home country? What do you know about refugees? What do you wonder about refugees? (Note: some students in the class may have had the experience of immigrating to a new home and might choose to share their stories.)

### *Examining the Cover of the Book*

- Draw students’ attention to the cover of the book. Students can make predictions about the importance of the doll. What do we know about the characters shown on the cover?
- What words might we use to describe the girl and/or the doll on the cover?

**Extension:** Invite the students to write one or two sentences to describe the doll shown on the cover.

### *Inventing a Story from Pictures*

- Take a picture walk through *The Doll* and draw attention to images of the doll that appear throughout. What things seem to have happened in the doll’s life? What is the doll’s story? What questions come to mind about the doll?

## Questions for Discussion

1. The opening illustration of this story shows an airplane. Have you ever been on an airplane? Where did you travel to/from?
2. Early in the story we meet “a mother and six children in ragged clothes, clutching a tattered bag. Holding all they had left.” What belongings do you think were held in the tattered bags?
3. The third spread in this book features a scene from the past, showing Vietnamese Boat People. What information do we learn from the verbal text (e.g., “Forced from their home by the cruelty of war...”)? What information do we learn by examining the illustration on these two pages?
4. How do we know that the young girl’s dreams came true when she became a woman?
5. The expression “paying it forward” means that you do a kindness for someone because someone has done a kindness for you. How is *The Doll* a story of paying it forward?
6. Do you think this is a happy story or a sad story? Or both?
7. How is *The Doll* a good story to learn about acts of kindness?
8. Why is *The Doll* a good story to learn about the refugee experience? Does this story remind you of other true stories of refugees? Other books you have read?
9. How might we welcome a refugee or another newcomer to our country into the classroom? What might we say, ask, do, or give?
10. Nhung’s doll is now on display at the Canadian Museum of Immigration, Pier 21, Halifax. Why do you think this doll now rests in a museum?



## Responding to *The Doll*

*The Doll is a very special picture book to share with students ages 6–11.*

*The following are suggested response activities that can be adapted for different grade levels.*

### WRITING:

#### Describing the doll

Nhung N. Tran-Davies describes the doll this way: “In her hands she held a small doll, with wild curls of cinnamon, lips sweet and rosy.”

Have students examine the image of the doll on the cover, or any illustration in which the doll appears. Invite students to write a description\* that would tell someone who hasn’t seen this doll what it looks like. Encourage students to describe each of the doll’s facial features and articles of clothing, using adjectives and perhaps similes to paint a clear picture of the doll.

\*Younger students can write two or three sentences. Older students can write a descriptive paragraph.

**Extension:** Tell the students to imagine that the doll has been lost one day. Students can prepare a poster that could be displayed throughout the neighbourhood. Students could write a detailed description of the doll to accompany an illustration.

## ORAL NARRATIVES:

### The Teddy Bear's picnic

Tell the students that you are going to organize a Teddy Bear's picnic in the classroom. Each student can bring in a stuffed bear (or other animal), a doll, puppet, or other toy to attend the picnic. Students can share stories about their toy by explaining why it is special.

**Note:** Although this activity might seem more appealing for younger children, it is likely that students ages eight to eleven would enjoy sharing stories about their favourite toys.

## LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY:

### Exploring the author's style

Each page of the narrative presents examples of the vivid use of adjectives and verbs to convey strong images in the reader's head.

To begin, read the book's opening sentence and discuss the author's choice of words to describe the girl.

“Long ago, in a nearby land, there was a young girl whose eyes were deep-ocean blue, whose dimples twinkled like bright mischievous stars.”

As you review the book, draw students' attention to the author's use of vocabulary. A chart can be used to record the effective use of nouns, adjectives, and verbs.

“A young girl whose eyes were deep-ocean blue”

“[Her] dimples twinkled”

“Her skinny legs dangled”

“Planes landed and lifted above cotton-candy clouds”

“Wild curls of cinnamon”

“The metal gates slid softly open”

“They'd fled to cross unfriendly seas”

**Teaching tip:** You may wish to identify parts of speech (e.g., adjectives, verbs, adverbs). You may choose to record examples of each.

ADJECTIVES: mischievous, sweet, rosy, radiant

VERBS: whispered, rolled, washed, pacing, clutching, quivered, shuffled, surged

ADVERBS: softly open, timidly peeked, slept safely



## DETERMINING IMPORTANT DETAILS (Nonfiction):

### Author's note

Read aloud the *Author's Note* that appears at the end of the book. Have students identify new facts that we learned about Nhung N. Tran-Davies from this autobiographical piece. Record students' responses on a chart entitled Things We Learned about Nhung N. Tran-Davies. Or, students can work in groups of three to list six to ten facts.

## INQUIRY:

### Investigating information about Boat People

*The Doll* provides readers with information about Boat People who escaped Vietnam in the late 1970s. Provide students with a T-Chart. In column #1, students can list things they *know* about Boat People. In column #2, students can list things that they *wonder* about Boat People (questions).

### Extensions:

- a) Display a map of the world. Point out the location of Vietnam, Malaysia, Edmonton, Syria, and the students' city.
- b) Some students can use the Internet to research and report other facts and stories they learn about Boat People. Students can share their findings as a written report with illustrations, a PowerPoint, a newscast, or an interview.

## DRAMA:

### An interview with Nhung N. Tran-Davies

Tell the students to imagine that they will have a chance to interview the author about her experiences of coming to Canada, of settling into Edmonton with her family, of receiving the doll, of passing the doll on to another young refugee girl, and of growing up and realizing her dreams. To prepare for the interview, brainstorm questions that the class, as media reporters, might ask the author for their news report about immigrants and refugees.

The in-role interview can be conducted in one of the following ways:

- The teacher answers questions from the media (the students).
- Students work in groups of four or five. One volunteer can assume the role of author. The remaining members of the group can ask questions.

## VISUAL ARTS:

### Making dolls

On the final page of the book, we see a display of the doll at the Museum of Immigration in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Provide students with an opportunity to create other dolls or toys or refugee belongings that might be displayed in the museum. Students can make dolls using simple materials (e.g., wool, sticks, fabric, Styrofoam spheres, etc.). Once completed, students can name their dolls and write a short description or a story about their significance to accompany the dolls.

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## FURTHER READING

### Picture Books

*Adrift at Sea: A Vietnamese Boy's Story of Survival*, written by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch with Tuan Ho, illustrated by Brian Deines, Pajama Press, 2016

*Dear Baobab*, written by Cheryl Foggo, illustrated by Qin Leng, Second Story Press, 2011

*Dreamers*, written by Yuyi Morales, Neal Porter Books, 2018

*Mustafa*, written by Marie-Louise Gay, Groundwood Books, 2018

*My Beautiful Birds*, written by Suzanne Del Rizzo, Pajama Press, 2017

*Out*, written by Angela May George, illustrated by Owen Swan, Scholastic Canada, 2011

*The Paper Boat: A Refugee Story*, written by Thao Lam, Owlkids, 2020

*Teacup*, written by Rebecca Young, illustrated by Matt Ottley, Scholastic Press, 2015

*Where Will I Live?*, written by Rosemary McCarney, Second Story Press, 2017

### Nonfiction (ages 9+)

*Inside Out & Back Again*, written by Thanhha Lai, HarperCollins, 2011

*Last Airlift: A Vietnamese Orphan's Rescue from War*, written by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, Pajama Press, 2011

*One Step at a Time: A Vietnamese Child Finds Her Way*, written by Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, Pajama Press, 2013

*My Name Is Konisola*, written by Alisa Siegel, Second Story Press, 2020

*Our New Home: Immigrant Children Speak*, edited by Emily Hearn and Narywinn Milne, Second Story Press, 2008

*Refugees and Migrants*, written by Ceri Roberts, illustrated by Hanane Kai, Wayland, 2016

*What Is a Refugee?*, written by Elise Gravel, Schwartz & Wade Books, 2019