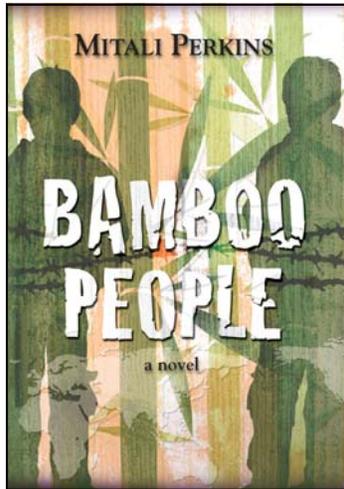


BAMBOO PEOPLE

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

Developed by Charlesbridge with Mitali Perkins and Kelley McDaniel, librarian, King Middle School in Portland, Maine
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Ages 11–14

Narrated by two teenaged boys on opposing sides of the conflict between the Burmese government and the Karenni, one of Burma's many ethnic minorities, this coming-of-age novel takes place against the political and military backdrop of modern-day Burma.

Chiko isn't a fighter by nature. He's a book-loving Burmese boy whose father, a doctor, is in prison for resisting the government. Tu Reh, on the other hand, wants to fight for freedom after watching Burmese soldiers destroy his Karenni family's home and bamboo fields. Timidity becomes courage and anger becomes compassion when the boys' stories intersect.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1) In her author's note, Mitali Perkins writes that her interactions with the Karenni people she met along her travels in Thailand led her to think of the bamboo plant as "an excellent symbol for the peoples of that region." What does she mean by this?

2) Daw Widow is a strong-willed character treated with a great amount of respect by Chiko and his mother. She ultimately convinces Chiko's mother that her son should go to take the teacher's exam, despite the fact that it may be a trap. Why does Daw Widow's opinion hold so much weight? Why does she change her mind about Chiko's future?

3) When Chiko's father was captured, he called out, "Take care of your mother, Chiko!" (p. 6) Although Chiko replied that he would, he does not think that he has kept that promise. In what ways has Chiko taken care of his mother? In what ways has he not? Do you think Chiko has kept his promise, or has he failed? Why or why not?

4) Chiko carries around the pictures of his father and neighbor, Lei, during his time in the Burmese army. Why are these objects so important to him?

What do they symbolize? Do you have any objects in your own life that have helped you through a difficult situation?

5) During his first days in the Burmese army, Chiko keeps telling himself, "Mind your own business. Keep out of trouble. Stay alive. One day at a time." (p. 39, 47). He believes the only way to survive is to keep to himself and obey his captors. Does this opinion change as time goes on? If so, what prompts this change?

6) When Tai declares that Chiko had nothing to do with the idea to use buffalo to finish the daunting task of clearing the river, the captain sends Tai to confinement. Chiko thinks, "It's done. Tai is going to confinement, and I'm not. So why do I feel like the one who's condemned?" (p. 82) What do you think of Chiko at this point in the book? What do you think of Tai? Have you ever been in a situation like this? Which character were you, and how did you feel?

7) Chiko teaches Tai how to read and write while they are both in the Burmese army. What does Tai



DISCUSSION TOPICS

teach Chiko? How is Tai an inspiration to Chiko? How does he help Chiko get through each day in the training camp?

8) When the captain chooses Tai for a “secret mission,” Chiko steps forward to take his place (p. 123). Why do you think Chiko made this decision? What do you think Tai thought and felt? What do you think the other boys watching and listening thought and felt?

9) How do Chiko and Tu Reh develop throughout the course of the book? How are these changes displayed? What do we learn about these boys through the other characters, as opposed to through their first-person narratives?

10) Both Chiko and Tu Reh’s fathers are absent from most of the book, but we do learn a lot about them through other characters, their sons in particular. How are these fathers different? How are they similar?

11) Education is very important to Chiko. He wants to be a teacher, and he believes that if Tai learns to read and write, it will help his sister, an orphan in Yangon. While listening to the captain talk about the Karenni as “rebels” and “insurgents,” Chiko thinks, “I’ve been taught not to believe anything the government says about the tribal people. But the other new recruits didn’t have someone to tell them the truth. All they have is this captain’s version.” (p. 48) Meanwhile, Tu Reh feels that education is a waste of time. How do these different views on education affect Tu Reh and Chiko’s perspectives of the world? Are these differing perspectives due to the education each boy received, or are they just a result of their individual circumstances? Or both?

12) What are Peh’s reasons for wanting his son, Tu Reh, to join him on the mission? When they find Chiko, Tu Reh says to his son, “I won’t command you, my son. A Karenni man must decide for himself. Leave him for the animals. End his life now. Or carry him to the healer. It’s your choice.” (p. 149) Do you think Peh wants Tu Reh to make a certain choice? Why or why not?

13) The grandfather asks Ree Meh to read a well-known passage from the Bible, Ecclesiastes 3:1–8: “There is a right time for everything:/ A time to be born, a time to die;/ A time to plant, a time to harvest. . .” (p. 170–171). This prayer was made into a song in the 1960s (written by Pete Seeger and made famous by The Byrds). What does this prayer/song mean to you? Does it remind you of anything?

14) Ree Meh’s reluctance to go to school reminds us that while the characters in this book are placed in difficult and dangerous situations, most of them are just children. What other instances in the book remind us of this fact? How would you respond to the events in the book if you were Tu Reh, Chiko, or one of the other children?

15) Throughout the second part of the book, the people in the refugee camp where Tu Reh lives keep referring to Chiko as “[Tu Reh’s] soldier.” Tu Reh is very bothered by this. Why? Why did he decide to save Chiko after all?

16) Nya Meh has been through a terrible ordeal. Captured by Burmese soldiers, she suffered verbal and physical assaults that are only hinted at in the book. Despite this, she is dedicated to healing Chiko. Why do you think she is able to do this? What role does her ordeal play in Tu Reh and Sa Reh’s reconciliation?



BEYOND THE BOOK. . .

About Modern Burma

Slightly smaller than Texas in size, the country of Burma shares borders with India, Laos, China, Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Bay of Bengal. It's a land of diversity, with over one hundred languages, several religions, fertile plains, and rugged highlands. The country was once described as the "rice bowl of Asia" and enjoyed one of the highest literacy rates in Southeast Asia.

Sadly that didn't last. Today about ninety percent of Burma's people live at or below the poverty line, and the country's health system is ranked second worst in the world. About ten percent of children die before the age of five, and the literacy rate has been plummeting each year.

How did the region's "rice bowl" become a place of suffering, disease, and hunger? It's a sad story of injustice and corruption.

Once ruled by Britain, Burma became an independent parliamentary democracy in 1948. Ethnic groups like the Shan, the Karen, and the Wa wanted to keep their independence and avoid being controlled by the Burmese majority. Despite tension and strife, the country survived as a representative government for fourteen years. In 1962, however, military leaders staged a coup and took control of the country.

Things went from bad to worse—the army shut down free elections, took over newspapers and businesses, and clamped down on freedom of expression, association, and assembly. People tried to resist, but the military brutally crushed student and worker demonstrations in the 1960s and 1970s. The government tortured and imprisoned anyone brave enough to speak out. At the same time, ethnic groups along the country's frontiers continued to struggle for independence. To fight these "insurgents," as they were labeled, the government began forcing young Burmese men into the army.

The military makes money by controlling industries like mining, logging, oil, transport, manufacturing, apparel, and electricity, and by regulating exports and foreign investment. What happens to all that income? Half is spent on the military and next to nothing on health care and education. And the rulers are lining their own pockets, of course. While the elite live in luxury, the vast majority of Burmese don't know if they'll be able to feed their families tomorrow.

The army tortures and kills members of minority ethnic groups, uses them for hard labor, and burns their villages. Thousands of people hide in the jungle as internally displaced people, while some flee across the border to Thailand to seek shelter in refugee camps. About one hundred forty thousand refugees live in nine camps along the Thai-Burma border. Since 2004, over fifty thousand refugees representing different minority groups in Burma have been resettled in other countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Norway.

MAP OF BURMA/MYANMAR AND ITS SURROUNDING COUNTRIES



Quick Facts:*

- Official name: Union of Myanmar
- Form of government: Military regime
- Population Estimate (2009): 48,138,000
- Capital: Nay Pyi Taw
- Official Language: Burmese
- Official Religion: None
- Monetary Unit: Myanmar kyat
- Total area: 261,228 sq mi

*"Myanmar." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 22 Feb. 2010
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/400119/Myanmar>

What's in a name?

You may not find the country of Burma listed in some books after 1989. That year the military government changed the country's official English name from "the Union of Burma" to "the Union of Myanmar." Although the United Nations switched to Myanmar, the USA, the UK, and Canada are among the nations that refused to recognize this new name. "Burma" is what the Burmese people use in informal, everyday conversation, reserving the use of "Myanmar" for formal and ceremonial speech.

The capital of Myanmar, or Burma, was the southern city of Yangon, also known as Rangoon, until 2006 when the government proclaimed Nay Pyi Taw as the new capital (see map at right).



Map from U.S. Department of State website, www.state.gov