

## READING GUIDE: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND AN INTERVIEW WITH KAO KALIA YANG

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Hmong language is intimately tied to Yang's experience of, and expression of, Hmong culture. Her arrival in the United States means learning English and having to navigate a new culture in that language. How do the languages of our families, communities, and cultures color how we inhabit those spaces? How do they create and sustain those bonds?
2. Yang's grandmother is a powerful figure in *The Latehomecomer*, and her resourcefulness and wisdom in many ways make possible the family's journey from Laos to Minnesota. The attention to her role in their story is one of many ways the author focuses the story on others, making this a "family memoir." How does that choice affect your reading of the book? What does it mean for an author to define "self" in the context of "family"?
3. The United States was populated by colonized Native peoples, voluntary migrants, refugees whose migration was coerced by conditions at home, and slaves. How do the complexity of our origin stories and learning about the conditions under which Hmong families like the Yangs arrived change your understanding of citizenship, Americanness, and home?
4. When the Yangs cross the Mekong, they're forced to leave their family photos behind. How do belongings carry meaning in *The Latehomecomer*? What other objects take on significance beyond their utility in the book?

5. Yang pays close attention to her characters' surroundings—we can see, smell, and hear the mountains of Laos, the refugee camps in Thailand, and the family's first winter in St. Paul. How does evoking the spaces her family inhabits create emotion? How do those contrasts give weight to their journey?

## AN INTERVIEW WITH KAO KALIA YANG

1. Families tell themselves their stories all the time—it's one of the ways that we define ourselves as related, as more than demographic units. What inspired you to move from sharing stories within your family to capturing your family's stories on the page?

*Too many people in my community have lived for far too long without understanding on their side. They have not had the language, the time, and many times the opportunity to answer an often-asked and sometimes-acted question, "What are you people doing here?" I want to work on behalf of a deeper understanding of how it is that the Hmong are here in America, spread across the globe; this was a source of great motivation and inspiration for me to write the book, to become a writer.*

2. How did you capture the parts of your family's story that happened before you were born? What research went into representing those moments in a way that felt real to the people who lived them? Did you worry about the ways in which their stories and your research might diverge?

*I was born at a time and in a place where stories were the only means by which the Hmong could leave the confines of the refugee camp. I was a vessel for these stories, some hope of some future somewhere. A big part of the work I did in the writing of this*

*book was to piece together the stories inside of me within memories from my family, within the larger framework. I read pretty much all that had been written in English on the Hmong American experience. I took the stories I had been told by my loved ones and wrote them alongside the documented histories; we've been sadly neglected, often misrepresented.*

3. Oral storytelling is a big part of Hmong culture, and so many people first experienced *The Latehomecomer* from your presentations and live performances. Does telling your story to communities, schools, and groups alter your relationship to your book? Does it change your relationship to your family's stories?

*I belong to a people who are new to what is written. My father says that when I write, I write on paper, but when I speak, I write on the fabric of the human being. This is what gives me the courage to speak. I am much more comfortable on the page. Living a comfortable life is not one of my goals. Telling these stories out loud has forced me to become a much more public, more influential, perhaps more responsible person.*

4. How do the rhythms of oral storytelling shape what's on the page?

*My Uncle Eng once told me that the purpose of a story is to serve as a stop sign on the road of life; its purpose is to make audiences pause, look at both sides, check the trajectory of the horizon. This is a guiding principle for me on the page. I don't stumble over traditional beginnings, middles, and ends; I am interested in making my readers act—which is very much the function of oral storytelling, the form I come from.*

5. *The Latehomecomer* is, in many ways, a series of love stories—between your parents, between you and your grandmother, and between you and your family. How does love animate and reshape what is, in purely historical terms, a story of war, loss, and trauma?

*Love, for me, is the reason why we remember our lives in stories, with characters and places, vivid and true. It is easy to talk of the contents of a book. It is far harder to forget the love one encounters between the pages of lives.*





Coffee House Press began as a small letterpress operation in 1972 and has grown into an internationally renowned nonprofit publisher of literary fiction, essay, poetry, and other work that doesn't fit neatly into genre categories.

Coffee House is both a publisher and an arts organization. Through our Books in Action program and publications, we've become interdisciplinary collaborators and incubators for new work and audience experiences. Our vision for the future is one where a publisher is a catalyst and connector.

LITERATURE  
is not the same thing as  
PUBLISHING

## FUNDER ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Coffee House Press is an internationally renowned independent book publisher and arts nonprofit based in Minneapolis, MN; through its literary publications and Books in Action program, Coffee House acts as a catalyst and connector—between authors and readers, ideas and resources, creativity and community, inspiration and action.

Coffee House Press books are made possible through the generous support of grants and donations from corporations, state and federal grant programs, family foundations, and the many individuals who believe in the transformational power of literature. This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to the legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund. Coffee House also receives major operating support from the Amazon Literary Partnership, the Bush Foundation, the Jerome Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, Target Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). To find out more about how NEA grants impact individuals and communities, visit [www.arts.gov](http://www.arts.gov).

Coffee House Press receives additional support from the Elmer L. & Eleanor J. Andersen Foundation; the David & Mary Anderson Family Foundation; the Buuck Family Foundation; the Carolyn Foundation; the Dorsey & Whitney Foundation; Dorsey & Whitney LLP; the Knight Foundation; the Rehael Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation; the Matching Grant Program Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation; the Schwab Charitable Fund; Schwegman, Lundberg & Woessner, P.A.; the Scott Family Foundation; the us Bank Foundation; vsa Minnesota for the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council; the Archie D. & Bertha H. Walker Foundation; and the Woessner Freeman Family Foundation in honor of Allan Kornblum.



## THE PUBLISHER'S CIRCLE OF COFFEE HOUSE PRESS

Publisher's Circle members make significant contributions to Coffee House Press's annual giving campaign. Understanding that a strong financial base is necessary for the press to meet the challenges and opportunities that arise each year, this group plays a crucial part in the success of Coffee House's mission.

Recent Publisher's Circle members include many anonymous donors, Mr. & Mrs. Rand L. Alexander, Suzanne Allen, Patricia A. Beithon, Bill Berkson & Connie Lewallen, E. Thomas Binger & Rebecca Rand Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation, Robert & Gail Buuck, Claire Casey, Louise Copeland, Jane Dalrymple-Hollo, Ruth Stricker Dayton, Jennifer Kwon Dobbs & Stefan Liess, Mary Ebert & Paul Stembler, Chris Fischbach & Katie Dublinski, Kaywin Feldman & Jim Lutz, Sally French, Jocelyn Hale & Glenn Miller, the Rehael Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation, Roger Hale/Nor Hall, Randy Hartten & Ron Lotz, Jeffrey Hom, Carl & Heidi Horsch, Amy L. Hubbard & Geoffrey J. Kehoe Fund, Kenneth Kahn & Susan Dicker, Stephen & Isabel Keating, Kenneth Koch Literary Estate, Jennifer Komar & Enrique Olivarez, Allan & Cinda Kornblum, Leslie Larson Maheras, Lenfestey Family Foundation, Sarah Lutman & Rob Rudolph, the Carol & Aaron Mack Charitable Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation, George & Olga Mack, Joshua Mack, Gillian McCain, Mary & Malcolm McDermid, Sjur Midness & Briar Andresen, Maureen Millea Smith & Daniel Smith, Peter Nelson & Jennifer Swenson, Marc Porter & James Hennessy, Jeffrey Scherer, Jeffrey Sugerman & Sarah Schultz, Nan G. & Stephen C. Swid, Patricia Tilton, Stu Wilson & Melissa Barker, Warren D. Woessner & Iris C. Freeman, Margaret Wurtele, Joanne Von Blon, and Wayne P. Zink.

For more information about the Publisher's Circle and other ways to support Coffee House Press books, authors, and activities, please visit [www.coffeehousepress.org/support](http://www.coffeehousepress.org/support) or contact us at [info@coffeehousepress.org](mailto:info@coffeehousepress.org).



COLOPHON

*The Latehomecomer* was designed at Coffee House Press,  
in the historic warehouse district of downtown Minneapolis.

Fonts include Caslon and Goudy Sans.

