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Book Talk

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Pahua and the Soul Stealer

By Lori M. Lee: <http://www.newleafliterary.com/people/lori-lee/>

**Author Biography**



Lori M. Lee was born in the mountains of Laos on February 12th, though soon after relocated with her family to a refugee camp in Thailand. At the age of three, she had moved permanently to the dairy state Wisconsin, where she was raised as well as earned her Bachelor’s Degree in Creative Writing. She is quite fond of writing on topics such as magic, manipulation, and family. She has had an interest in this career field ever since the third grade. She was a preteen when she had written her first novel, a Mary Sue fantasy romance. Since then, she has come out with several published works with her debut novel titled, “*Gates of Thread and Stone*,” which was released on August 5th, 2014. In addition, author Lori M. Lee is an advocate for binging TV shows, texting in caps lock, and unicorns, which she pays homage to in *Pahua and the Soul Stealer*.

Other Novels by the Author

*Gates of Thread and Stone, The Infinite*, *Forest of Souls, Broken Web, The Weeping Tree*, and many more in the near future.

**Novel Summary**

 *Pahua and the Soul Stealer* centers around a Hmong girl by the name of Pahua. Many of her classmates view her as weird, due to her contrast in cultural and ethnic background. She becomes a social pariah at her school and spends most of her time with her younger brother Matt as well as her best friend Miv, who was a cat spirit that only Pahua could see. Ever since she could remember, she was able to see spirits of every nature. This did not help with her social standings at school and had only distanced her more from her classmates until one day, a transfer student had invited her to play at a rumored haunted bridge. At the bridge she saw her first ever human spirit and had interacted with it. The spirit had latched onto her and she had subconsciously untethered the spirit from the bridge and sent it to the Spirit Realm. However, before it had left, it had taken her little brother’s soul with her and he soon fell ill. She happened upon a girl her age by the name of Zhong who was trained in shaman arts when trying to investigate how to help her brother. She tells Pahua that his soul is trapped in the Spirit Realm and that she has 3 days to retrieve Matt’s soul before he becomes corrupt and turns into a demon. Now she must embark on a journey with Zhong to retrieve her brother's soul, unaware of what awaits her.

**Significant Quotes**

 “Once, Nhia Ngao Zhua Pa disguised herself as a beautiful mortal maiden…she cursed it to be stuck here forever, forced to repeat its act of kindness over and over.” (191-193)

*Pahua and the Soul Stealer* honors Hmong mythology with many of the retellings of the lore with this quote being one of them. The stories and legends of Hmong mythology are passed down orally from generation to generation and can oftentimes be told differently with each retelling, seeing as how there is not a concrete record of the stories being passed on. Think of it as the longest game of Telephone if that makes it easier. This method makes it somewhat difficult to keep track of the Hmong cultural history and if that wasn’t enough, the oral tradition is disappearing for the young Hmong generations that do not reside within South East Asia. This can be due to assimilation to other cultures or just simply a lack of interest as time passes on. With passages such as this in the novel, the readers are able to open themselves up to unique stories that appreciate the Hmong’s cultural background while adding interesting explanations to some of the questions that you may be asking while reading.

 “I don’t forgive you…Small enough that I could let it go if I wanted to.” (294-295)

 In this passage, Pahua confronts her worst memory up to this point in her life, the day that her Dad had left the family. It had been four years since then and Pahua often avoided the topic despite the anger she had felt, so as to not make her mom or brother feel saddened by the remembrance. To cope, she would often play pretend and imagine being anything and anyone else but herself, to hide from the truth that she believed she might not have been enough for him to stay. She was able to finally find some closure by talking to her father, despite only being a memory. As a result, she gains a physical metaphor of the weight of the memory that once weighed down on her, now a plum pit that can fit in her pocket with ease.

 “She’d taken the children because she was lonely. Without the protection of the lightning ax…Tears filled my eyes, too.” (396-397)

 Despite being the reincarnate of the greatest Shaman warrior, Pahua chooses violence as her last option to her many encounters with the elements that wish to harm her. This passage is the best representation of that. She had only needed to defeat the corrupted bridge spirit to take back her brother’s soul but one of the most charming characteristics that she has is that she always sees the good in people. Instead of dealing the final blow, Pahua drops her ax as well as her guard to hug the spirit. She is consistently harmed by the spirit during this process but she bears through the pain and gives her something she has never received in her fleeting moments as a human and countless years as a spirit, company and consolidation. This mirrors in comparison to her first form, who was often destructive and used violence at the tip of a hat to reach his goals.

**Teaching**

**Why Teens Should Read**

 The appropriate age range for students to read this would be between 10 to 14, however while Pahua is only 11 years-old in the story, older teens can still relate to some if not all of the problems that she is dealing with as an adolescent. There are struggles within the family with an absent father and an overworked mother, social struggles within school due to having a different background, and lack of self-esteem which is coped with through playing into fantasies in order to forget reality if only just for a moment. All of these struggles are touched upon through Pahua’s journey and she is able to grow as a person by confronting her father, seeking friends that actually accept her, and gaining the ability to accept herself for who she is.

 With the many references to Hmong mythology in the novel, *Pahua and the Soul Stealer* would be a great piece for the class to explore the unique history of a piece of South Asia and can possibly be used as an introduction into a unit of ethnicity in literature, seeing as how the text is rather digestible which can interest young readers. In addition, students may also feel less ostracized if there were more representation for lesser known cultures.

**Adolescents in the Search for Meaning**

Pahua and the Soul Stealer can tie into Chapter 7 “Courage and Survival,” due to the constant onslaught of challenges and adversaries that Pahua and Zhong face during their adventure to retrieve her brother’s soul. Pahua oftentimes doubts herself throughout the novel and believes that she is not cut out for the difficulties that lie ahead. However, out of her love for her brother and the guilt she feels, she is able to power through and build the strength to push forward. With each hurdle cleared, she is able to grow more and more into the powerful shaman she is destined to be.

*Pahua* and the Soul Stealer ties into Chapter 8 “Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, and Parable” due to the overall magical setting of the novel, and I am not talking about Wisconsin. Readers are able to see the spectral world through Pahua’s eyes which are filled with numerous spirits. There were spirits of every nature, fire spirits, water spirits, even door and stove spirits. Each spirit is described in colorful detail by Lee in addition to the awe-shocking sceneries that Pahua and Zhang observed in the Spirit Realm during their three day journey. In addition the novel can be identified as an allegory for karmic retribution due to the elements of reincarnations and punishments that exceed lifetimes within the story.

**Text Complexity**

**Quantitative**

 Readability:

Flesch Reading Ease Score: 61.3

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 8.4 (8th Grade)

 The SMOG Index: 8.3 (8th Grade)

**Qualitative**

 The passages within the book are comprehensible with little to no conflict in terms of the diction and vocabulary. I would most likely place the reading level somewhere between grade 4 to grade 6. However, this novel can also be suitable for 7th through 9th graders as well. They would be able to appreciate the playful elements that Lee implements into the characters and it would give them some insight to problems that Pahua is dealing with that they might be able to relate to.