

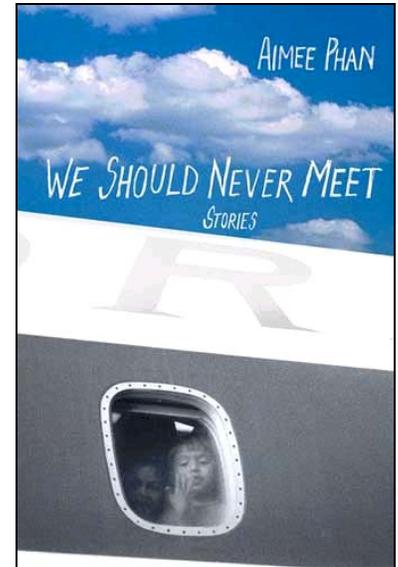
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *We Should Never Meet*

by Aimee Phan

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### Introduction to *We Should Never Meet*

Compelling, moving, and beautifully written, the interlinked stories that make up *We Should Never Meet* alternate between Saigon before the city's fall in 1975 and present-day "Little Saigon" in Southern California---exploring the reverberations of the Vietnam War in a completely new light.

Intersecting the lives of eight characters across three decades and two continents, these stories dramatize the events of Operation Babylift, the U.S.-led evacuation of thousands of Vietnamese orphans to America just weeks before the fall of Saigon. Unwitting reminders of the war, these children were considered *bui doi*, the dust of life, and faced an uncertain, dangerous existence if left behind in Vietnam.

Four of the stories follow the saga of one orphan's journey from the points-of-view of a teenage mother, a duck farmer and a Catholic nun from the Mekong Delta, a social worker in Saigon, and a volunteer doctor from America. The other four take place twenty years later and chronicle the lives of four Vietnamese orphans now living in America: Kim, an embittered Amerasian searching for her unknown mother; Vinh, her gang member ex-boyfriend who preys on Vietnamese families; Mai, an ambitious orphan who faces her emancipation from the American foster-care system; and Huan, an Amerasian adopted by a white family, who returns to Vietnam with his adoptive mother.

*We Should Never Meet* is one of those rare books that truly takes an original look at the human condition---and marks the exciting debut of a major new writer for our time.

## Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Despite her closeness to her family, Lien is determined to give up her child, in the story “Miss Lien.” Why? How do the circumstances around her compel this decision? Are her choices understandable?
2. In “We Should Never Meet,” what convinces Kim that the woman in the store could be her mother? Why is she so desperate to believe this could be true? What does this say about Kim’s true feelings about being an orphan? Why is she so determined to hide these emotions, even from the readers?
3. In “The Delta,” how do Truc and Phuong represent the different perspectives of the Vietnamese during the war? How does their evolving relationship parallel the conflicts and struggles between the Vietnamese people?
4. Vinh prides himself on being tough and impenetrable, yet he opens up to Bac Nguyen in the story “Visitors.” What is it about Bac Nguyen that softens Vinh? Why do these new emotions disturb Vinh? How is Vinh’s violent reaction to Bac Nguyen’s recognition at the end, not only rage at the older man, but at himself as well?
5. Why does Hoa decide not to evacuate herself and her two young boys at the end of “Gates of Saigon?” Is her choice admirable or foolish, considering the possible danger her family could be in after the Communists seize Saigon?
6. Mai goes through a range of emotional extremes on her eighteenth birthday in “Emancipation.” What is the significance of the story’s title? Is Mai’s emancipation from the foster care system a true freedom that she could celebrate, as Kim and Vinh expect her to? How is it possible that she can feel both dissatisfied and guilty about her foster home experience?
7. In “Bound,” why does Bridget decide to stay so long in Vietnam, even when her family asks her to come home? What does she find in Vietnam that she seemingly cannot find in America? How does she justify her decisions and sacrifices?
8. How do Huan’s feelings about being an Amerasian orphan change throughout his trip in “Motherland?” Compare Huan’s history as a Babylift orphan and Mai’s experience as a boat refugee orphan. How are they similar and how are they different? How do they resolve their conflicting emotions about returning to Vietnam?
9. Although this is a collection of stories, how do they make up a larger narrative about the legacies of war, international adoption, refugee orphans and the foster care system?

## About the Author

**Aimee Phan** was born in 1977 in Orange County, California, and now teaches in Las Vegas, Nevada. She received her MFA from the University of Iowa, where she won a Maytag Fellowship.