

A Reading Group Guide to
A MILLION SHADES OF GRAY

By Cynthia Kadohata

ABOUT THE BOOK

Thirteen-year-old Y'Tin is obsessed with elephants, and more than anything he wants to become the youngest elephant trainer in South Vietnam. His father thinks that he is too young, and his mother insists that he stay in school. But when Y'Tin is given the chance to work with Lady, a wild elephant living with his Dega tribe, he begins to feel that his dream may come true. Then Y'Tin's father hears that the North Vietnamese are about to attack their village. He directs Y'Tin to take Lady into the jungle while he helps the women and children evacuate. Revenge. That's what this attack is all about. It's about destroying the homes of people like his father who served as a tracker for the Americans during the Vietnam War. The Dega are peace-loving people, and they are ill prepared to defend themselves against the Communist forces. Some manage to flee. Others are captured and tortured. Hundreds more are killed. Y'Tin's bravery is truly put to the test: He can stay in his village, held captive by the North Vietnamese, or he can risk his life (and save his elephant's) by fleeing into the jungle . . .

PREREADING ACTIVITY

The United States participation in the Vietnam War sparked controversy across the nation. Research the pros and cons regarding the U.S. involvement in the war. Make a poster that is either for or against the U.S. war effort in Vietnam.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss Y'Tin's attitude toward school. Why is his mother so determined that he complete his education? Cite evidence that Y'Tin is willing to learn in spite of his rebellion against school. When the North Vietnamese become a threat to the Rhade tribe, Y'Tin's family is forced to leave the village. Explain why Y'Tin suddenly wants to go to school when he no longer has to.

Y'Tin spends a lot of time daydreaming and thinking. He explains the difference to his mother: "Daydreaming is thinking about things that aren't true yet. Thinking is when you ponder matters that are already true." What "truth" does Y'Tin ponder the most? Which "truth" hurts the most? Debate whether Y'Tin's daydreams come true. Discuss Lady's role in helping Y'Tin realize his dream.

Y'Tin says that next to his father, Tomas is the man that he most admires. What is it about Tomas that Y'Tin admires? What causes Tomas to turn on Y'Tin? How does this change Y'Tin's admiration for Tomas? When do Tomas and Y'Juen become "we,"

casting Y'Tin aside? Y'Tin's father has always told him that the jungle changes a man. Debate whether it's the jungle that changes Tomas and Y'Juen or something else.

Y'Tin thinks a lot about betrayal. Debate whether the Rhade feel betrayed by the Americans. How do Tomas and Y'Juen have a different idea of betrayal than Y'Tin? Tomas and Y'Juen think that Y'Tin's father betrayed his people. Debate whether he was actually working on behalf of his people. Y'Tin says that he would rather die than betray his people. Discuss whether Tomas and Y'Juen would make that pledge.

Explain what Y'Tin's father means when he says, "We must use the jungle as a weapon."

At the beginning of the novel, Y'Tin is a boy, and at the end he is a man. At what point does he realize that he has become a man? Y'Tin feels sad that he is no longer a boy. What does he miss most about childhood? What might Y'Tin say was the toughest part about becoming a man?

Earlier Y'Tin refers to Tomas as a man. Discuss whether Tomas displays the qualities of manhood. How is Y'Tin a bigger man than Tomas and Y'Juen?

Fear overtakes the Rhade tribe as the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong threaten their village. Y'Tin's father tells him that he has to face what's happening. When Y'Tin says that he isn't scared, his father replies, "Then you're not thinking straight." Why is it important for Y'Tin to feel fear? How might fear keep Y'Tin focused and cautious? Discuss other times when Y'Tin comes face-to-face with fear. How does he deal with each situation?

Explain why Y'Tin's father calls the war the American War. Why are the North Vietnamese especially interested in men like Y'Tin's father? How does his father's work with the Americans make the entire Rhade tribe vulnerable?

Y'Tin's father worries that the North Vietnamese might capture Y'Tin, strip him of his identity, and put him in a reeducation camp. What do these camps teach? How might the North Vietnamese be more interested in someone like Y'Tin than in Tomas or Y'Juen? Discuss how these camps are really about revenge.

Y'Tin's father is a wise man, and recognizes that different situations require different types of leaders. Describe Y'Tin as a leader. Why is he more qualified to lead in the jungle than Tomas or Y'Juen?

Y'Tin speaks a lot about fate, spirits, sacrifices, etc. How does this reflect the religion of his people? Explain the role of the village shaman. Y'Tin struggles to deal with the sudden anger and hatred that has filled his heart after the North Vietnamese bombs his village. Why does he think that lying on Lady's back will cleanse his heart? How are their spirits connected?

RESEARCH & ACTIVITIES

Write down all the information you learned from the novel about the Central Highlands and the culture of the Dega people. Then use reference sources in the library and sites on the Internet to find additional information (<http://www.cal.org/CO/montagnards/vpref.html>). Prepare a PowerPoint presentation to introduce a social studies unit on Vietnam. Use pictures and appropriate music in the presentation.

Y'Tin is obsessed with elephants, and hopes to someday attend elephant training school in Thailand. Make a list of the things that Y'Tin already knows about elephants. Then take a look at the Mahout Training School: <http://www.theworldisnotflat.com/mahout>. Write a letter that Y'Tin might write to the school telling them of his experience and outlining specific skills that he wishes to learn.

At the end of the novel, Y'Tin plans to go to Thailand, where he will look for work involving elephants. Find at least five jobs working with elephants. Write a half-page advertisement for each job. Include the job description, required skills, salary range, and other pertinent information.

The first verse of "The Impossible Dream" from *Man of La Mancha* (1972) seems as though it might be written for Y'Tin:

To dream the impossible dream,
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow,
To run where the brave dare not go

Write a paper titled "Y'Tin's Dream." Analyze each line with Y'Tin's quest in mind.

Look at a map and plan the best route and the cheapest mode of transportation that Y'Tin may take from his home in the Central Highlands in Vietnam to Bangkok, Thailand, where he will inquire about an elephant training school. Consider the fact that Y'Tin has very little money for his journey.

Henry Kissinger from the United States and Le Duc Tho from North Vietnam won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973. Find out why these two men were selected to share this honor, and why Le Duc Tho declined the prize. Write a feature story for a major U.S. newspaper titled "Tho Says NO."

Find the website for the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam. Who is the U.S. Ambassador? What is his role? Pick one of the activities of the embassy and write a speech about

it. Imagine it will be delivered at the Montagnard American Cultural Center in North Carolina.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cynthia Kadohata is the author of the Newbery Award winner and *New York Times* bestseller *Kira-Kira*, her debut novel for children, the Jane Addams Peace Award and Pen USA Award winner *Weedflower*, *Cracker!*, *Outside Beauty* and several critically acclaimed adult novels, including *The Floating World*. She has published numerous short stories in such literary journals as *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Grand Street*, and *The Mississippi Review*. A graduate of the University of Southern California, she has taken graduate courses in writing at the University of Pittsburgh and Columbia University. A great deal of Cynthia's writing inspiration comes from her travels across America: As a child, her family lived in Georgia and Arkansas before settling in Chicago, and as an adult, she explored the states on a Greyhound bus. She lives with her son and dog in West Covina, California. Visit her website at <http://www.kira-kira.us/>.

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