

**“I believe it is impossible to make sense of life in  
this world except through art.”**

**Daniel Pinkwater**

Over the course of this year, we have read books that opened our eyes to the stories of people living in times, places, and circumstances different from our own. We’ve paid close attention to the way characters respond to their challenges. We’ve learned from and, even, emulated their courageous choices.

This month, we devote some of our focus to the writer. An author spends hour upon hour putting down her story, choosing just the right words to delight, move, and enlighten the reader. But, there’s a deeper reason for her work. This purpose has to do with the artist herself, with the value of creation and self-expression.

Writing about one’s life - whether fictionalized or not - can bring new insights, truths, and, even, peace. In this month’s book, Thanhha Lai’s *Inside Out and Back Again*, the author writes about events closely based on her own childhood. Like Ms. Lai did, the main character Hà leaves her home in war-ravaged Vietnam and makes a new home with her family in Alabama. When she does so, she has to deal with the trauma of leaving behind a life she knew and loved and figure out the language and culture in a completely foreign place. She goes from feeling safe to feeling insecure, from feeling smart to feeling dumb. Gradually, Hà creates a life for herself. She makes some friends and brings some of the customs of her old life into her new one. So, too, does the writer take control of her well being by creating.

Each of us faces challenges throughout our lives. A practice of regularly creating art - in any format - can help us put our own lives in perspective. Sometimes expressing ourselves through art can help us solve a problem, or simply feel a bit better about it. We can share our work with the world, with a trusted few, or keep it private. An artist benefits from the creative process whether or not she shares her work with others.

During your last Girls Leadership Book Club meeting (until next school year!), perhaps you could talk about your own creativity. Tell each other how creativity figures into your lives, or how you would like it to figure into your lives. Are there ways that your group can support each other’s creativity?

**Munch 'n' Chat, 20-30 minutes**

As grown ups and girls arrive, allow some time for snacking and catching up. Snacks don't have to be fancy at all; it can be as simple as a picnic blanket in the backyard, or sitting around the coffee table eating popcorn and lemonade.

**Check-In, 10-15 minutes**

Start with a check-in about leadership goals. Did anyone participate in advocacy work this month? Grown ups should share, too. If you support causes you believe in, share what you do. Do you donate your money, time, or other resources? Do you work independently by making phone calls or writing a letter about something that matters to you? Or, do you work within a community of advocates?

**Book Discussion, 30 minutes or so****Open-Ended Questions**

Open-ended questions are a good springboard to book talk because they allow readers to bring up any part of the book that made an impression, confused, delighted, or inspired them. Any question that gets grown ups and girls sharing is a good question.

- What was your favorite part of the book? If you have the book with you, read a paragraph or two of your favorite part aloud. Why was that particular part so powerful or memorable?
- Which part of the book felt important or gave you a Big Idea?
- Was any part of the book confusing? Was your confusion cleared up by the end of the book, or not?
- How is the main character like you, and how is she different? Would you have handled the situations in the story differently than she did?
- What did the main character learn in this story, if anything?

**Questions About *Inside Out and Back Again* by Thanhha Lai**

These questions about *Inside Out and Back Again* can help you launch your book talk. Some groups might have time to get to all of these questions, but many groups might pick one or two questions and spend the whole meeting discussing those. Feel free to write your own discussion questions.

- Thanhha Lai’s poetry is filled with powerful metaphors. For example, in “Sour Backs,” she writes that her family “sticks together/ like wet pages.” In “Twisting Twisting,” she writes that her mother’s brows “twist like laundry/ being wrung dry.” What are some of your favorite poems or lines from this book? Why do you think Ms. Lai chose to write Hà’s story as a collection of poems? How might it have been different if she’d written it in prose, instead?
- Hà’s first impressions of America aren’t great. The food seems strange and unappealing, and some of the neighbors don’t want her family around. What are some of the other details about Hà’s experience in America? Are you surprised by any of them?
- Why does Hà wish that her mother wasn’t always trying to “make something bad better?” (pg 116) And, why does her mother continue to look for the positive?
- Can you identify any moments when Hà’s life changes for the better? Does she do something to create those changes?

**Leadership Goals, 15 minutes**

In writing a book based on her childhood, author Thanhha Lai uses her art to make sense of her own experiences, and she creates something beautiful out of her struggles. Do you use artistic expression to process or examine your life? If so, what kind of creativity do you practice? And, if you don’t, would you try? Perhaps you could get a sketchbook or a journal, and spend 5-10 minutes every day putting your thoughts to paper. After a week, you might be surprised. The benefits of self-expression are not just for our children.

**Reflection and Closing, 15 minutes**

Think back on the books you've read with your club. Which book affected you the most strongly, or which did you most enjoy? (Those two books might not be the same.) Did any of the books change the way you've dealt with any situations in your life? Did any of the books change or grow your idea of leadership?

This is the last discussion guide for this school year, but it needn't be your last book club meeting. If you want to keep going, you could pick your own books (check out our blog, Facebook Group, and the "Further Reading!" section of discussion guides for ideas and resources). Your club could meet up for field trips, service projects, or potluck dinners. This is your community, your support network. Make it what you want it to be! And please let us hear from you so that we know what worked for you, and what didn't. Tell us what you want more of, and how we can better support your families. With your help, we want to make book club better every year.

Thank you for reading with us, and with families around the world.

**Further Reading!**

If you really loved this book, and you'd like to read more like it, here are some suggestions. If there are other books you would like to recommend, we'd love to hear them! Please share them on our Girls Leadership Book Club Facebook page, so our community can keep growing our list of great titles.

*Listen, Slowly* by Thanhha Lai - Published in 2016, this is the author's second novel. It is a *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book and a *Publisher's Weekly* Best Book of the Year. It tells the story of Mai, a 12 year-old girl who travels to Vietnam with her grandmother one summer, even though she doesn't feel any connection to the place or its culture.

*The Wild Book* by Margarita Engle - Set in Cuba, this novel in verse tells the story of 11 year-old Fefa. Fefa has dyslexia, and the doctor told her she'll never read or write. But her mother knows better. She gives her daughter a book to

write her own words, and Fefa does learn to read and write, a skill that later saves her family from danger.

*The Red Rose Box* by Brenda Woods - 10 year-old Leah lives in Louisiana during the early 1950s, and her family has to face the hardships of segregation and Jim Crow laws. When Leah and her sister go live with their aunt in California, she sees a way of life that she never could have imagined. Though how can she enjoy this newfound freedom when it's so far from everything she knows and loves?