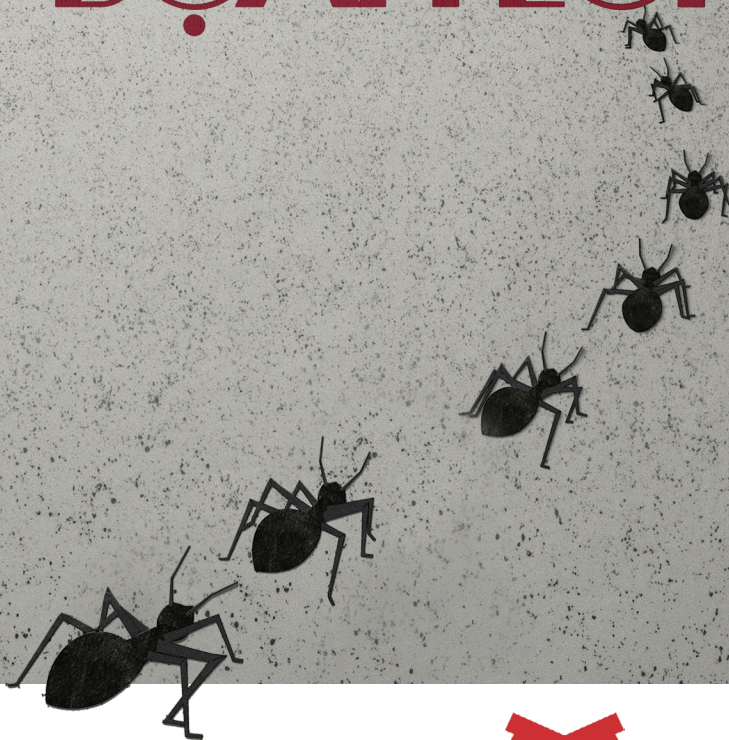


# NFB STUDY GUIDE



## BOAT PEOPLE





## NOTES FOR EDUCATORS

The NFB animated documentary *Boat People* (2023) is an adaptation of Thao Lam’s book *The Paper Boat* (2020), weaving a visual narrative that mirrors her family’s journey from Vietnam. This study guide accompanies the book and the film, offering additional context and insights for a deeper understanding of the story’s themes and historical background.

Recommended Age Range: Learners aged 8–12

Recommended Subject Areas:

- Diversity/Pluralism/Diversity in Communities
- Family Studies/Child Development
- Communities in Canada/World
- Social Studies/Communities in Canada/World
- Social Studies, Diversity, Immigration
- Visual Literacy
- Global Citizenship

## ABOUT THE FILM

With *Boat People*, illustrator and author Thao Lam undertakes a creative rescue mission, joining forces with animator Kjell Boersma to recount her family’s dramatic trajectory across the turbulent waters of history—they were among over 1.6 million refugees who fled the chaotic aftermath of the Vietnam War, venturing across the South China Sea in precarious open boats.

The filmmaker’s dazzling narrative flair counterbalances a very human story with metaphorical lessons in ant behaviour. Ants may not experience loss, as Thao Lam notes in her measured, minimalistic narration of the film, but, as the unfolding story shows, humans carry the burden of loss for a lifetime. The striking aesthetic of this animated documentary was created using a hybrid of traditional 2D animation, stop-motion multiplane animation, and 3D rendering to capture the unique look of Thao’s hand-printed paper textures and patterns.

A sharply etched personal story, exquisite in its specificity, *Boat People* resonates with universal themes, speaking across time and culture to anyone who’s ever experienced big change in their lives or fought to protect the people they love.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

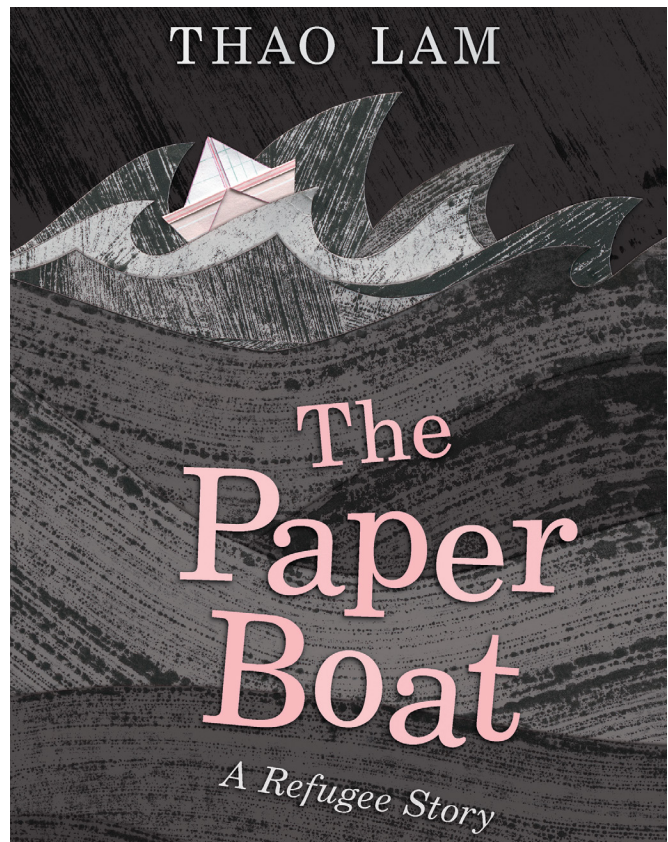
*The Paper Boat* is a wordless picture book that tells the story of one family's escape from Vietnam, inspired by author Thao Lam's family's own refugee journey when she was a child. At her home in Vietnam, a girl rescues ants from the sugar water set out to trap them. Later, when the girl's family flees war-torn Vietnam, ants lead them through the moonlit jungle to the boat that will take them to safety. Before boarding, the girl folds a paper boat from a bun wrapper and drops it into the water, and the ants climb on. The ants' perilous journey, besieged by punishing weather, predatory birds and dehydration, before reaching a new beginning, mirrors the family's own. Impressionistic collages and a moving, authentic narrative make this a one-of-a-kind tale of courage, resilience and hope.

While it may be counterintuitive to use a picture book with middle-grade students, these books provide an excellent opportunity to explore curriculum in a fresh way, outside of the denser texts students might be used to using. In *The Paper Boat*, visual literacy, social studies and media literacy are just three examples of connections to be made.

*The Paper Boat*, Owlkids, 2020. ISBN: 9781771473637

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed for educators, librarians, caregivers and others to facilitate conversations and lessons on the topic of refugees, migration and displacement in the classroom or at home. Using reflective writing practices, students will develop a deeper understanding of historical facts, question-answer relationships, and the author, illustrator and filmmakers' message. We suggest doing some pre-reading and pre-watching research with the class on the Vietnam War and the refugees who fled that war before delving into the activities outlined here.



By the end of this unit, students will further develop their empathy and open-mindedness through exploration of the challenges and struggles refugees face when leaving their homeland, and how they contribute to the multicultural tapestry of their new home.

This guide includes activities framed around both the book and the film. The first set of activities is geared towards engaging with the book and developing visual literacy and research skills, while the next set will help students engage with the film through media literacy

and other activities and visual storytelling. Teachers and facilitators are encouraged to use whichever set of activities best suits their context.

Please note that these topics could be very sensitive for students whose families may have experienced their own migration journey, and those who may still have family in another country.

## CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION: MENTAL HEALTH AND THE EXPERIENCE OF REFUGEES

Within the narratives of the book *The Paper Boat* and the animated documentary **Boat People** lie poignant portrayals of individuals grappling with major issues and traumatic situations. The book shows a child-centred view of displacement and a treacherous journey. The film shows the aftermath of their wartime past, the experience of culture shock, the loss of loved ones and the weight of economic hardships when resettling and building a new life in a new country.

While refugees either feel forced or make the choice to leave, these departures are not without their costs and challenges, including various mental-health challenges

that may take years to overcome, if they are overcome at all.

Some of the common mental-health challenges faced by refugees include depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), often compounded by many factors, including language or cultural barriers and affordable medical coverage and access to health care (World Health Organization, 2021).

These experiences underscore the profound mental-health needs that arise from the complex tapestry woven through culture, personal history and the intricacies of navigating life as a refugee. Isolation and loneliness are common themes in the refugee experience, as individuals often feel like strangers in a foreign land. Rituals and acts of remembrance, like lighting incense to honour ancestors and family left behind, underscore the theme of sacrifice and the enduring consequences of disrupted families resulting from refugee migrations. In many cases, children of refugees also carry trauma, navigating their own journey of intergenerational healing.

Note: The lessons in this study guide may be sensitive for students whose families have experienced life as refugees, as the activities draw on the students' empathy. Please use or adapt with care.



## READING FOR KNOWLEDGE: *THE PAPER BOAT*

This is a wordless picture book, which means reading the book requires interpretation of images to understand the story being told, thereby developing visual literacy and inference skills. It might be helpful to show the book once right through and then do a second reading to ask the students what they see as the story.

### RESEARCH

Before reading the book, explore current headlines in the news with your class. What do the headlines reveal? Students should keep an eye out for time, subject and place.

As a class, explore the opening and closing pages (known as endpapers) of *The Paper Boat*, which show headlines. Ask students: What do you see in these headlines? What words, dates and subjects are mentioned?

From the headlines in the book *The Paper Boat*, start creating a list of words for vocabulary building. Examples: war, crisis, peace, honour, innocent, victim(s), vacancy, refugee(s), march, etc. Ask students to use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words to develop and discover the definitions. As you continue through the guide, add any new words and their definitions.

In small groups or individually, ask students to perform a simple Internet search of the dates in the headlines, including the word "Vietnam." For example, a search could be: "April 15, 1967, Vietnam." This will enable students to find more information about the historical significance of this date as it pertains to the Vietnam War. (On April 15, 1967, massive anti-Vietnam War demonstrations were held around the United States.) Once students have gathered the necessary information, construct a classroom historical timeline, assembling all the information in chronological order.

## FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

### Ask students:

- What information have we gathered about the Vietnam War thus far?
- Who? What? Where? When? How?
- What would you like to know more about?
- Is there anything that you need clarified?

### TASK

**Ask students to write a personal reflection on their learning from this lesson. Ask:**

- What did you learn?
- What did you already know?
- What do you think the book is about?
- What other questions do you have?

### EXTENSION

**Possible topics to explore more deeply**

- Current events: Are similar things happening right now in the world?
- Renaming of places, streets, sports teams, etc. to reflect less bias and prejudice
- Treatment of refugees and/or displaced people around the world
- The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and their contributions

## READING FOR ENJOYMENT!

For the first read-through, allow students to simply enjoy the story. As you turn the pages, ask: What do you see? How do you think the characters feel? Why might these events be happening?

## READING FOR MEANING

Now that you've read the story once, read through a second time. This time, ask students to write down any questions that come to mind using their prior knowledge and own experiences. Write each question on a sticky note to make it easier to move questions around the chart during the follow-up discussion.

Create a chart with the following categories under the title "Question-Answer Relationships":

- "Right There" – The answer is right there in a specific place in the illustration;
- "Think and Search" – The answer is in the text but requires the reader to look for it and put together several pieces of information;
- "In My Head" – The reader must use text and their own knowledge to find the answer;
- "On Your Own" – The answer can be found in the reader's mind based on inferences from the text.



## FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

When you finish reading the book, have students share their questions and place them on the chart under the relevant category. Explore all possible answers with them.

### Possible questions to explore

- Why do you think the child saved an ant from drowning?
- Why does the family have to separate?
- How might they have felt hiding in the grass?
- Why did they follow the ants?
- Who is the younger girl at the end?
- Why is there a picture of the older lady?

## TASK

### Ask students to write a reflection on the following questions:

- Without words in the text, how did developing questions assist you in understanding the text?
- Which type(s) of questions help you to understand the text better?
- Were there any questions your peers asked that helped you in your understanding?

## EXTENSION

### Possible topics to explore more deeply

- **Inferencing skills:** When do we use them while reading? How do they help us to create meaning? Inferencing skills are particularly essential in wordless picture books. How do we create meaning when interpreting a story based on images, and without text? What tools or strategies can we use?
- **Foreshadowing:** One example here is when the girl saved the ant at the beginning, and the ants ended up helping her family's journey later.

## READING FOR DEEPER MEANING

### BRAINSTORM

Brainstorm with the class around the topic of symbols. What is a symbol? Where do we see them in everyday life? For example, a dollar sign symbolizes money, and a recycling icon represents being conscious of our environment. In partners or small groups, ask students to come up with symbols they know from their own lives and surroundings. Afterwards, have students share some examples with the class.

### RESEARCH

In small groups, have students research fun facts about ants using classroom technology. Compile the information on a chart. Some examples: Ants live all over the world (except the polar regions), they are the longest-living insects, they are the strongest animal for their size, they are social insects, etc.

### READ

Read the story again, but this time from the ants' perspective. Have students follow the ants closely throughout the story, paying close attention to pages 15–26. Guiding questions:

- Are the ants doing the same thing as the human characters?
- Why are the ants on a paper boat?
- Who might they represent or symbolize?

### REFLECT

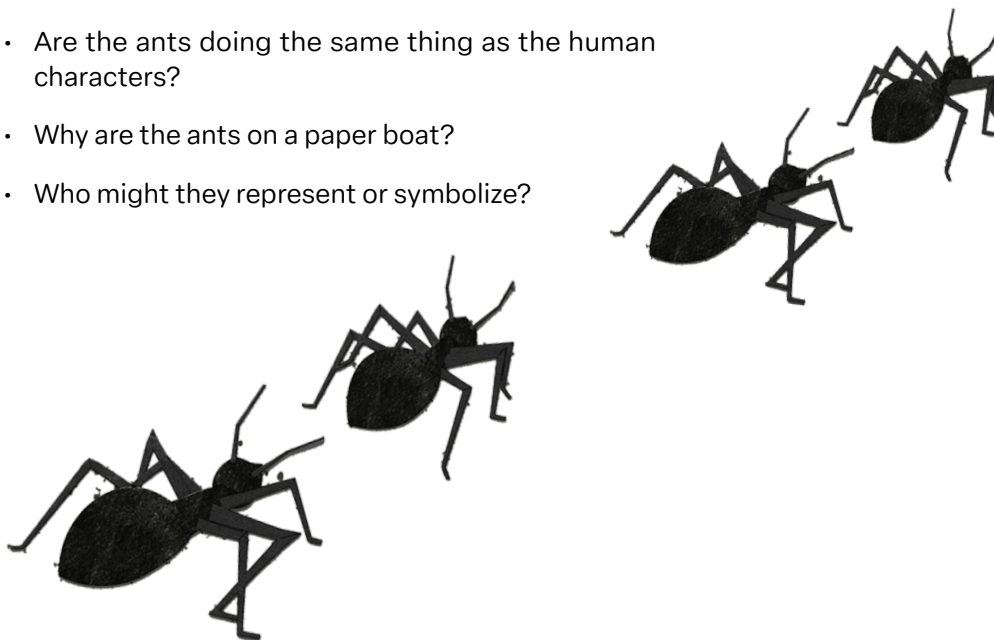
**Ask students to write a reflection on one or more of the following topics:**

- How are the ants similar to the humans in the story?
- What inferences can be made about the humans based on the ants' journey on the paper boat?
- Has your opinion of ants changed since reading this story?
- If you had to choose a symbol to represent you, what would it be and why?

### EXPLORE

**Possible topics to explore more deeply**

- Other symbols from the text (star, moon, sun, light, food, etc.)
- Story within a story, or an embedded narrative





## READING FOR CONNECTIONS

### CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

- Ask students what they think about the title of the book. What happens to a paper boat when it is put into water? Where do you see the paper boat the most in the story?
- Read the author's note with the class. Write down new words on the word list and add definitions. For example: determination, resilience, dehydration, piracy, sacrifice, etc.

### WRAP-UP DISCUSSION

After reading the book, do you think the title is effective? Why do you think the author chose this title? What does the paper boat represent?

### REFLECT

**Ask students to write a reflection on the following questions:**

- What did you learn from exploring this story and the topic?
- What connections can you make to other historical or current events in the world?
- Did this make you think of anything in your own family's story? Invite students to share information about their own origins or immigration journeys.



## MEDIA LITERACY AND THINKING OUT LOUD: *BOAT PEOPLE*

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Ask students to watch the film twice, and the second time, have them pause it at three scenes that stand out to them. Fill out the graphic organizer below to help students organize their thoughts about this media text.

<b>Describe what you see.</b> What do you see? Is there a close-up on a character's face? Do you see emotion? The passing of time?	<b>Describe the sounds.</b> What do you hear? Focus on the sound effects and music instead of the narration.	<b>How do the visuals and sound effects work together to help tell the story?</b> What does it tell us about the character/setting/story?

## FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION

Discuss the scenes students chose and what they have written in their graphic organizer.

### Ask students:

- How did the sound effects help you understand the story? The emotions of the characters?
- How did the music help you understand the story? The emotions of the characters?
- *If you have read the book as well as watched the film:* How does viewing the film enhance your understanding of the story? Are there details that you notice now that you didn't in the book? What helped you notice them?
- What can you infer about the characters' feelings at \_\_\_\_ (choose a scene that may have stood out, such as when the grandmother looks at the father and does not join her family in the boat).



## TASK 1: IN THEIR SHOES

Based on the music, sound effects and first-person narration, the animated version of this story provides students with a rich context for understanding the human experience of Thao's family, one of many refugee stories.

1. Use the scenes from the film on the next page or ask students to choose two or three to work with for this task.
2. Ask students to consider what the characters (including the ants) may be feeling based on the sounds, music, facial expressions, and the situation.
3. Encourage students to talk through their ideas, or think out loud, with partners or small groups.
4. Then, ask students to add thought bubbles to the scenes and fill them in with the thoughts and emotions of the characters.
5. As a class, discuss what the word "empathy" means and how exploring the characters' thoughts can help us build empathy for others.

### Suggestions

- Print and cut out the thought bubbles ([Appendix A](#)) for the students to add to scenes of their choice, which can be projected on the board, drawn by the students themselves, or printed as physical copies in groups.
- Prepare specific scenes for the class to discuss with thought bubbles on specific characters or objects, photocopy, and have students fill out individually or in partners ([Appendix B](#)).



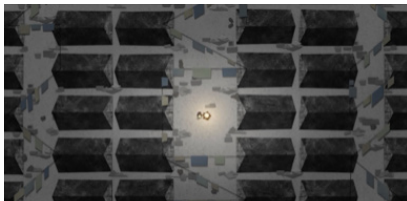
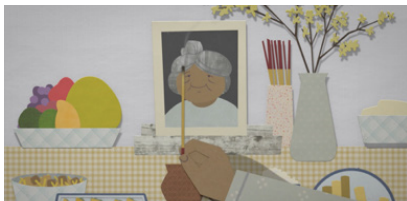
Examples of scenes to use	Examples with thought bubbles
 <p>Figure 1</p>	
 <p>Figure 2</p>	
 <p>Figure 3</p>	

## TASK 2: FILM CONVENTIONS AND SHOT COMPOSITION

### Types of Shots

The camera's point of view automatically tells you something about how a film's creators intend viewers to perceive a setting or subject.

Ask students to fill in the rest of the chart under the "Explain" column, in partners or as a class.

Type of shot	Example	Explain What does it tell us about the character/setting/story?
<p><b>Close-up:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depicts detail;</li> <li>• Close-ups of faces are common, usually to show an important emotion, facial expression or reaction.</li> </ul>		<p><i>For example: This close-up communicates that he is serious, sad and conflicted by the sacrifice of leaving Vietnam and his home for the sake of his child's future.</i></p>
<p><b>Long Shot:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used at the beginning of new scenes as <b>establishing shots</b> that provide context about a new setting.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>High-Angle Shot:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The camera looks down on a subject;</li> <li>• Used to make the subject appear vulnerable or overwhelmed by their surroundings.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Point-of-View Shot:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The camera sees what a particular character sees;</li> <li>• Used to show the viewer what the character is looking at from a first-person view (FPV).</li> </ul>		

## Think-Pair-Share: Exploring Visual Storytelling

- How does the variety of shot compositions give you a different perspective of the characters? Of the situation?
- Why is it effective to use a high-angle shot to show you a setting compared to a long shot?
- How does the shift from the ant's perspective at the beginning to the narrator's perspective help you understand the analogy of an ant's role to each family member's role?



## EXTENSIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Here are some possible activities students can do to further develop their understanding of the topic:

- Create a comic strip of their own personal journey through a life event;
- Write a memoir, with a focus on a particular life event;
- Write a fable using animals to tell the story of a personal life lesson;
- Write a friendly letter or email to the author or filmmaker with additional questions;
- Write text to accompany the book. If there were words in the book, what would they say?;
- Construct paper boats and place them in water to see how long they float;
- Perform tableaux to parts of the story to bring the narrative to life;
- Create a poster to bring awareness to a group of current refugees or displaced people in the world.

Possible media-literacy tasks for students to explore:

- “Mise-en-scène” means “placing on stage” and helps you read a scene for meaning by analyzing what is intentionally placed in the scene. This involves looking at the background setting, body language and facial expression, lighting and colour, props and clothing of the scene. Pause the screen on a shot such as the one in Figure 2, and ask students to “read” the setting and its various elements for meaning.
- After exploring and discussing the emotions of the characters throughout each section of the film, have students create a music playlist to accompany a section of the film.

- After exploring different types of shots and film conventions, ask students to create their own storyboard (on paper or digitally) using specific types of shots and sound effects to create their own family story.
- This animated film is a perfect introduction to visual storytelling and would pair well with NFB Education's **Media School** modules.
- This film also lends itself to further investigation into visual storytelling strategies and approaches, many of which are described in the NFB's study guide *Exploring Literary Devices and Terms*, which can be found at: [NFB Exploring Literary Devices Terms Animated Films Study Guide Final.pdf \(onf.ca\)](#).

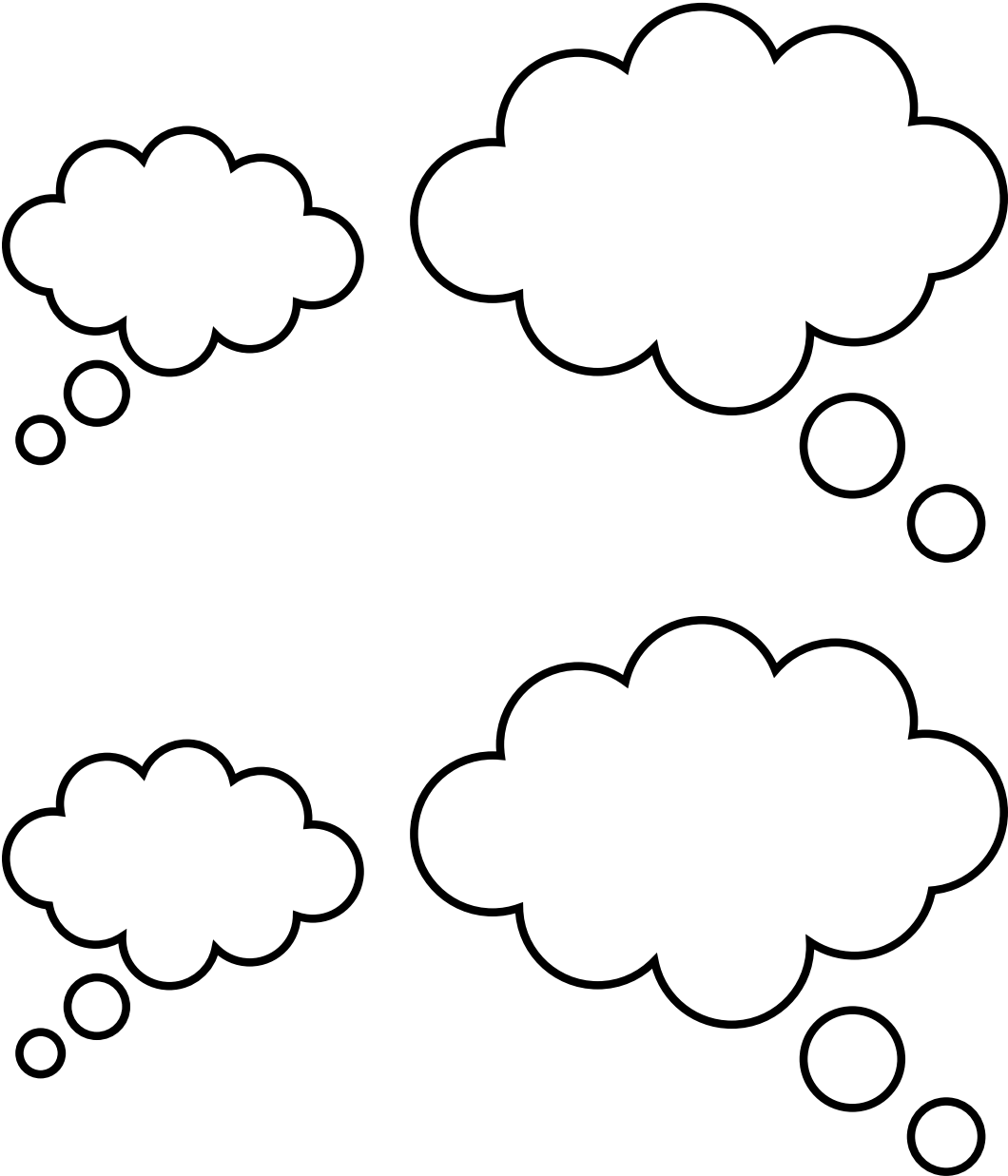


This study guide was written by Brendan Holker and Felicia Yong, and produced in collaboration with Owlkids Books by NFB Advisors in Educational Programs Anne Koizumi and Esther Maloney-Lebensold.

**Brendan Holker** is an elementary school teacher who has been working in the inner-city schools of Toronto, Canada, for 14 years. Being raised by immigrants in one of the most multicultural cities in the world has led to his passion for diversity and social justice.

**Felicia Yong** is a secondary English and Visual Arts teacher in London, Ontario. She believes incorporating voice, choice and representation empowers students to become empathetic creators. Felicia is interested in storytelling through data visualization and returning to imaginative and playful art in the secondary classroom. Collaborating with others continues to inspire her to reimagine learning possibilities.

**APPENDIX A: THOUGHT BUBBLES**



## APPENDIX B: HANDOUT

Based on the music, sound effects and first-person narration, the animated version of this story provides you with a rich context for understanding the human experience of Thao's family, one of many refugee stories.

### Instructions:

1. Consider what the characters may be feeling based on the sounds, music, and facial expressions.
2. Talk through your ideas, or think out loud, with partners or in small groups.
3. Fill the thought bubbles with the thoughts and emotions of the characters.

