

Discussion Guide



Summary

Past and present converge as sisters, Trang and Quỳnh, come together to confront decisions made during a time of war—decisions that reverberate throughout one another’s lives and ultimately allow them to find common ground across race, generation, culture, and language. Immersive, moving, and lyrical, *Dust Child* tells an unforgettable story of how those who inherited tragedy can redefine their destinies with hard-won wisdom, compassion, courage, and joy.

Questions

1. What did you know about Amerasians born into the Việt Nam War before you read this book? How do Phong’s experiences influence your thoughts about the impact of wars on women and children? What could be done to prevent these situations?
2. Were you aware of the number of Vietnamese women who worked in bars that served American soldiers? Describe the nature of the trauma and social ostracism that Trang and Quỳnh faced. How did the experience influence the relationship between the two sisters?
3. Describe Dan when he first arrived in Việt Nam in 1969. Why was Trang first attracted to him? Trace how—and how much—the war changed Dan. Do you think wars have the power to change the moral character of human beings?
4. Which elements of Vietnamese culture described in *Dust Child* stood out to you?
5. Via the experiences of Linda and Thanh (the son of the Northern Vietnamese veteran who suffers from Alzheimer’s), describe how war trauma is inherited by family members. What have Linda and Thanh done to help their loved ones cope with their trauma?
6. Discuss the ethics and complexity involved in the Amerasians’ search for missing parents. How do these ethical issues compare to other instances of people searching for their birth parents or lost family members?
7. How does Phong demonstrate his determination to survive and prosper? Describe his transformation throughout the book.

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8. Describe the difficult decisions that Trang and Quỳnh had to make. What would you have done if you were in their situation?
9. What is Dan's initial motivation for returning to Việt Nam? Do his reasons change during his trip? If so, how and why?
10. In *Dust Child*, Vietnamese words appear with their full diacritical marks in chapters written from the viewpoints of Vietnamese speakers. These marks are necessary to interpret meaning: for example, in Nun Nhã's name, nhã means "elegant," while nhà means "house," nhả means "release," nhạ means "music," nha means "teeth" or "dental," nhá means "to chew carefully." In chapters written from Dan's voice, the diacritical marks are stripped away. Did the use of diacritical marks affect your reading experience? What do these two ways of representing the Vietnamese language show you? Does Dan's understanding of the importance of diacritics change?
11. In the novel, Quỳnh says, "She had tried to live an honest life, but the war had given her no choice. It had forced her to make up a version of herself which was acceptable to others. In a way, making up stories had been the basis of her survival and her success." Can lies be necessary for love, survival, and dignity? Were you surprised at Quỳnh's decision, and what do you think about her as a mother?
12. Which Vietnamese proverbs in the book are your favorites? Which ones demean Vietnamese women? Do you have similar proverbs in your culture?
13. Have you tried any of the Vietnamese food described in the novel? Which ones would you like to eat and/or try to cook?
14. "Conversation about books represented the most intimate discourse. It revealed a person's values, beliefs, fears, and hopes. Experiencing the same books enabled people to travel on similar journeys and brought them closer together," Dan reflected in the novel. Do you agree with Dan's reflection in the novel? Has your book club enriched your life? If so, how?