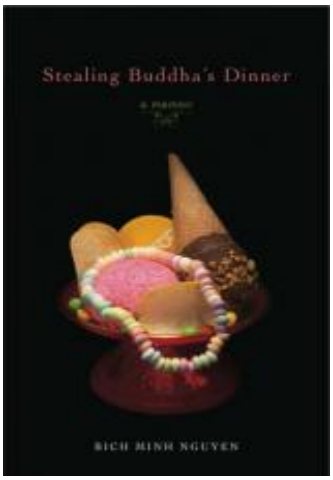
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Stealing Buddha's Dinner

by Bich Minh Nguyen



About the Book

A vivid, funny, and viscerally powerful memoir about childhood, assimilation, food, and growing up in the 1980s

As a Vietnamese girl coming of age in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bich Nguyen is filled with a rapacious hunger for American identity. In the pre-PC era Midwest, where the devoutly Christian blond-haired, blue-eyed Jennifers and Tiffanys reign supreme, Nguyen?s barely conscious desire to belong transmutes into a passion for American food. More exotic seeming than her Buddhist grandmother?s traditional specialties --- spring rolls, delicate pancakes stuffed with meats, fried shrimp cakes --- the campy, preservative-filled ?delicacies? of mainstream America capture her imagination. And in this remarkable book, the glossy branded allure of such American foods as Pringles, Kit Kats, and Toll House cookies become an ingenious metaphor for her struggle to fit in, to become a ?real? American.

Beginning with Nguyen?s family?s harrowing migration from Saigon in 1975, **Stealing Buddha?s Dinner** is nostalgic and candid, deeply satisfying and minutely observed, and stands as a unique vision of the immigrant experience and a lyrical ode to how identity is often shaped by the things we long for.

Discussion Guide

1. The narrator uses food as a metaphor for cultural identity. How effective is this metaphor? What kinds of foods does the narrator describe to define who she and her family are? What kinds of foods does she describe to define who she wishes to be? Can any person be defined by what they eat and what they long to eat? How much can a person?s diet reveal about who they are?

2. Some argue that immigrants should assimilate themselves entirely into American culture, while others believe it is important to preserve the cultural heritage of the country they originate from. Which Vietnamese cultural customs does the narrator hold onto? Which American customs does the narrator embrace? What are the difficulties of straddling two

very different cultures? What issues of cultural identity are specific to the immigrant in America?

3. The narrator?s father uproots their family to escape a life of destitution under the postwar communist regime in Vietnam. But when confronted with limitless choice in the land of plenty, the young narrator and her sister Anh only yearn for what they cannot have, hardly able to appreciate what little they would have had had they not left for America. How might their aspirations have been different if they had not escaped communist Vietnam? Is this materialistic yearning the flip side of ?freedom of choice??

4. The narrator embraces American consumer culture, yearning for brand-name foods and the lifestyles associated with them. Have advertising and marketing campaigns shaped her American dream? Can you think of instances in your own childhood where you believed, perhaps naively, that a product could give you a lifestyle you wanted?

5. The narrator describes her obsession with the Little House on the Prairie series of books, saying, ?In a way, it makes sense that I would become enamored with a literature so symbolic of manifest destiny and white entitlement.? Why does it make sense that she would embrace Little House on the Prairie? What do the Ingalls represent to the young narrator? What does the Ingalls family fantasy provide to her that her family life does not?

6. Why do the narrator and her sister, Anh, break into the Vander Wals? home and wreck Jennifer Vander Wal?s room? How do Jennifer Vander Wal?s pious superiority and the narrator?s resentful friendship reflect relations between Americans and Vietnamese refugees at that time?

7. Rosa, the narrator?s stepmother, teaches her stepchildren to embrace their Vietnamese heritage and tries to integrate herself into the local Vietnamese community, which often emphasizes the cultural differences between Rosa and her adopted family. Why does Rosa try so hard to embrace Vietnamese culture? Was her method the best way to unify a mixed-culture family?

8. On the few occasions in which the narrator is finally allowed to indulge in the foods she?s idealized --- Kraft Macaroni and Cheese after she has an argument with Rosa, a pork-chop dinner at her friend Holly?s house --- she finds herself disappointed by their flavors. How is this mirrored in the accompanying personal experiences?

9. The music references in the book are almost as rich and evocative as the food imagery. Is music more or less personal than food? Given that music is purely sensory pleasure while food is a necessity that can also be a sensory pleasure, what do you make of their impacts on culture? Which has had more of an impact in your own life?

10. How has the immigrant?s status changed since Nguyen?s family came to America? What was unique about the immigration situation for Vietnamese refugees? Which of the narrator?s experiences --- harrowing escape, immigrant sponsorship, religious condescension, etc. --- could have happened today? Which experiences would be different?

11. What does the book reveal about ideas on motherhood and matriarchy? Why does Nguyen structure her book so that the revelations about her birth mother are not revealed until ?Mooncakes?? How do themes of motherhood in the book reflect tensions between the immigrant and her mother country?

Author Bio

Bich Minh Nguyen teaches literature and creative writing at Purdue University. She lives with her husband, the novelist Porter Shreve, in West Lafayette, Indiana and Chicago.

Critical Praise

?Relevant not only to anyone who?s ever lusted after the perfect snack . . . but anyone who?s ever felt like an outsider.?

Stealing Buddha's Dinner

by Bich Minh Nguyen

Publication Date: February 1, 2007

Genres: Nonfiction

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Viking Adult

ISBN-10: 0670038326

ISBN-13: 9780670038329