

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the Trung sisters wanted an army of women? What did this symbolize to you specifically?
2. Why do you think Trung Nhi stepped back and allowed her sister to assume the role of leader of their rebellion?
3. How do you think the story would've been different had Trung Nhi been successful in her attempt to kill Wan Fu instead of Trung Trac stopping her?
4. Discuss the relationship of the nobility to the people of the Lac Viet region? Do you think the Trung family truly understood the reality of these people's lives?
5. Do you think Lord Trung should've heeded his dreams more? What could he have done to change the course of their future?
6. Discuss the ways this novel portrayed historical attempts of erasing a culture. How does it make you consider the current world and the ways this is repeated throughout history?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

7. Do you think the mountain people were correct to want to keep to themselves and wary of opening up to outsiders like Trung Trac? Why or why not?

8. Discuss why the different regions were so reluctant to join a second war against the Han? Do you think that if they had all stood strong together, they would've won again and been able to keep their freedom?

9. Discuss your response to the character of Kha. What additional layers did he bring to the novel in terms of tone and emotion?

10. Describe the ways that Thi Sach and Phan Minh are similar to each other. In what ways are they different? What do they tell the reader about Trung Trac and Trung Nhi by being chosen as their husbands and lovers?

Q & A

WITH PHONG NGUYEN



1. How did you first hear the story about the Trưng sisters?

My father told me the story of the Trưng sisters when I was a young boy. It stuck with me because it was completely unlike any other revenge story with which I had been familiar. Instead of ending with the death of the guilty party (the governor), the Trưng sisters' revenge galvanized the women against the greater enemy, which was the occupying forces of the Han. The point wasn't just "an eye for an eye"; it was to use one's anger and passion and ferocity for the good of the people.

2. What did growing up with the story of the Trưng sisters mean to you and the way you viewed the world?

For whatever reason, I have always connected the story of the Trưng sisters to my family's history. I never met my paternal grandmother because she and her one-year-old son (my uncle) were killed during a French air attack when she was twenty-seven years old. By all accounts she was as formidable as Trưng Nhi and as pious as Trưng Trac; had she lived, I fully believe she could have launched a revolution. One effect of growing up with this story is, I suppose, that I've always been most comfortable under the leadership of women.

3. What does the role of mythology and oral tradition play in Vietnamese culture? What does it mean to you?

I won't presume to speak for Vietnamese culture. I myself was born in Boston and grew up in central New Jersey. But mythology and oral tradition play a major role in my life

because they create archetypes that enable one to rise into these roles and inhabit them. Growing up in the 1980s, screen media offered few if any positive portrayals of Asian, Asian American, or, especially, Vietnamese characters. Hearing stories that featured Vietnamese heroes likely saved me from the self-loathing that I might have felt if my only exposure to Vietnamese characters was through depictions of the Vietnam War.

4. You have written other fiction. What made you want to get this story of the Trung sisters into readers' hands?

It is a story I've always wanted to write but felt prepared to do so only after I'd written a few other books. It's a big-canvas story, requiring a scale that is daunting, almost Shakespearean in scope. I wanted to make sure I could do it justice. To me, the worth of the Trung sisters' story is self-evident, and I just hope that I succeeded in sharing aspects of the story that were so special to me growing up.

5. As a creative-writing professor, what's a common piece of advice that you give to your students, and did you follow that advice yourself when writing Bronze Drum?

I like to tell my students to "follow your curiosity." I certainly followed that advice when writing Bronze Drum, which I spent more than a year researching before I typed a single word. Writing it was a process of discovery, which is essential for any writer, because without discovery, how can there be joy?

6. What was your process for researching an ancient true story especially given it's treated practically as myth as so much of the story is passed down through oral tradition?

If you go to the library and look up "Vietnamese History," you will find shelves and shelves full of books on the Vietnam War and very little that goes back further than 1900, and almost nothing from ancient Vietnamese history. At first, I got my information from single chapters and articles from books with titles like Women of Vietnam, Women Warriors in

History, and Tigers in the Rice. But then I found some more substantial accounts in books by Keith Taylor and Nam C. Kim. I must have had hundreds of email exchanges with the archaeologist Nam C. Kim, who helped me imagine the physical details of this ancient society. I leaned heavily on his input when it came to constructing their world.

7. What was the process for you in writing historical fiction? How did you find the balance between “truth” and weaving a tight narrative?

As a fiction writer, I feel that my primary allegiance is to telling a good story. If I can incorporate historical fact and can draw from myth, that can strengthen and deepen the narrative. But I didn't set out to teach history with this book, and I didn't always validate contemporary Vietnamese myth making about the Trưng sisters. One of the things I love most about fiction is its honesty—it makes no claims to truth and simply asks you to live in the world of the story for a while.

8. What is your writing process like? Do you do a lot of planning, or do you like to write freely and get it all on the page?

That varies depending on the project. With Bronze Drum, the movement of the narrative was straightforward because it was driven by historical events, so it did not require detailed planning. I did have an outline, which I followed very closely, but it was broad. The original draft was more than six hundred pages long, so the most challenging part of the process was cutting out a third of the novel and, in the process, having to determine what was truly dispensable.

9. Do you have a favorite character from Bronze Drum? Were some characters easier to write than others?

I don't have a favorite individual character, but I do have favorite relationships in the book. My favorite relationships in the book are between 1) Trung Nhi and Lady Man Thin, 2) Trung Trac and Lord Trung, 3) Kha and Thi Sach, and, of course, 4) Trung Nhi and Trung Trac. Character is best revealed through interaction, and to me these dyads were the

most illuminating. As a side note, I quite enjoyed writing about Ma Yuan, actually, because I like writing sympathetic villains, and there is so much historical record when it comes to Ma Yuan.

10. Who are the writers that have inspired you and informed your work?

My favorite American writers are Mark Twain, Willa Cather, Herman Melville, James Baldwin, and Edith Wharton. More recently, there is Louise Erdrich, Min Jin Lee, Madeline Miller, Karen Russell, Zachary Mason, George Saunders, and Colson Whitehead. My favorite international writers are Italo Calvino, Marcel Proust, Chinua Achebe, Naguib Mahfouz, Jin Yong, and Eiji Yoshikawa. Recent short fiction authors I admire include Alexander Weinstein, Nafissa Thompson-Spires, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, Ted Chiang, and Anjali Sachdeva. Among all of those writers, I would say that the ones who have most directly informed my work are Mark Twain, Louise Erdrich, Italo Calvino, and Eiji Yoshikawa. Readers who are familiar with my other books will notice how different they are from one another. Each book has to be a departure from the others for me to become genuinely excited about it, and I consider each book I write to be a part of a different literary lineage.

BRONZE DRUM

Bò Lúc Lắc (Shaking Beef)

Ingredients for the Marinated Beef

1.5 pounds filet mignon
2 tablespoons fish sauce
4 tablespoons soy sauce
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon black pepper
4 tablespoons grapeseed oil
4 tablespoons minced garlic

Ingredients for the Salad

4 tablespoons white vinegar
2 teaspoons grapeseed oil
2 teaspoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon black pepper
1 red onion
3 cups watercress or baby
spinach

On the night before you cook Bo Luc Lac:

- 1) First, cut the filet mignon into small chunks, about ½ inch square each.
- 2) In a separate bowl, stir the sugar and pepper into the soy sauce and fish sauce.
- 3) Toss the filet mignon in the bowl with the marinade, coating it evenly.
- 4) Cover up and refrigerate the meat overnight.
- 5) For the salad, stir the white vinegar, grapeseed oil, sugar, salt, and pepper into a bowl.
- 6) Thinly slice the red onion and add it to the bowl, tossing it.
- 7) Cover up and refrigerate the red onion overnight.

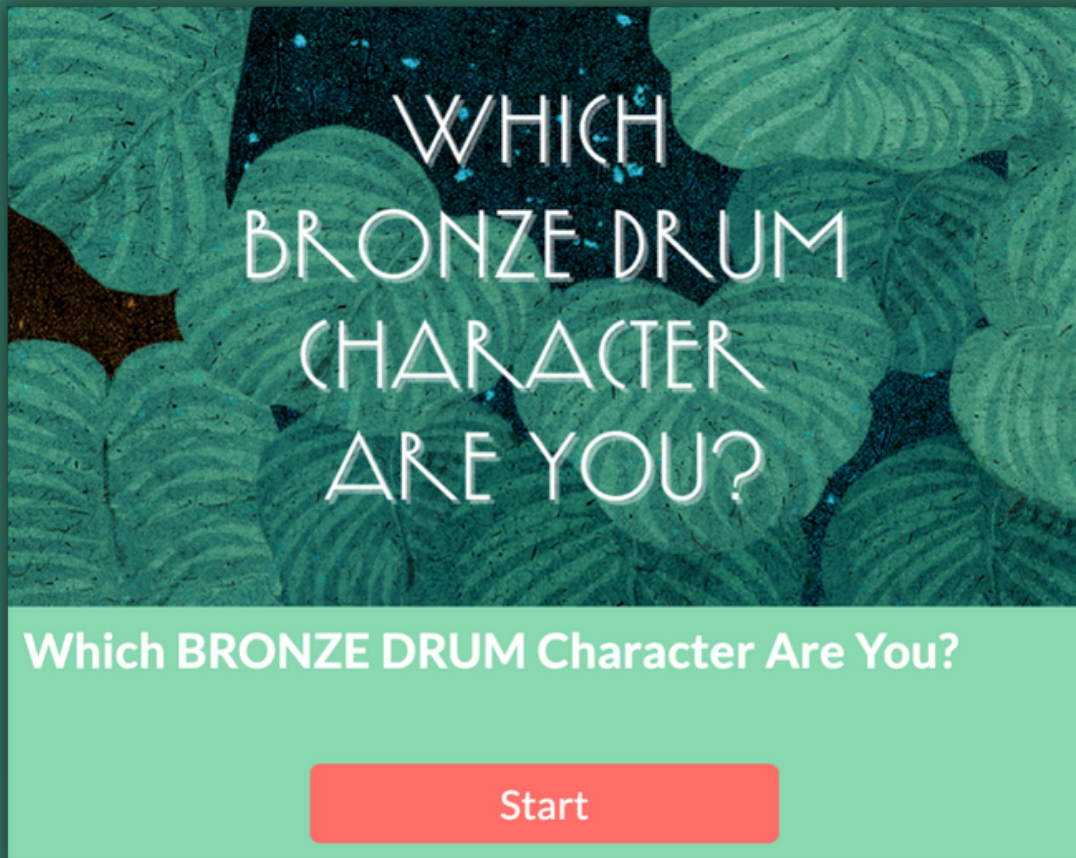
R
E
(
|
P
E

On the day you cook Bo Luc Lac:

- 1) Heat the grapeseed oil in a large skillet on high until a drop of water sizzles in the pan.
- 2) Add the beef, which should form a single layer on the pan.
- 3) Brown the meat on all sides, shaking the pan to turn the meat.
- 4) Add the garlic and continue cooking, shaking the meat until done to your liking.
- 5) Set the pan aside while you prepare the salad.
- 6) Toss the watercress (or spinach) with the red onion and juices.
- 7) Add the steak to the salad and serve.

MORE RESOURCES FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB

TAKE THE QUIZ TO FIND OUT WHICH CHARACTER YOU ARE!



LISTEN TO A PLAYLIST CURATED BY THE AUTHOR!

