

>> Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining us for a special KidsLIVE author talk with Thao Lam. Thao is the author and artist of many children's books, including *The Paper Boat*, a refugee story, which is featured on our best books for KidsLIVE 2020 list. Thao will talk about the story behind her book, which will be followed by Q&A with NYPL librarians. There will also be an exclusive peek into her new book, *Thao*, that will be coming out next year. And I'm going to pass it over to Thao. Welcome.

>> Hi, everyone. My name is Tao. And as Nicole said, I'm an author and illustrator. Sorry, this is my cat with me and she's going to be interrupting for a while. I am the author of *The Paper Boat*. And just a clarification, *Thao* is out this April. So, it's been about two weeks, I think April 15. But I'll give you a sneak peek of that at the end of the show.

[Music]

My name is Thao Lam, and I'm the creator of *The Paper Boat* with our kids books for Fall of 2020. *The Paper Boat* is about the flight refugees. I was two when my family fled Vietnam. It was my mother and my father. My mom was three months pregnant. And we got on a homemade boat and crossed the South China Sea. We landed in Malaysia where a refugee camp was set up, and we stayed there for six months before we accepted the Canadian government's offer to start a new life in Canada. So, I was trying to figure out how to overcome hardship and trying to figure out where all the steps that led me to the place that I was currently at, which was going through a divorce, and like my family breaking up. And I decided that I was going to ask my parents about how they survived the journey and how they started over in Canada. My parents don't talk about the war or the journey, because they were probably traumatized. My mother, as long as I can remember, used to tell me a story about how her mother would leave a bowl of sugar water out on the table in order to capture the ants because they were being passed. And she would sit there and she would rescue these ants. On the night we were escaping, my mother had gotten lost and in the tall grass. And so, she saw a trail of ants in the moonlight and she decided to follow them. And they led her to the river where the boat was waiting to take us from Vietnam. I did a lot of research on ants and on Vietnam. And one thing I learned while I was piecing together my family's journey was that ants are very similar to refugees. Like they're very hardworking. They're willing to sacrifice and take lots of risks in order to save the family. I have a daughter named Maddie, and she's currently six. When I started the project, Maddie was the same age I was when my family fled Vietnam. At three, her comments were more observant, like, "Oh, why are you and Nana running away from your home?" Now that Maddie is six, she's asking tougher questions. She's asking what is war, and she wants to know why the soldiers are chasing her Nana and her mom, and she wants to know why people are being mean. In a way, I feel like my parents, when I asked them that question, and I could see how difficult it was as a parent to answer those questions. I tell her the same story my mother told me, which is the story about the ants. What was great about this, *The Paper Boat*, was that it started a conversation. It doesn't have the answers to the conversation, but it sparked her interest. Like Maddie is born here in Canada. I would like her to have empathy and understand that like, these peoples don't make these choices lightly, right? They're hard decisions to make, like who would like volunteer to put their child on the boat with no direction,

right? When I was young, I never understood why my parents made this choice. But I think, now that I'm older, and I'm a parent, like I understand. I feel like you can't quite figure out who you are, until you know kind of like where you came from, right? Talking about your family history, even though it could be tragic could be inspiring and encouraging.

[Music]

>> Awesome, such a great story. Thank you for sharing that. Can you tell us a little bit about how this story first came to be? Did it start with an image, a voice, or a concept, or something else?

>> The story of The Paper Boat started with my mom's story. So when I was little, she used to say that because she spent, she's a true believer in karma. So, she says that she spent her childhood rescuing these ants from sugar bowls that my grandma left out to get rid of pests. And then the neither of [inaudible] because she got lost. She saw a trail of ants, and she decided to follow them. And they rescued her and basically led her to the riverside where the boat was waiting. So, it is her story that this is based off of. So, yeah.

>> Right. We have a question in the chat, which is an excellent question. Robin asks, what is the biggest challenge with telling a story using only pictures?

>> Oh. There's lots of challenges? So [inaudible] why do I do it. For me, it's trying to make the story clear. There's a lot of stuff that is up for interpretation, but trying to make the storyline as clear as possible. With The Paper Boat, it was difficult because it is a story kind of based on history, and there's been lots of books on refugees and war and the Vietnam War, especially. And so, it was trying to tell that story without using historical facts or words to tell it. With other books, it is making sure that the facial expressions of my characters come through and their actions come through correctly. But at the end, it is one of the challenges but also like the wonder of a wordless picture paper book is that it's up to the reader. At the end, it's like you put it in their hands, and it's like, "Okay, now you take over," right? And I have been really surprised at some of the responses I get from kids and adults when they interpret my books. And so, I'm like, "Oh, I wasn't thinking like that when I wrote it or when I was creating it. Or, "That wasn't the action I was thinking." Or, "Oh, they took it to a totally different level of imagination." And so, that's always been a real, for me, that's been the gift of creating a wordless picture book [laughs] creating a wordless picture book. Yeah.

>> That kind of leads into Crystal's question, which is, what made you decide to use only pictures and not words in some of the other books that you've written?

>> Well, I guess, for me, instinctively, writing, creating a book is, I've always been visual. It plays like a film in my head or an image that gets stuck in my head, and I try to like see what the next frame is. With The Paper Boat, although I did intentionally make it wordless, because it is a story about refugees, I wanted a child who was new to the country to be able to pick up the

book and see their story or to understand the story without knowing the language in their new country.

>> So, I'm very interested, were there any scenes you ended up cutting out where you wish you kept? Like, what was your decision making process when it came to creating The Paper Boat?

>> No, there wasn't anything. It was pretty seamless. Compared to my other books, I feel like it right off the bat, like it was approved by the publisher or the editor. And because I was working on it for quite a while before I showed it to them, it was pretty much set in my head. The only constraint was page count, eight. And I like to keep things clean and not make things too muddy for the reader. But like I said, like I've been working on this story for quite a long time, because originally, the story was meant as a film. I wrote it as a film. Like a wordless film. And I was trying to get distribution for it like. I was trying to get a film company to pick it up. And like, applying for grants and applying for like, or trying to get somebody to pick it up was really hard, and it took a couple of years and like it's like, "Oh, well, no. In the meantime, I'll just turn into a book." I had all the like images, deanery, like sketches, I mean. And so, you know, our kids was wonderful. They said they would love to take it on. So, yeah.

>> So that leads to my next question. So, what is your favorite illustration out of the whole book, if you could [choose] one?

>> If I can pick one. Let's see, well, I'm a big fan of endpapers. And so, the endpapers was my opportunity to provide history or context to the story. So, this was the endpapers. And that also was a great opening for me to do research on the Vietnam War because, like up to this point, I didn't know much except for like stuff that was on TV, when they show once in a while, the history of the Vietnam War. And my parents did not talk about the war. So, and for a long time, I just thought, "Okay, well," like it was a taboo subject to bring up, right? So, I kind of let it slide until like I got to an age where I'm just like, "All right. Like I think I'm emotionally and mentally prepared to dive into this." And so, yeah, this was like this was me doing research. So yeah, the endpapers are probably my favorite because it did give me an opportunity to find out more about like Vietnam.

>> I'm going to barge in here. The chat is popping. Allison has a two-part question. I think they go well together because you kind of touched on the length of time it took to write the book. So, she first asked, what took the most time, mapping out the story or the artwork? And then she also asked, how do you stay motivated when things take time to finish? Do you have any tips for kids?

>> Right. The longest sketches or concepts art usually takes the longest because I like to have every, like all my ducks in a row before I go the final art. But I'm pretty, like everything has to be precise and clean and neat and orderly before I move on. So, yeah, doing all the research about Vietnam and about the war took some time. But then the sketches also took time to do. As I progress through the story, it gets easier. Like at the beginning of a story, it always takes a lot of mental brainpower. And by the end of the story, when I'm doing fine art, it's more a bit laborious

like, it's just like for me, it's like doing craft time. Like I'm cutting and I'm gluing. And that's the fun part of it. It's the easy part of it, which is great that it comes at the end, because by the end, I can get really drained because I've been with this book, or any of my books for at least a year. And the way I break up that mental draining, like burnout, is that I usually have another project on the go halfway. For me, writing a book, I love the challenge or coming up with the concept. I love the problem solving, of writing or trying to figure out the composition. And that's where I have fun with a story. And so, by midway, when I'm doing like the laborious part, part that doesn't require my brainpower, I usually start a new one. So that my brain has been problem solving as I'd like gluing and cutting stuff. As for me, and I've heard for many artists, is that they multitask. So, they're always doing more than one project at a time, because when you are stuck on a project, it's great to put it aside, walk away and pick up another one. And then probably halfway through, you're like, "Oh, I got a solution for that. And you come back. So like for me, working on another project helps. I also clean the house, and I bake. So, whenever I have a problem that I need to solve, those are the things I do. And recently, I picked up making chili sauce. So, it's been like when I procrastinate the house smells really good because it smells like, you know, it's clean and smelling like baked goods. So, that's how I get to a project.

>> Oh, that leads right into something that I'm personally curious about, which is, collage art. Because I went to your website and I see that you're really into, you know, getting different kinds of wallpaper and trying different like patterns. So, I wondered if you could kind of touch on how to do collage art simplistically, because I think it'd be a fun craft project for some of our young viewers.

>> Oh, yeah.

>> So, was this always a hobby of yours collecting wallpaper?

>> No. And it's deciding when I was in college when I was doing the illustration program. But I think collages is super easy to do, and it's a great project to do. My little one, well, the time when we get the mail, sometimes you get those like magazines or advertisement. And there's always like a stack on the side. And she would go and she would cut it up and cut the people out or cut the like food items and she'll piece it together and make her own little image with it. So, I feel like collage is really fun and is an easy project to do. Like scissors, glue is the only thing, and there is really, really no rules to it at all. You can make anything happen right? And you also don't need to feel pressured because you're like, "Oh, I can't draw a fish." Right? So, there's already in your [inaudible] fish, and you just cut it out and glue it in, right? And then so, it actually requires you to use a part of your brain to work out composition, so placement of images, instead of like being worried, like, "Can I draw a fish correctly?" Right? So there's that freedom to it that you know like anybody can collage, right?

>> Awesome. So, I just want to put it out there to everyone. Any last questions? I'm going to ask a question, but hopefully, we get some more in the chat. This is sort of an easy softball question. Which illustrators/authors sort of inspire your own practice?

>> I am a huge fan of illustrators and authors because my background, when I first started in the industry, was I was an art buyer for educational publishing. So that meant that I bought or commissioned the illustrations that went into your math books or your science books or your history books. So, I was working with illustrators all the time, and I was exposed to so much talent and creativity. So, I'm a huge fan. Before I'm an author and a writer, I'm a huge fan. Like when I was little, like I was a huge fan going to libraries, and just sitting there and just looking at all the images. So, for me, there is just, I'm a roll with everybody. But there are people that really do, like I have more than one of their books on my bookshelf. So, I'm a big fan of Mo Williams. I'm also a big fan of, I don't know how to say her last name, Isabelle Arsenault. She did *The Honeybee*. Jon Klassen is a good one, Oliver Jeffers. There's also like yeah, there's just like, everybody and everything. And I also notice that as I like, when I became a parent, my taste in authors and illustrators, or books in general, changed. You know, like coming out of college, you decide to use anything that looks really trendy, and you're just like, "What?" When you're a parent, and you're reading a book to a child for like the 50th time, like story is important to keep you, you know, engaged. So yeah, like now, for me, storyline is like is what will sell books for me. And, you know, when I was in school, it was like I'm sorry that I did judge a book by its cover, like beautiful shape, I will buy it. But now, like as a parent, I'm just like, "Oh, wow, this storyline is awesome. Illustration. But oh, man, I can read this over and over and over again." Right? And so, that's great too. [laughs]

>> Great. So you've talked a lot today about how like biography has informed your writing process. So, we wanted to, you know, give you a little time to pitch your latest book, *Thao*. So if you want to bring that out and maybe show us some pictures, I read it, and it's really good, guys. I highly recommend it.

>> This cover really makes me laugh. [laughs] My sister has seen it and she says this is the next level Narcisist, [laughter] but she says it with love, okay? So, it's a picture book, *Thao* by Thao Lam. And it started, the book started out, years ago, I read an article on NPR about the psychological impact on a child when you mispronounce her name. So, I went down this rabbit hole of researching, like microaggressions, and what teachers were doing, what schools were doing, and how kids that were immigrating to, you know, North America were changing their names either for convenience or because they were asked to buy the school. So, for me, it was just like, "Wow, like, I didn't have words or information to put what I was going through as a kid. And so, it really was just an eye opener. And I thought that it is something that kids are struggling with now. And I think, especially now, because there's so many kids that are being displaced and are starting over in different countries that is not their home country, right? So, this is what it tells about. Once again, big fan of the endpapers. Can you guys see?

>> Yeah.

>> So, the endpapers actually took more work than the whole book in general. I did a lot of research on its name. My editors, like they went through like multiple passes of the names just to make sure that we didn't leave anybody out or offend anybody at the same time. So, it's not easy being *Thao*. By the way, I'm going to talk through it, okay? So that's me. These are

photographs of me as a kid. When I was doing *The Paper Boat*, my mom sent me a bunch of photos, family photos, for references. And so, as I was going through them, I'm like, "Oh, this would be great." Like if I, you know, use it as part of like a future book. And I was lucky that this was the next book. My name has the same letters as other names. T-h-a-o. T as in Tom, H as in Henry, A as in Amy, O, it would be so much easier that my name was Olivia. Letters get added, scrambled and left behind. Though, sigh, Thao. Where did they all come from? Tow? Not even close. Eventually, I learned to recognize the names people gave me, Thao, here. And this is my daughter's hand. She thinks she's famous now because her hand is in the book. And there are many of those, tofu, tiny, China girl, shrimp, toto, Thao, tail, bow, Thai, theo, hao, tau, cow, bow, tea, yellow, Tam, Charles, rose, ali, Talis, Jose and that. And so, that's-- That's me.

>> Thank you so much. That was really great. It's really cool to get like some personal info on the book. It definitely enhances my reading of it. I'm really excited. Hopefully, it will make it on this year's list. I'm rooting for it.

>> Yeah.

>> So, we're coming to an end here. And of course, we want to thank you very much for coming. And we just want to mention the name of the book, *The Paper Boat*, and it's available from our online catalogs. So make sure you pick it up. Thank you very much.