



# The Booklist Project



Focus: Culture-Specific Booklist

Vietnamese

Developed by: Elodie McAllister

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## Book List Project:

# A Selection of Books Geared Toward Vietnamese Adult English Language Learners

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*Books Geared Toward Vietnamese Adult Language Learners*

The Vietnamese are the fifth largest immigrant group in the U.S., with a total of more than one million people. This population is concentrated in six states: California, Texas, Washington, Virginia, Florida and Massachusetts. Based on 2006 data, about 75% of these immigrants were adults of working age. Two-thirds of Vietnamese immigrants (ages five and above) rate themselves as having "limited" English.

On April 30, 1975, "the fall of Saigon" ended the war, and thus began the first wave of Vietnamese immigration. Those years at the end of the Vietnam War era brought a wave of immigrants to the U.S. 1977 brought another group of refugees, as they fled the Communist regime, which included the torture of former military personnel and anyone considered sympathetic to the South Vietnamese cause. These "boat people" fled to camps in Asia and the Pacific, waiting for eventual refuge in other countries. With quotas in force in the U.S., it was over many years that these people arrived at their final destination.

I have a particular interest in working with ELLs whose native language orthographies are different from those of the Romance languages. My interest also probably stems from the fact that I have a brother who was adopted from Vietnam and brought to the U.S. during Operation Babylift. His flight took off the same day-April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1975-as another airplane filled with orphans bound for the U.S. That other flight experienced mechanical difficulties when the back doors blew out, taking with them crew, staff and children. All told, about 180 of the 221 on board died. This was just one tragedy of the many experienced by the Vietnamese people during this era.

#### Choosing Books of Interest:

There are a great many books written based on Southeast Asian and Vietnamese fables. These fables were not included, as these adult learners are already familiar with such stories from their childhoods. The choice of books presented here was intended to acknowledge the Vietnamese recent history of turmoil and Communist rule, but not to dwell on it. In the United States, there exists a wealth of books written on the Vietnamese War experience. These adult ELLs are looking forward and don't care to be

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reminded or instructed about their culture's-and possibly their own life's-difficult past. Ignoring these aspects of their culture, on the other hand, would be unwise, so books such as *The Tale of Kieu*, an iconic epic poem by Nguyen Du, *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry From the Wars (1948-1993)*, and *Life, Poetry and Prison*, a collection of works that resulted in the imprisonment of its author, Nguyen Chi Thien, have been included.

Useful Websites:

<http://openlibrary.org/>, something like a Wiki of books, is a good source to check for the existence of books in the U.S. and a handful of other countries; it is also a good source to check for eBooks.

<http://www.eastwestdiscovery.com/BookStore.asp> offers bilingual books in 40 languages, plus a selection of multicultural books. Many of their books support language arts and social science content curricula.

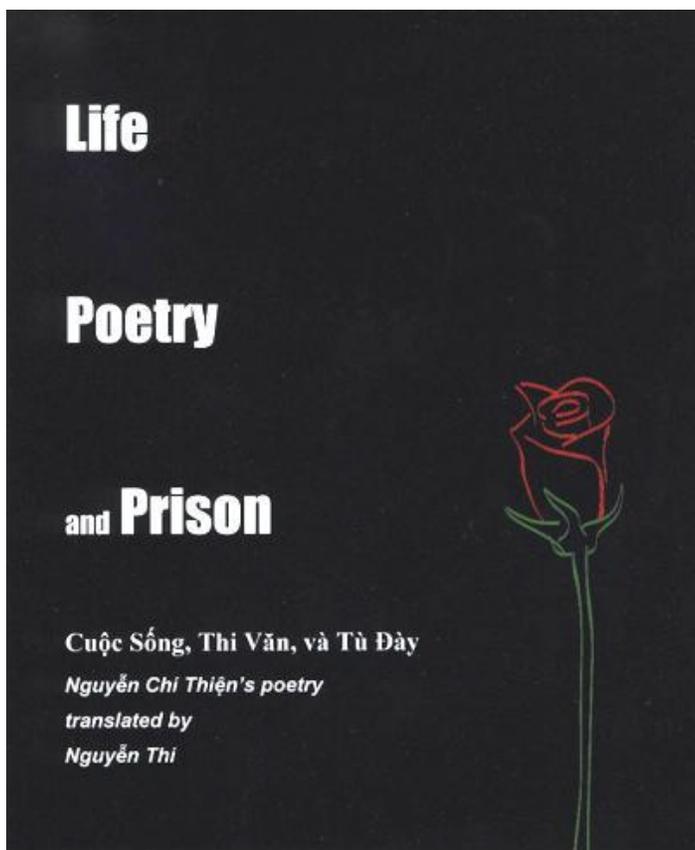
<http://www.worldcat.org/> searches through public and university libraries worldwide.

<http://www.paperbackswap.com/> is a possible source to locate books that may be out of print.

<http://vietnamesearchwork.com/> offers 16 bilingual books written about various aspects of Vietnamese culture.

<http://lookatvietnam.com/> is not a literary source, but is an on-line English-language newspaper with all the news and features that one would expect to find in and about Vietnam, and so can be a valuable resource to utilize for a second language teacher.

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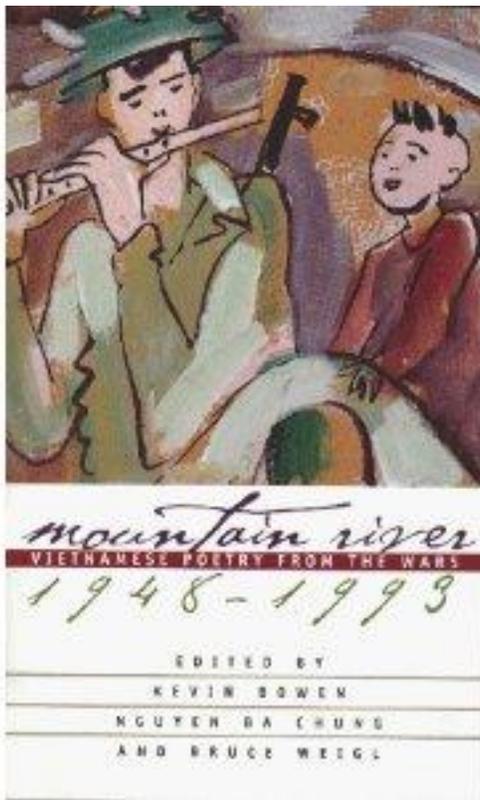
- 1) Thien, C. (2007). *Life, Poetry and Prison*. (N. Thi, Trans.). Palo Alto, CA: Allies for Freedom Publishers [ISBN 13 978-0-9773638-4-1]

Imprisoned for supposed anti-revolutionary ideas over a 30-year span, Nguyen Thi wrote 700 poems, committing them all to memory. Poetry was his lifeline, and he wrote from his heart. These adult themes would be appropriate for high school students, as well.

This is published as a pamphlet of 35 pages, with the English translation by Nguyen Thi following the Vietnamese text.

RI Standards Level 3, but subject matter would be a 5 or 6, were it not for the bilingual text.

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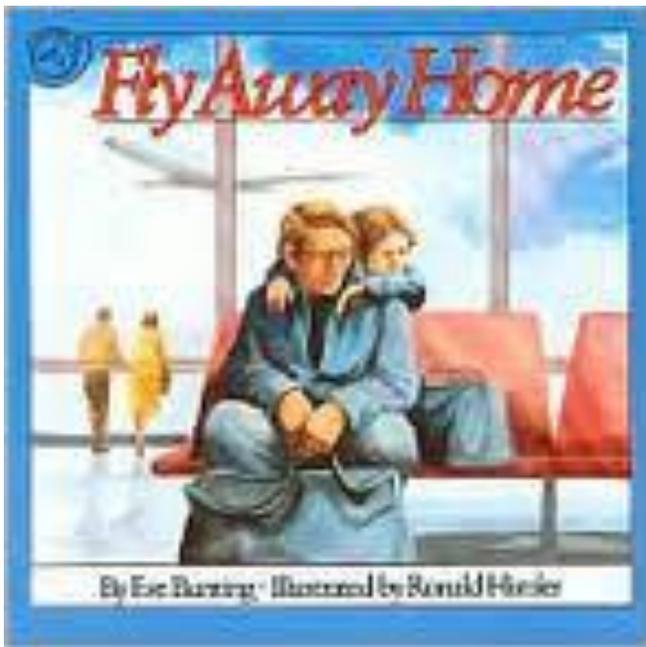
- 2) Chung, N., Bowen, K. & Weigl, B. (1998). *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry From the Wars (1948-1993)*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press. [ISBN 1-55849-141-4]

Another bilingual book of poetry, this is a compilation of different Vietnamese authors. Poetry is important in Vietnamese literature, because, prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because quoc ngu, a national writing script, was not widely used. Hence, poetry was an easier way to remember ideas, which were then passed on by word of mouth. Much of the poetry is written to express suffering and hopes for the future.

With 266 pages, a teacher may choose a poem whose content and vocabulary fit with an appropriate unit being taught. The subject matter is appropriate for adults, with high school-aged learners being capable of benefitting from these poems. The format has the Vietnamese language version on the left side of the page and the English translation on the right.

RI Standards Levels 2-3, given the bilingual text, but content makes this a level 5.

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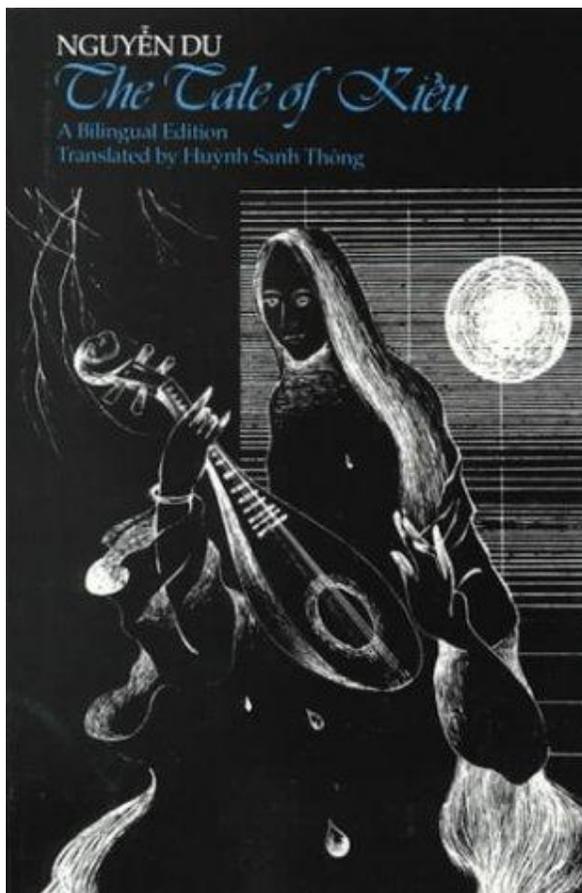


- 3) Bunting, E. (1991) *Fly Away Home*. (Himler, R., Illustrations). New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. [ISBN 0-395-55962-6]

With illustrations on every page and about five short paragraphs per page, this book is geared toward ages 4-8, or K-3. But adult Level 3 learners will appreciate the storyline of a homeless father and son who live in the airport. A sad but heartwarming story written from the boy's perspective about how his father has taught him to blend in so as not to get noticed by security personnel.

Adult learners will be well served by this book in follow-up conversations to the topic of homelessness and a father and son making a life after the mother passes away.

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- 4) Kieu, N. *The Tale of Kieu: A bilingual edition of Nguyen Du's Truyen Kieu*. (Thong, H., Trans.). (1987) New Haven: Yale University Press [ISBN 978-0300040517]

An epic poem, considered something of a national cultural treasure by the Vietnamese people, it has been translated several times into English, with many debating the comparative qualities of each. Kieu is a female protagonist who falls in love three times, but “prostitutes” herself unknowingly into marriage in order to rescue her father and brother from prison. Adult Vietnamese ELLs should be familiar with the story; this can provide them with the opportunity to read and discuss the English version, with the assistance of the Vietnamese language version on the left hand side.

The “Notes” section at the end is very useful as it provides cultural explanations and references in English as added enrichment. This section

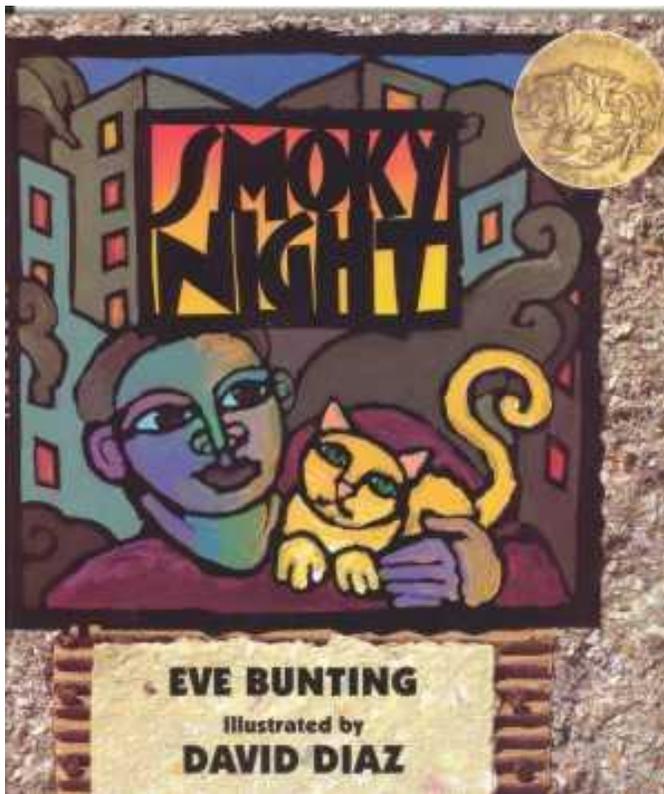
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can provide further ideas for discussion topics. Students could attempt to write their own poetry in English, using ideas from parts of The Tale of Kieu.

Even though only small parts of this poem should be attempted at one time, and despite the bilingual edition, Level 5, and preferably Level 6, students would be most suited to benefit from this text.

This book is also available in eBook format.

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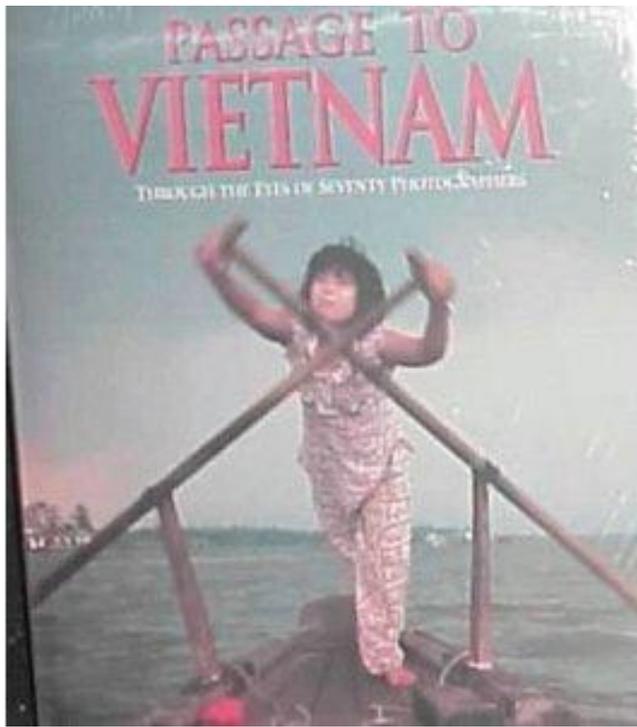
- 5) Bunting, E. (1994). *Smoky Night*. (Diaz, D., Illustrations). Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Co. [ISBN 0-15-269954-6]

Geared toward ages 4-8, this book's theme is universal and can be appreciated by adults. Daniel and his mother live in an urban area where youths are rioting, smashing windows and stealing from stores. They vacate their apartment when the vandals start fires. Worried about their cat, they find they have something in common with Mrs. Kim, someone who they saw as "different," who is also worried about finding her cat.

The story is about people from different cultures and ancestries, but the illustrations are generic enough that they may be interpreted loosely as people from any number of different countries. With much of the text conversational, activities could naturally follow that involve students making up a dialogue and acting it out about a particular situation.

Levels 2 and 3 students could benefit from this text. This is also available in eBook format.

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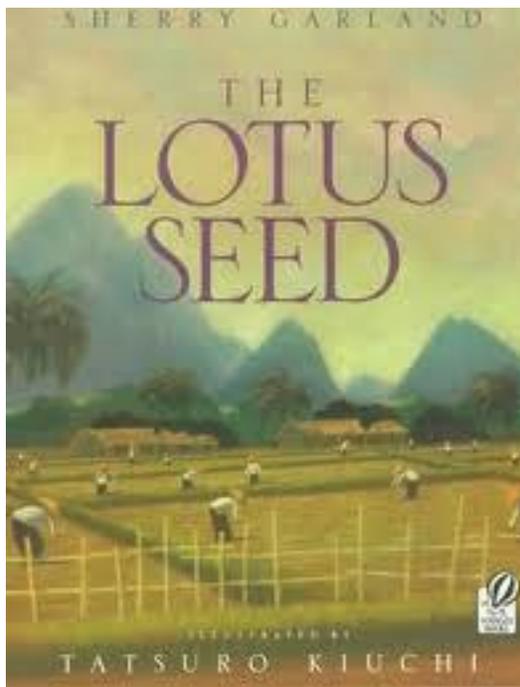


- 6) Iyer, P., Smolan, R., & Erwitte, J. (1994). Passage to Vietnam. Hong Kong: Against All Odds Productions and Melcher Media [ISBN 1-885559-00-3]

Amazing photographs taken throughout Vietnam, short and longer captions describe the photos, with additional text interspersed throughout. As the intent of a book list is to create an enthusiastic group of pupils in a stimulating learning environment, bringing in as much of the native culture that may be enjoyed and discussed can lead to many opportunities in a natural teaching environment. Teachers might want to plan lessons after seeing which photos stimulate the most interest.

Learners at Level 1 might utilize this book by pointing to photos and speaking whatever English words they can find to describe what is being depicted. Learners at Level 6 might use topics suggested from these photos to write an essay about their knowledge or experience.

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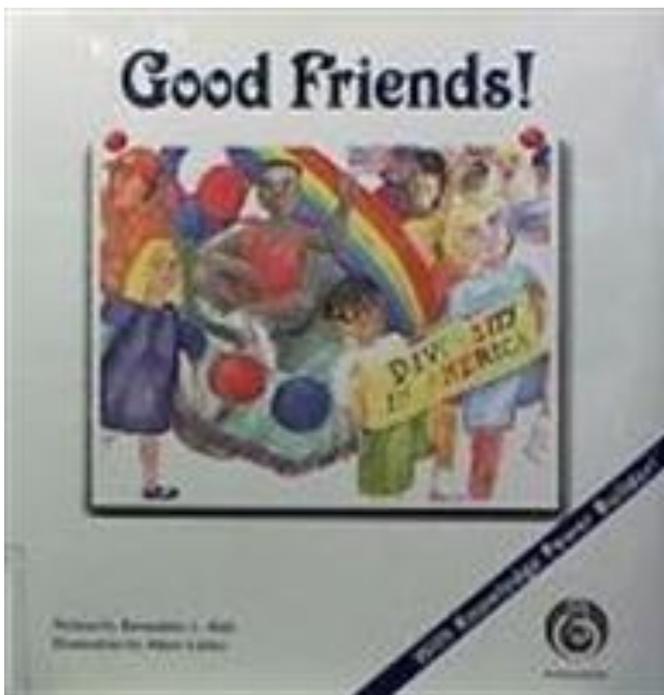
7) Garland, S. (1993). *The Lotus Seed*. (Kiuchi, T., Illustrations). Singapore: Harcourt Brace & Co. [ISBN 0-15-249465-0]

Recommended for ages 5-9, Garland's tale spans generations as the grandmother, who had taken a treasured lotus seed with her when she fled Vietnam, eventually passes on the next generation of seeds to her grandchildren. Written in the voice of the granddaughter, the story is a tale of immigration that shows a family who have adapted to life in their new country while remembering their culture and circumstances of their previous life.

Pages contain single compound sentences accompanied by illustrations of Vietnamese people and their surroundings at the time. Adult Level 2 learners would appreciate this text.

The book is also available in eBook format.

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- 8) Shih, B. (2001). *Good Friends!: Diversity in America* (Lister, M., Illustrations). Korea: Phaelos Books [ISBN 0-9700209-9-6]

Recommended for ages 9-12, adult students from different cultures will appreciate the multicultural bent of the book, with its references to Chinese food and Spanish exclamations. The end of the book includes "Knowledge Power Builder" terms, which have been highlighted throughout the text. Examples include descriptions of "coolies," Plymouth Plantation, a history of the State of California and of China, and an explanation of the National Anthem.

The story takes place during a summer day, when two boys begin a fight over the bragging rights that went with being the "reading, writing and math...class champion." After finding their way to safety during an earthquake, the students share their individual ancestry and immigration stories. As the story ends, they have found new appreciation for each other despite their differences.

With a good amount of text on some pages, and illustrations that support but can't substitute for the text, the book is best suited for at least a Level 3, preferably a Level 4, student.

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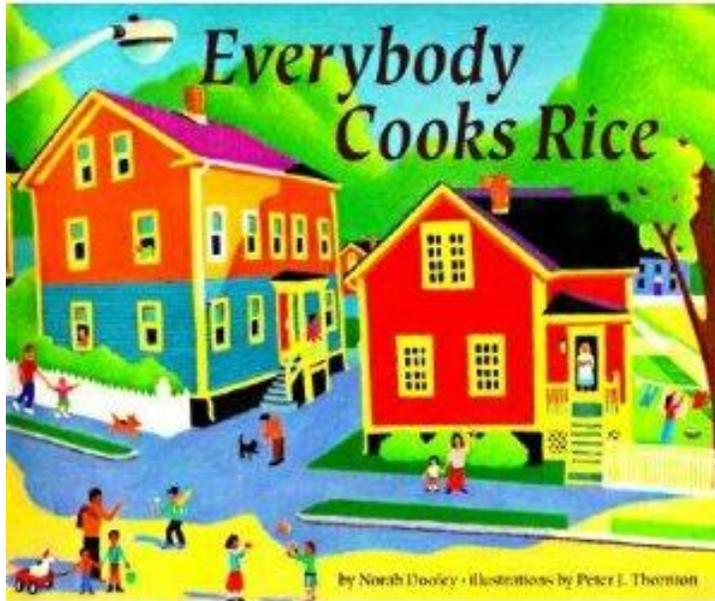
- 9) Tran, T. (2003). *Going Home, Coming Home* (Phong, A., Illustrations). Hong Kong: Childrens Book Press [ISBN 0-89239-179-0]

A Skipping Stones Honor Award Book

Intended for preschoolers up to Grade 3, this book follows a Vietnamese American girl as she travels to visit her parents' homeland, meeting her grandmother for the first time. A Bilingual book with colorful illustrations of native peoples and places, the Vietnamese language follows the English version on each page. There is a moderate amount of text on each page, and the sentence length is average. With the translation, Level 3 students should be able to attempt the book in stages. Adults should appreciate the cultural references, and the story is written in a fairly sophisticated voice, even though the central character is eight years old.

This book is also available in an Audible Audio Edition format.

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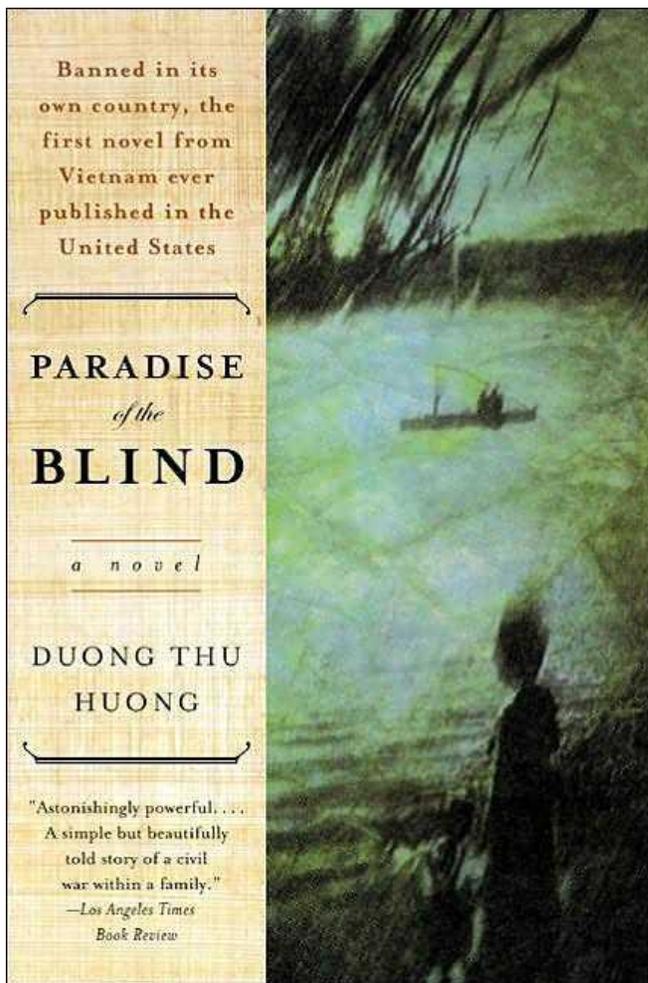
10) Dooley, N. (1991). *Everybody Cooks Rice* (Thornton, P., Illustrations). Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, Inc. [ISBN 0-87614-412-1]

An American family lives in a multicultural neighborhood. The son likes to visit all the homes and experience the different cultures (read: food)-Haitians, Indians, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc... When the sister goes to find him, she discovers who and what is cooking in each home. The end of the book provides the recipes from each home, each of which is made with rice.

The vocabulary is not advanced, but the amount of text would be best suited for a Level 4 learner.

This book is also available as an eBook.

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- 11) Huong, D. (2002) *Paradise of the Blind*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers [ISBN 0-06-050559-1]

*Paradise of the Blind* is the story of a young Vietnamese woman who must take a train to Moscow to visit her ill uncle. Her uncle used his Communist party connections to secure a post in Moscow. The young woman, Hang, was an "exported worker" in the (then) Soviet Union.

This is a novel of over 200 pages, suited only to Level 6 students, but is nonetheless an interesting story that should be read by ethnic Vietnamese who are able and anyone who wishes to learn more about the culture in story form.

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Other suggested books that I was not able to access in time include:

*The Family from Vietnam*, by Tana Reiff

I Love You are for White People (also in eBook format), by Lac Su

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A Project of the  
M.Ed. In TESL Program,



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