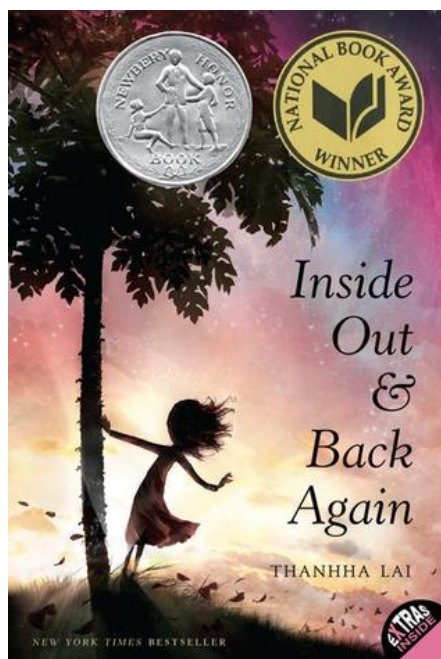




Inside Out and Back Again

Thanhha Lai

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Inside Out and Back Again Thanhha Lai

***Inside Out and Back Again* is a #1 New York Times bestseller, a Newbery Honor Book, and a winner of the National Book Award!**

Inspired by the author's childhood experience as a refugee—fleeing Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon and immigrating to Alabama—this coming-of-age debut novel told in verse has been celebrated for its touching child's-eye view of family and immigration.

Hà has only ever known Saigon: the thrills of its markets, the joy of its traditions, and the warmth of her friends close by. But now the Vietnam War has reached her home. Hà and her family are forced to flee as Saigon falls, and they board a ship headed toward hope—toward America.

This moving story of one girl's year of change, dreams, grief, and healing received four starred reviews, including one from *Kirkus* which proclaimed it "enlightening, poignant, and unexpectedly funny."

An author's note explains how and why Thanhha Lai translated her personal experiences into Hà's story. This paperback edition also includes an interview with the author, an activity you can do with your family, tips on writing poetry, and discussion questions.

Inside Out and Back Again Details

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Author : Thanhha Lai

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From Reader Review Inside Out and Back Again for online ebook

Betsy says

Thinking about the most memorable of children's novels, one trait in all of them has to ring true in order for them to click with their readers. The books must contain some kind of "meaning". Even the frothiest Charlie and the Chocolate Factory-type offering isn't going to remain long in the public's brain if there isn't at least a little "meaning" slipped in there. Now when I use the term "meaning" I'm being purposefully vague because it's not the kind of thing you can easily define. What is meaningful to one person might strike another as trite or overdone. I personally believe that adult novels contain this saccharine faux-meaning a lot more often than their juvenile contemporaries, and why not? Adult books can get away with it while children's books are read by the harshest of all possible critics: children. As a librarian and a reviewer, I'm pretty tough too. I get mighty suspicious of prose that gets a little too lyrical or characters that spout the book's thinly disguised premise on every other page. All this is leading up to the fact that when I turned my jaded suspicion-filled toxic eyeballs on Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out and Back Again* I found nothing to displease me. Lai's debut novel speaks with a natural voice that's able to make salient points and emotional scenes without descending into overly sentimental goo. This author makes a point to draw from her own life. The result is a novel that works in every conceivable way.

"No one would believe me but at times I would choose wartime in Saigon over peacetime in Alabama." Ha has known both in her life, actually. Born in Vietnam during the war, Ha lives with her mother and three older brothers. Her father disappeared years ago on a navy mission when Ha was just one. Today the family doesn't even know if he's alive, but when the chance comes to flee Saigon and make a new life in America, Ha's mother doesn't hesitate. Once they're settled in Alabama, Ha has a whole new set of problems ahead of her. She's homesick, mad that she's no longer the smartest girl in class, and tormented after school by some of the boys. Yet the solution, it seems, is not to become someone different but to take what she is already and find a way to make her new life work.

In a way *Inside Out and Back Again* kind of marks the second coming of the verse novel. A couple years ago this style of writing for children was hugely popular, helped in no small part by Newbery Award winning books like Karen Hesse's *Out Of The Dust*. For some it represented the perfect way to get to the heart of a story without unnecessary clutter. Unfortunately, others regarded it as a quick and easy way to write a novel with a word count only slightly higher than your average picture book. The market was saturated and finally verse novels began to peter out. It finally got to the point where I became convinced that the only way a verse novel would work would be if there was some reason for it to even BE in verse. If the author couldn't justify the format then why did they even choose that style of writing? I haven't reviewed a verse novel since 2009's *Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba* by Margarita Engle and like Engle's book, Thanhha Lai's novel is written in verse for a concrete, very good reason. In both cases you have stories where children were entering strange new lands where they did not necessarily know the language. To make this book a verse novel, the child reader gets to be inside Ha's head while at the same time encountering sentences that are broken up in ways different from your average middle grade novel. The result is simultaneously intimate and isolating. It's perfect.

There are a fair number of children's books about immigrants coming to America, most of them historical in some way. Ha's story feels a bit more contemporary since it's set in the late 20th century. Other immigrant stories for kids always cover the same territory (hostile neighbors, the other kids at school, strange foods, etc.). What I like about Lai's book is that Ha does something I've rarely seen immigrant characters do in books for kids. She gets mad. I mean really rip-roaring, snorting, furious. Here she is, a bright kid, and now she has to feel like she's stupid all that time at school simply because English isn't her first language. It's infuriating! And it was this spark of anger that cinched Ha's character for me. You can have a sympathetic

protagonist set upon by the world all you want, but when that character exhibits an emotion other than mere passive acceptance or sorrow, that's when you find something about them to hold on to. Ha's anger lets child readers really understand her. It's necessary to who she is, drilled home by the section called "Wishes". In that two page spread, Ha discusses all the things she wishes for, including the return of her father. Then, tellingly, "Most I wish I were still smart."

Maybe what I really liked about the book was that it wasn't a one trick pony. Sure, much of it is about moving to America and what that's like. But it's also a novel about family. Ha's brothers are hugely annoying to her when the family is living in Vietnam. They're all older, after all, and they get a bit more attention and freedom. When the family uproots and leaves everything they've known behind, Ha begins to connect to them in new ways. She becomes a comfort and helpmate to her brother Khoi when he suffers a kind of nervous breakdown over the death of his baby chick. She learns self-defense from Vu, her Bruce Lee obsessed brother. And of course it's her brother Quang who really saves the day for her in the end (I won't give away how). The change is slow in coming, which keeps it from feeling manipulative or false. It's just a natural coming together of family members in a hostile world. Good stuff.

As for the writing itself, I'm a bit tired of the term "lyrical". That's just personal, though, and I'm sure that if you troll the professional reviews for descriptions of the book that word will surface again and again in relation to this book. With good reason, of course. Lai knows from which she speaks. At the same time, though, she's making choices in the narrative that I found very interesting. For example, at first you think that you're reading a kind of pseudo-diary of Ha's life since her first two entries comes with dates (February 11th and 12th, respectively). Yet when you hit the third piece, it describes the ways in which Ha's brothers tease her ending, not with a specific date, but with the phrase, "Every day". In this way Lai is able to separate out the things that happen only once on a specific day and those things that occur frequently. It's a subtle technique, but it makes the author's point. Lai also makes small notes about the world that give a person pause. Since this is the story of a girl moving to Alabama in the early 70s, it will probably prompt a lot of discussion in bookgroups when she says of the cafeteria, "On one side of the bright, noisy room, light skin. Other side, dark skin. Both laughing, chewing, as if it never occurred to them someone medium would show up."

Lai is also able to teach kids about Vietnamese society without coming off all school marmish. I knew about the holiday of Tet in a vague sense (mostly from Ten Mice for Tet), but what I didn't know was that not only is Tet a Vietnamese New Year's, it's also the day everyone celebrates their own birthdays.

All told, *Inside Out and Back Again* has the brevity of a verse novel packed with a punch many times its size. It's one of the lovelier books I've read in a long time, and can make you think about and question the entire immigrant novel genre, so long a permanent part of the American children's literary canon. Lai drew upon much of her own life to write this book. Now I'd like to see what she's capable of when she looks at other subjects as well. Great new author. Great new book.

For ages 9-12.

Kristy K says

This book has been on my radar (and my shelves) for a while and I'm glad I finally read it. Told in verse from the POV of 10 year old Hà, we get a glimpse into life in Vietnam during the war, the journey of a refugee, and the struggles to adapt and be accepted in a new country. Truly a wonderful, heartfelt (and sometimes heartbreaking) book.

Sandra says

{This review originally appeared on Clear Eyes, Full Shelves.}

I now understand
when they make fun of my name,
yelling ha-ha-ha down the hall
when they ask if I eat dog meat,
barking and chewing and falling down laughing
when they wonder if I lived in the jungle with tigers,
growling and stalking on all fours.

I understand
because Brother Khoi
nodded into my head
on the bike ride home
when I asked if kids
said the same things
at his school.

Thanhha Lai writes her verses in her award winning middle grade novel in verse, *Inside Out and Back Again*, from the heart, and memory of deeply felt experience.

She poignantly and artistically brings emotion, both painful and joyful, straight from the page and into the senses. She recounts her family's escape before the fall of Saigon through the eyes and the voice of Ha Ma. With other refugees they're packed into small, often unsanitary quarters on a ship that will take them to safety, freedom and a new culture.

Ha Ma, her brother Quang remembers, "was as red and fat as a baby hippopotamus" when he first saw her, thus inspiring her name, Vietnamese for river horse. He could not have imagined that in a few years her name would become the stick that tormented her in a foreign land (Alabama) far from her beloved Saigon.

I taught in a public high school for many years and some of my students were children of those leaving their homelands in search of a better or freer life. Children that were just like Ha Ma. I went through the process to become certified to teach English as a Second Language. Yet with all my training and experience I realize that I could not have known the real pain these children lived with each day, in a new and strange environment.

Reading *Inside Out and Back Again* brought me insights I'd never considered. Perhaps it is an all too human failing to believe we have understanding.

Emily Dickinson wrote that she knows something is poetry when,

...it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me. I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?

No, Emily, there is no other way.

Verse or poetry distills experience into its most elemental form. It drips with love, scorn, hope, desperation, faith and understanding. Feeling the confusion of a small child in beautifully constructed lines brings a childlike dimension of understanding of the heart of experience.

The reader experiences this in *Inside Out and Back Again*, when the family is on a ship swaying in the ocean, headed for another country. Ha's fatherless family drifts rocking back and forth seeing only water stretching before them endless and overwhelming. At only ten years of age, she comes to the realization that she has only her mother and brothers.

The father lives in the family's minds as a rainbow of hope. Still they must move forward to escape certain death. If they stay in Vietnam they would likely be caught up in the throes of a lost war facing a dark, uncertain future. After a long time at sea, a sponsor from America boards their ship to bring them to a small Alabama town to begin a new life in a strange, odd land.

Thanhha Lai's writing is such that while reading, I found myself imagining myself as a child seeing someone who looks so different reaching out for my family, offering home, hope, hospitality and happiness, yet, still not feeling emotionally safe.

All the while
shame.
This year I hope
I truly learn

Needless to say, *Inside Out and Back Again* is most deserving of all of its acclaim. If you're not accustomed to reading novels in verse, this would be a wonderful choice with which to start, as the writing is very tight and the story is completely absorbing

Wendy says

Hey, reviewers? A lot of you are using the word "prose" where you mean "poetry", and I can't take it.

Also, there are actually lots and lots of kids' and YA books written in verse. Thanks.

Anyway, actual review: I find it difficult to review this, just like I found it difficult to review the last novel-in-verse about a Vietnamese refugee in the 1970s that I read, *All the Broken Pieces*. Like anything negative I might say is me judging the immigrant experience itself.

At first I didn't like this that much, but it's growing on me some after the fact. Ha reads like a more original character than many, and the thoroughly-sketched mother and sketchily-sketched brothers are all so clear to me in my mind. One heartbreaking sentence at the very end made me feel that Brother Khoi has his own fascinating book in a parallel universe.

The sense of place is much greater for the scenes in and memories of Vietnam than they are for Alabama.

Overall: good, but not great. I don't think it's a Newbery.

Kelly (and the Book Boar) says

Find all of my reviews at: <http://52bookminimum.blogspot.com/#ud...>

For those of you who know me, you might remember last year I discovered my youngest was failing to get his required nightly reading completed by opting to sit on the toilet and stare at the wall for 20 minutes every night rather than ever opening a flippin' book. That little revelation led to us buddy reading Wonder. Unfortunately the boy child still appears to have been swapped with someone else's baby and has yet to discover the wonderful world of book loving, so we are buddying up again this year. After having much success with *The Outsiders* and *All American Boys* he took his teacher's recommendation and we ended up with this one - and wow what an important and timely little book it was.

Told in verse, *Inside Out and Back Again* is about Hà, a young girl growing up in war torn Vietnam. With the fall of Saigon, Hà's family realizes they can no longer hold on to the hope of remaining in their country and flee to America via ship. Upon reaching a refugee camp in Florida, Hà's mother chooses Alabama as their final destination in hopes that her children can have the life she dreamed of – college, families, careers, etc. This is the story of Hà's first year in America.

First things first, since this was told in verse my kiddo was able to read it in only a couple of days which made him feel AWESOME so thank you Thanhha Lai for that format. And most importantly, to the messages presented. . .

***“You deserve to grow up
where you don’t worry about
saving half a bite of sweet potato”***

***“Everyone knows the ship
could sink,
unable to hold
the piles of bodies
that keep crawling on
like raging ants
from a disrupted nest.
But no one
is heartless enough
to say
stop
because what if
they had been
stopped
before their turn?”***

***“Mother says,
People share when they know
they have escaped hunger.
Shouldn’t we share
because there is hunger?”***

They are something we should all be thinking of . . .

Now I need a little bit of help choosing our next book (I'm leaning toward Sherman Alexie, but not 100% committed). We've definitely found a formula that is working – topics that are relevant to today, the shorter the better so dude feels like he's making progress and maintains interest, NO instalovin' mumbo jumbo, NO dystopia, would prefer something that is not a potential "required read" (i.e., The Lord of the Flies, The Chocolate War, etc.). Thanks in advance for any suggestions!

Moe says

Let me tell you something. If I wasn't forced to write so many essay's about this stupid book, then I might have enjoyed it more. Maybe if we didn't have to analyze every sentence discussing every little detail until I accidentally tear one of the papers out because we had to flip back so many times, I probably might have enjoyed it more. This could have been a great book, and it's a shame that the new common core thinks we are "Learning" from writing useless paragraphs on how Ha's experience relates to the title. Don't let something like school ruin what could have been a great novel.

Nat says

*"I'm practicing
to be seen."*

This book grabbed my attention with its beautiful cover, and I'm really glad that it did. Inside Out and Back Again tells the tale of Kim Hà and her journey during wartime in Vietnam.

Hà and her family are forced to flee as Saigon falls, and they board a ship headed toward Alabama.

In America, the family has to start anew, where they discover the coldness of its strangers, the dullness of its food, the strange shape of its landscape . . . and the strength of their very own family.

*"Oh, my daughter,
at times you have to fight,
but preferably
not with your fists."*

I wasn't expecting to read this so fast, but I simply could not put it down. I especially appreciated the love this family held for one another during such difficult times.

However, the format of the story made me feel a bit disconnected from the tale. I felt like I was getting a glimpse into someone's life, but not being fully immersed into it. I wanted to feel more connected to the family and know a bit more of their past.

But overall it was a poignant and important story that will be on my mind for the next few days.

3.5 stars

Note: I'm an Amazon Affiliate. If you're interested in buying **Inside Out & Back Again , just click on the image below to go through my link. I'll make a small commission!**

Support creators you love. Buy a Coffee for nat (bookspoils) with <http://Ko-fi.com/bookspoils>

babyhippoface says

Read this straight through in one evening. It repeatedly put me in mind of an outstanding teacher at my school, whose family immigrated to the United States when she was about Ha's age. When we had a "Guess That Baby Picture" contest at school, she brought a school photo of herself around the age of 8, because that was all she had. There were no baby photos of her, no visual memories of her early years; they were too poor for photographs. All through this book I kept thinking, "I wonder if this is what it was like for her," and "I have to give her a copy of this book, see what she thinks of it."

Me? I thought it was wonderful. I am always drawn to novels written in free verse. The form forces a talented author to show clarity and emotion with minimal language, and Lai's is just beautiful. It helped me understand what it would feel like to move from a familiar, beloved homeland to a new country with foreign customs, words, foods, and faces, to suddenly feel stupid because you cannot communicate verbally. Entitled *Feel Dumb*, this poem expresses that feeling succinctly:

MiSSS SScott / points to me, / then to the letters / of the English alphabet.

I say / A B C and so on.

She tells the class to clap.

I frown.

MiSSS SScott / points to the numbers / along the wall.

I count up to twenty.

The class claps / on its own.

I'm furious, / unable to explain / I already learned / fractions / and how to purify / river water.

So this is / what dumb / feels like.

I hate, hate, hate it.

Because of Lai's insight, I gain insight myself. I can place myself in Ha's shoes in that moment. I feel what she is feeling. And I hurt for her. I get a sense of how must it feel to be physically and verbally attacked because I look different from everyone else in the room, because I cannot speak their words, because I practice a different religion, because I am an outsider with no idea of how I can make them understand me, know me. I am able to see how even good intentions can hurt, as the situation in the above poem and several others demonstrate.

There is so much pain in this little novel, but oh, so much hope. Just beautiful.

Erica says

I don't recommend listening to this one. The narration is stiff and the Vietnamese words are spoken in italics (see Older's thoughts on italicizing a native language)

I didn't read this one with my eyes because I have an aversion to novels in verse. While they can be more nuanced than the typical novel and though you have to work harder to get to the depths due to a scarcity of words, they seem choppy to me, jarring, and a little flighty. I'm not a fan of poetry, either, so the whole paint a big picture with the most minimal of brushes thing doesn't appeal.

However, this semi-autobiographical story is both timely and not overtold. Ha, her brothers, and their mother all flee VietNam, traveling downstream on a Naval ship to sneak out of the country. They're eventually rescued at sea and wind up in Alabama where they're sponsored by The Cowboy and his sour wife. There are several topics in this short tale that are relevant to today, specifically refugees seeking safety in America, cultural integration, racism, and the goods and evils of Christianity. (view spoiler) Unpacking these issues in the gentle way this story manages should engender some sympathy from young readers. In addition, there are the standard topics of starting a new school, bullies, community, and the value of well-meaning adults in a child's life making the story relatable to kids who are not Asian refugees in the 70's because some things just never change.

Romie says

It's a book I didn't know exist until a few days ago, and I'm truly glad it came into my life.

This book deeply touched me because my dad's own family immigrated from Vietnam to France and the Vietnamese culture is one I grew up hearing about but never truly experienced it.

This story follows Hà, her mother and three brothers, through their journey from a Vietnam at war to an American that doesn't necessarily welcome them with opened arms. It's a book about being stripped off your culture, your language, your country, your everything, and yet still trying to live a good life, a better life no matter the struggles and people's cruelty.

It's a quick read, it won't take you a lot of time to get through, but I really think you'd gain something by reading it.

From the author's note:

"The emotional aspect is important because of something I noticed in my nieces and nephews. They may know in general where their parents came from, but they can't really imagine the noise and smells of Vietnam, the daily challenges of starting over in a strange land."

Kim says

A must read!

Liz Janet says

Putting aside that I was not the biggest fan of the writing, because I do not think that simply separating sentences with a lot of space is poetry, the story and her experiences made up for it.

*"Whoever invented English
should have learned
to spell."*

It is not often that I see a book about immigration to which I can relate. I come from an European background and nationally, I am Caribbean, so I have the whole, not a native English speaker, but still get white privilege thing. This book took me back to what it is like completely learning a new language, and how some people will make you feel stupid, ignoring that perhaps you speak more languages than they do, for your inability to speak perfectly the first day you arrive at school.

I was also on a boat, fleeing as well, unlike her I did not make it, however, her depictions of the experience were resonating with me throughout the story. What happened afterwards when she was here, was more boring, but relevant nonetheless.

"... having learned from Mother that the pity giver feels better, never the pity receiver."

I agree. Pity is not the solution to systematic oppression and discrimination.

I am however not sure how I feel about this quote:

"People living on others' goodwill cannot afford political opinions."

It seems very accurate, but I want to look at it from a more historical perspective. I'll leave it for when I re-read the book.

Maha says

I always love a good verse novel, and this book was just that.

A story about immigration and attempts to adapt to a new culture, Inside Out & Back Again was truly beautiful and heartwarming. It touched me emotionally on the struggles Hà had to deal with.

Hà is different from everyone around her. She is a Vietnamese girl among Americans. She is the weird black-haired girl in her school. She is the girl everyone makes fun of. Despite all this, Hà tries to stay strong and continues working and hoping for life to get better. She works hard to learn English to overcome the differences and challenges, and I really admire her for that. Another reason I loved this book is that I was able to connect and relate to her struggles. Many people around the world also deal with the problem of being laughed at just because they are different from people around them, and I think this book has a really nice message for everyone to understand.

*I now understand
when they make fun of my name,
yelling ha-ha-ha down the hall
when they ask if I eat dog meat,
barking and chewing and falling down laughing
when they wonder if I lived in the jungle with tigers,
growling and stalking on all fours.*

*I understand
because Brother Khoi
nodded into my head
on the bike ride home
when I asked if kids
said the same things
at his school.*

~~

*“Oh, my daughter,
at times you have to fight,
but preferably
not with your fists.”*

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Inside Out & Back Again, Thanhha Lai

Inside Out & Back Again is a verse novel by Thanhha Lai. The book was awarded the 2011 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and one of the two Newbery Honors. The novel was based on her first year in the United States, as a ten-year-old girl who spoke no English in 1975. Inside Out and Back Again is a story about a young girl named Kim Hà and her family being forced to move to the United States because the Vietnam War had reached their home, and it was no longer safe. They board a navy ship and flee. Upon spending a couple months at a refugee camp, they end up moving to Alabama. There she struggles with learning English and confronting bullies, including one that she nicknamed Pink Boy, at her new school. Hà at one point said, "No one would believe me but at times I would choose wartime in Saigon over peacetime in Alabama." Eventually, she has pushed through those hard times with the help of their next door neighbor, Mrs. Washington and the support of her family. In the beginning of the book, it mentions that Hà's father, a soldier in the Vietnam war, was captured by the North Vietnamese Army when she was only a year old. In the end, Hà's family figures out that unfortunately, her father had died while in North Vietnamese hands. Hà then gets used to living in the U.S and her family celebrates the new year. She prays for good things to happen to her and her family. The main resolution of the book is family importance.

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Rebecca says

Read this review and more on my blog

In a nutshell: A beautifully written story of immigration told through verse and the eyes of a young girl.

After the Fall of Saigon at the end of the war in Vietnam, Hà and her family are forced to flee home. Inside Out & Back Again tells their story, inspired by the author's experiences, of leaving their home, spending many wary days at sea unsure of their future, and finally immigrating to Alabama. Through Hà's eyes, the reader experiences the difficulties of leaving a place so familiar to her and struggling to settle in America, where everything is so different - the food, people, language, her family, life.

Inside Out & Back Again is written in free verse, making it a quick and engaging read. It's an effective style that immediately drew me in. While the writing was simple, it was beautiful. I finished the book in practically one sitting but despite being such a quick read, it's had a significant impact on me. I was so caught up in Hà's story and I've been inspired to do more research on the history and experiences detailed in the book. It's not really something I've read or know too much about. Many of us take for granted a lot of things and in hindsight, the hardships I faced when I moved from England to Australia are so weak in comparison. At least I didn't have to learn another language! As Hà often pointed out, English is weird.

My only real problem with the book is that I wish that it was longer. I just felt like I needed just a bit more time with the characters or to just know what happened later. My imagination can do an okay job, but it needed something more in my opinion.

Something I particularly liked was how it was fiction layered with fact. The fact that it was based partly on Thanhha Lai's own experiences made it more real, rather than a simple regurgitation of things anyone could read in a textbook. It was such a raw, realistic and beautiful story. I'd recommend it to everyone.

Initial review:

A beautifully written story of a girl and her family, who leave Saigon at the end of the Vietnam War and live in America. It's about their triumphs and struggles, and it's written in verse, which makes it a quick, simplistic yet lovely read. I just wish that it was longer.
