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A California girl born and raised, Mai can't wait to spend her vacation at the beach. Instead, though, she has to travel to Vietnam with her grandmother, who is going back to find out what really happened to her husband during the Vietnam War. Mai's parents think this trip will be a great opportunity for their out-of-touch daughter to learn more about her culture. But to Mai, those are their roots, not her own. Vietnam is hot, smelly, and the last place she wants to be. Besides barely speaking the language, she doesn't know the geography, the local customs, or even her distant relatives. To survive her trip, Mai must find a balance between her two completely different worlds.

Listen, Slowly Details

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From Reader Review Listen, Slowly for online ebook

Rincey says

This is a really solid middle grade novel, but I may have really enjoyed this because it reminded me a lot of myself when I was younger. I saw a lot of myself in Mai, particularly my experiences traveling to India and trying to communicate with my relatives their with their broken English and my broken Malayalam and eating the delicious food and dealing with the different world in so many ways. It really just gave me a lot of nostalgia feels.

Brody says

It's is really good, there are certain parts that I had to skip over though. It wasn't the best book I have ever read but by the end of the book it made me want to cry and and smile at the same time.

Book Riot Community says

Mai is a pretty typical California 12 year old: living her first crush, excited about spending the summer at the beach. Then her parents force her to accompany her grandmother back to Vietnam to search for the truth about what happened to her grandfather, who disappeared after the war. Bitter and frustrated Mai slowly morphs into a selfless and considerate kid as she falls in love with the Vietnam of her grandmother, and with her own heritage. This is a lovely middle grade novel that, frankly, everyone should read.

–Amanda Nelson

from The Best Books We Read In August 2016: <http://bookriot.com/2016/08/31/riot-r...>

Pamela says

Read and theatrically interpreted by Lulu Lam, this audio version of **Listen, Slowly** was primarily a pleasure to listen to while bed-bound with the flu.

The story is that of Mia's foray into young adulthood via a summer trip to Vietnam and the village where her grandmother immigrated from after the fall of Saigon. A trip Mia vehemently desires NOT to take. She is an only child, more than a bit spoiled, narsasitic, and very SoCal beach-culture minded. Needless to say, she is in for a rude awakening when faced with rural village life in Vietnam. No indoor plumbing. No indoor kitchens. Mosquitos the size of Texas. And OMG! dialup internet..... in a dank and humid cafe ripe with flies, no less.

But then during Mia's summer immersion into Viatamese culture, trying new foods, expanding her limited foreign language vocabulary, adapting skill sets, making new friends, learning the art of thriftiness, she begins to fully understand the value and importance of family roots. More importantly, she grows to value

the people and things in life that truly matter, and that sometimes less is more.

Great narrative. I totally 'got" Mia and her SoCal snarky 'tude. The print version may or may not come across as readily identifiable. The overall story was good - but a bit too long and perhaps a tad lackluster for tween audiences. My favorite aspects were the grandmother's search for closure, and why it was important to her, along with Mia's immersion into rural Vietnamese culture, food dishes, French dialect influences, afternoon naps, homeopathic remedies, and folklore.

THREE *** Solid Good, Snarky and Fun, Culture-Immersion Tween Fiction *** STARS

Melissa McShane says

Read for the 2016 YA/MG Book Battle.

Mai's summer is ruined when her parents ship her off to Vietnam to be company for her grandmother, who's received word that her husband, lost to The War decades ago, might still be alive. Bà is returning to the village where she and Ông lived, which means Mai will have the chance to "discover her roots" as her mother puts it. Mai can only see a summer away from Southern California, which is the only roots she knows—her friends and her life and the boy she has a crush on. Learning otherwise is going to change her.

Unfortunately, Mai's bratty attitude makes her really unsympathetic to this adult reader. Her parents aren't asking all that much of her—not even an entire summer—and I never felt that they were being terribly unfair. And what Mai leaves behind doesn't seem like much to sacrifice, particularly her "best friend" Montana, who comes across as more of a frenemy than anything else. Mai's worried that Montana will steal the boy she has a crush on (whom she invariably refers to as HE and HIM, not quite able to say his name even in the privacy of her own head, which became seriously annoying) because that's the sort of thing Montana does. And yet Mai's supposed to be a smart girl, all honors classes and SAT vocabulary. Possibly I'm expecting too much of a twelve-year-old, and intelligence doesn't translate to emotional maturity. But it was very difficult to feel sympathetic.

On the other hand, the writing is extremely evocative, bringing to life the summer weather of Vietnam (or Vi?t Nam; Mai realizes how differently she sees the country when she thinks of it with those different names). I felt every moment of sweaty, wet heat and every mosquito bite. I enjoyed Mai's developing relationship with her cousin (however distantly related) Út, whose friendship makes Montana's false, shallow relationship more obvious. Út and her love of frogs made a fun recurring theme, particularly the scene where she and Mai go illegally at night to capture a special kind of glowing frog to take back to the village. Overall, the development of the secondary characters could be stronger, but Út and Bà definitely are powerful presences, as is Ông, for all he's absent.

I have mixed feelings about the plot, which is interesting—there's some mystery about Ông's past that's reinforced by how everyone involved is dancing around issues of politeness and honor—but whose tension is artificially maintained by Mai's father's disappearance just at the right time to keep everything from resolving neatly. His reappearance is a little too pat—again, it happens just at the right time for him to participate in learning what Ông's last message to Bà was. And Mai's choice at the end—stay longer, or return home early as she's wanted to the whole time—comes across more as narrative necessity than supported by the rest of her actions. But I was moved by the story of Ông and Bà, and I was also very impressed that the book didn't come off as some kind of polemic in which Mai Learns The True Meaning of Family. I'm not convinced Mai's really matured, by the end, but I believe she has actually learned something about family and relationships, enough that her decision feels right. If I'd respected Mai better, I would have

enjoyed the book more.

Christine says

More like 2.5 stars. I really liked the story but couldn't love the delivery. Maybe it was the narrator but Mei's voice was just so irritating and while I found her likable I had a hard time listening to her for the 6+ hours it took to get through it. I understand that the author was probably doing this on purpose to show how a selfish young girl can learn to appreciate her roots and show more care to her family but, oh the whining! That part backfired. I feel bad because I really liked her last book, *Inside Out & Back Again*.

Veronica says

4.5 stars. I felt it was a solid middle grade read. The story is about Mai being forced to go with her Dad and Grandma to Vietnam, her grandma needs closure on finding out what happened to her husband, Mai's grandpa, who went missing during the war. Mai is going as her companion while her Dad goes north in Vietnam to help needy kids. Along the way Mai meets new people and finds out about her culture.

I loved this book! Mai made me chuckle thru out the entire book. I recently lost my grandma and so much of the respect & relationship she had with her granny reminded me of mine. Being a descendant of immigrant grandparents, it can be hard to appreciate the country and culture of your ancestors because I grew up in the US.

I didn't give it a 5 star cause the ending was lackluster then I would have liked but nonetheless great read!

Ms. Yingling says

E ARC from Edelweiss Above the Treeline

Mai is NOT happy that she has to go to Vietnam for the summer, since she and her friend Montana have plans to hang out at the beach all summer near their homes in Laguna, California. Mai's grandmother (Ba) wants to return to her native country because she thinks that her husband (Ong), missing in action in 1966, might still be alive, a belief reinforced by a Vietnamese detective. Mai's mother is a high powered lawyer with a case to argue, and her father spends time in the mountains of Vietnam, repairing cleft palates and performing other minor operations, so it is left to Mai to stay and help her grandmother. Visiting her grandmother's village, Mai meets a host of relatives, including a cousin her age, Ut. Mai gets to experience the hot, sticky climate of Vietnam, the endless food pressed on them by well-meaning relatives, and lots of village customs. Since she can understand the language better than she can speak it, and has some help translating from Minh, a boy her age who has gone to school in Texas, she is able to understand what is going on around her. Her grandmother is told that her husband left a message for her, but finding out where this is takes some detective work as well as a difficult journey for the two, but her grandmother is finally able to accept the passing of her much beloved husband.

Strengths: This was a quite fascinating look at what life is like in Vietnam, and the family's connection to the country is explored in interesting ways. I loved that Mai was irritated with her parents and grandmother even though she loves them dearly and knows they are good people-- that quality of being so irritated that one flops down on a bed and screams into a pillow is so uniquely middle grade, and made this story extremely

relateable. Also adding to the appeal for middle grade readers was the small side story on Mai's relationship with her friend Montana, and her concern that Montana would gain the affection of a boy she liked.

Weaknesses: When Mai and Ut go to Saigon, the novel seemed to really drag. The scenes in the village, even when they are discussing lice treatments and Mai's sickness after ingesting river water, were somehow more interesting.

What I really think: I expected this to be a novel in verse that I would hate, but I enjoyed it so much that I am going to have to go back and reread *Inside Out* and *Back Again*. Definitely buying.

Barb Middleton says

Anyone that has braved the streets of Vietnam knows the thrill of linking arms and shuffling across the asphalt as cars swerve around bodies like rocks in the middle of a roaring stream. Honest. It is quite the experience. The author captures this unique cultural feature and so much more as Mai, a first generation American born girl, learns about her heritage on a vacation with her grandma to Hanoi, Vietnam. Not that twelve-year-old Mai is looking for any cultural roots. "OMG," she's looking for love "with HIM", while hanging at Laguna Beach with her best friend over summer vacation. Her plans and romantic ideas simmer in the hot sun until her parents douse her with reality making her travel with her Grandma Ba to Vietnam because Ba has new information regarding her husband who went missing during the "THE WAR." Mai's dad goes with on the trip, but he is a doctor whose first priority is to help children in Vietnam's remote areas in need of medical services. Mai's mom is a lawyer on a big case and both insist Mai escort Ba. The parents want Mai to know her heritage. Mai's knowledge has some humungous gaps considering she refers mainly to what she learned from watching a PBS documentary on the Fall of Saigon. Mai says she is "unicultural"; but this trip changes Mai teaching her what it means to be bicultural, enriching her life in ways she never expected.

Mai matures in small increments. She's spoiled, privileged and has a snarky attitude that is hilarious and balanced by a kind heart. She will do something nice followed by a "I rock!" She loves her Ba completely and will do anything for her, "I'm now too tired to yawn but I still rock as her caretaker, asking if her throat is sore." In the beginning all Mai can think about is leaving Vietnam as fast as possible, but she starts to empathize with Ba and appreciate Vietnam. Ba is one of the few adults that Mai listens to: "My body loosens and expands, remembering how it used to make room for her words to wiggle deep into the tiny crevice alongside my bones, muscles, and joints. Becoming a part of me." Ba is the eloquent character in the group, a foil to Mai's egocentric voice. The title of the book comes from one of my favorite passages as Ba describes dealing with the loss of a loved one to Mai, "I tell you of loss, my child, so you will listen slowly, and know that in life every emotion is fated to rear itself within your being." In our fast-paced world, listen slowly, can take on many meanings.

Mai struggles with learning the language bemoaning, "...she [Ut] doesn't understand my non-Frenchy English. It's exhausting but so is my life." She calls her attempts to communicate, "Tarzanish Vietnamese." She's impatient and strong-willed making for a strong female character. When the detective shows up, she hates it when adults take forever to get to the point. "OMG, what are the chances of me meeting the second wordiest human on the planet?" Or she attributes all the building designs to one architect. "Now that I'm no longer shocked by the maneuvers of every moped I notice that just about every house is built in the stacked style like Co Hanh's. It's confirmed. One architect designed for the whole country." Mosquitoes love her sugary blood and she goes to war with them after being turned into their pincushion. Funny observations such as the "doll-sized" food portions and "How am I supposed to get beyond lanky in a land where ice cream is made of red beans instead of cream?" That's not exactly true but Mai likes to exaggerate for a laugh. And boy, did I laugh a lot. She also captures the overcrowded roads in Asia with comments like, "...let me enjoy my cloud of toxic fumes from thousands of lawless mopeds in peace." She pulls some shenanigans on

the women regarding thongs and starts to make friends with Ut, having far more exciting adventures than she would have at Laguna Beach.

Mai thinks of nothing but going home as fast as possible. She tries to manipulate events and others to make it happen, but later starts to adjust to her new culture and cousins. Ut is a strong-willed, frog-obsessed cousin who shaved her head - her reason is funny because it is practical but mortifies her beauty-obsessed mom - and she stands up to Mai's snobbish ways changing Mai's outlook in the process. The two develop a friendship where they respect and don't try to change each other. When Ut argues over 40 cents bargaining for food, Mai silently bargains behind her back so Ut thinks she got a good deal and Mai gets the food she wants. Mai wonders why everyone knows English better than she knows Vietnamese. Ut helps Mai along with the serious translator, Ahn Min, whom Mai can't resist poking fun at all the time.

Mai loves drama. In a subplot she whines that her love triangle in California is being replicated in Vietnam. In California, Mai and her best friend are interested in the same guy. She can't say his name because she has such a crush and refers to the boy as "HIM." By the end Mai has matured enough to say his name and not be so dramatic about talking to him. Ahn Min, her translator in Vietnam, is interested in another girl but a different girl is interested in him and thwarts his effort to get her attention. I am not sure how this ties in with the overall theme of a girl finding her heritage, but it does show Mai growing up and processing her crush on a boy and that people are the same and have the same basic needs regardless of where they live in the world. Some funny and memorable episodes happen during this part.

The author captures the frustration of learning a new language and how difficult it can be to communicate. Mai calls words she doesn't understand "ghost words." This imagery reminds me of Buddhism and how worshippers follow the "ghost" month where dead ancestors are allowed to spend a month visiting families, feasting, and finding victims among the living. Buddhism is the largest religion in Vietnam even though the government has periodically tried to extinguish it. When Mai goes to Saigon to locate the guard, she speaks sentences using Vietnamese mainly out of frustration and desperation. She's thrilled when this happens and the Vietnamese man understands her. Afterwards her usual cocky attitude comes back loud and clear, "I'm now officially bilingual and can rule the world!" It doesn't last long though. Pretty soon "The detective yells at us, using python sentences that strangle the air." What a great description of what it is like learning a language.

Mai pokes fun at cultures and conventions in the United States and Vietnam. They don't hug each other in Vietnam and Mai forgets many times hugging her relatives when she is happy. They seem to like it. Even Ut, although she swats her in response out of embarrassment. It is one of many instances where Mai shares her culture with her cousins or vice versa. This is the excitement of learning a new culture and sharing differences in a healthy way. Mai also diplomatically refers to the past fighting as "THE WAR." In Vietnam it is called, "The American War" and in America it is called, "The Vietnam War." Her neutral stance avoids the name controversy and shows the war for what it was, a bloody war between two countries. Mai jokes about food, sizes, architecture, and clothes. "I don't know anyone here to care what I wear, much less how often and what brand. It's freeing." She's also such a teen with an egocentric attitude. "I'm so bored, the kind where you bite off all your nails and wish they'd grow back instantly so you could bite them again." She's a hoot. Learning about heritage and other cultures has slowly changed my views of the world and exposed my biases and stereotypes I didn't know I had. I'm trying to listen slowly. Don't miss this winner.

Amanda - Cover2CoverMom says

You can check out my full review on my blog -> [Cover2CoverMom's Book Review: Listen, Slowly](#)

Why it's #DiverseKidLit: Vietnamese-American characters; Vietnamese-American author; Set in Vietnam

When 12-year-old Mai is forced to take a trip with her grandmother to Vietnam to find out once and for all what happened to her grandfather during the Vietnam War, to say she isn't thrilled would be an understatement. I have to be honest here, I was very tempted to DNF this book after the first few chapters for the simple fact that Mai was such an annoying main character. Don't get me wrong, I can completely see a 12-year-old Californian not being happy about spending her summer on a wild goose chase in Vietnam, but the spoiled brat persona was a tad too strong in the beginning. Thankfully the pre-teen angst is toned down as the book progresses.

I am happy to report that I am so glad that I stuck with this book, as I think this is a wonderful book rich with Vietnamese culture. I really enjoyed reading about Mai's journey learning about her roots. If you know me, then you know how much I adore learning about cultures and customs that differ from my own. Lai writes everything so vividly that you will see the wonders that Vietnam has to offer, taste the delicious food, and even feel the humidity and itchiness of the mosquito bites... Hey it can't all be puppies and rainbows, which was another aspect that I appreciated about this book. Lai doesn't shy away from some of the drawbacks of Vietnam: crowded cities, overwhelming heat, the plethora of insects, etc. etc.

Mai goes through tremendous growth through this book, which I appreciated very much since I was not her biggest fan in the beginning. By the end of the book, her trip to Vietnam really puts her life into perspective and she starts to realize what is really important in life. Listen, Slowly isn't an action-packed adventure, but rather a slower paced coming of age story that spans cultures.

The main character, Mai, is a 12-year-old but she felt older to me.... say around 14? I know this is classified as middle grade, but I would say it is going to appeal more to an older MA to younger YA audience, say 12-15 year olds? There are a few things mentioned (like developing breasts, thong underwear, etc. etc.) that I didn't really think would appeal to anyone under 12.

I listened to this via audiobook, which I think was very helpful since there is a lot of Vietnamese words included in this book, so I didn't have to attempt to figure out the correct way to pronounce the Vietnamese words. This was actually a pretty big focus in this book: language and the importance in getting it right. I was really able to HEAR the differences in the different accent marks and how they can make the tone go up or down in a word. I am not sure I would have fully understood had I read a physical copy of this book. This isn't to say that reading this book in print form is not the way to go, just that this was a particular strength of the audiobook.

michelle pham says

"Mong Nho Em Dem Tung Hat Mua"

When I read these words, I cried. Seven words that had built up so much suspense could cause me to cry and bring fulfillment and grief to Mai's grandmother.

I really don't know if this book has been far more sentimental coming from a family of refugees and immigrants, but this book just touched me more than any other book- maybe tied with "Inside Out and Back Again."

My family and I can relate to this book so much; my grandma herself still believes that my two aunts and uncle are still alive- somewhere in Thailand- after all these 30 years since the war. When I mentioned that I was reading a book that included a grandma who still thought her husband was still alive, my dad mentioned his mother.

Every single aspect of this story touched me and brought me closer to the story. Mai reminded me so much of myself- a Vietnamese American who was gifted with a gift that she did not appreciate: the Vietnamese culture and language. She was able to speak and understand Vietnamese with her grandmother when she was little, but threw it all away as she grew up. I myself can understand conversational Vietnamese and read/write, but have problems when trying to speak conversations. As I was reading, I wished I could converse with my grandma like Mai. Yet, while Mia/Mai hated the idea of traveling to Vietnam, if I was asked where my dream vacation would be, the sole place I would like to travel to would be Vietnam.

This story gave me the real feel of Vietnam- or should I say Viet Nam. It's not the tropical paradise advertisers say it is. Mosquito-infested and humid as it is, it is my parents' true home. "Listen, Slowly" did not sugar-coat it. Mai struggles with boy problems, pimples, humidity, fatigue, mosquitoes, and leeches. Yet, through all of the pains of Vietnam, Mai found a new life and love. She has new understanding of her grandmother- as well as her extended family out of her home in Laguna, California. She meets her new friends Anh Minh and Ut, who- in my opinion- would top snobby typical white-girl Montana any day.

Ut is the tomboy who Mai despises at the beginning of the story, but finds a bonding with- friendship, braces, and frogs. They grow together and complete one another. At first, Ut is the lonely girl who no one dares to befriend, but after Mai and Ut experience memorable moments together, they are inseparable.

Writing this has brought me to tears once again, but this story and image of life will forever affect me. The Vietnamese culture's feeling of others before you and giving is not well represented in America. This book has caused me to forever watch my actions and represent my country well. :)

Maha says

I personally enjoy short novels as they're pretty easy to read and usually tell a beautiful story, and thankfully, it is the same with this book.

Another journey of discovery, this time it involves Mai, the MC, tracing back to her roots. Having been raised in California, she is unwilling to travel to Vietnam, where her family originally came from. Told in a mesmerizing way, Mai slowly gets in touch with her roots and learn about the beauty of her culture: the language, the customs, the food, and the people.

Read a few years back, this is a perfect book for early Middle Schoolers.

Liviana says

Thanhha L?'i's second novel is also her first novel in prose. *INSIDE OUT & BACK AGAIN* announced her presence on the children's lit scene in a big way, winning both a National Book Award and a Newbery Honor. *LISTEN, SLOWLY* makes it clear that her debut was no fluke.

Mai is eagerly anticipating her summer with her best friend and crush, excited that at twelve, she's almost a teenager. But when a detective brings news that her Ong (grandfather) might be alive, she finds herself accompanying her grandmother to a small village in Vietnam for the summer. Mai is a bit of a whiner at this

point, but no more than any kid giving up summer in the beach for summer with access to dial-up if you go to the local cafe. Worse, she only kinda sorta speaks the language.

I loved Mai's gentle growth throughout the novel. The first real connection she makes is easy, with a teen guy who is an exchange student in Houston during the school year and who can speak English with her. As she opens up, she makes more friends and learns more about the lives of the people around her. (And gets some good advice regarding using sunscreen not made for your face on your face.) She also becomes interested in the mystery of her grandfather, tracking just what happened to him after he escaped capture during the Vietnam War.

Thanhha Lê develops her scenes sensually, with both pleasant and unpleasant details. There are itchy bug bites and glowing frogs and squelching mud. Mai makes visits to major cities as well, finding that life there is very different and she's equally unprepared for getting around. I also liked how she dealt with Mai's frustration that her family wants her to know more about her roots, but refuses to talk about why and how they emigrated. Mai's connections to her specific and unspecific roots both feel authentic.

LISTEN, SLOWLY is a book that makes you want to listen, slowly. It has family secrets and cross-cultural barriers and female friendship and all sorts of good stuff. It has a focus on language, getting it right, translating for others, and learning how to speak it so those less proficient can understand. Most of all, it has great writing. It's not a long read, aimed at fourth grade or so, but it is one that has enough depth for older readers too.

Beth says

This is a really, really good one. In a way, it's a classic MG novel, I think, because it's one of those seldom-published (recently, at least) How-I-Spent-My-Summer-Vacation books. Reading this after reading *Gone Away Lake*, for example, is an interesting experience!

Mai leaps off the page right from the beginning - from her insistence that she's not bi-cultural but uni-cultural - all the way until the book's end. Her voice is fabulous; her voice *is* this story, quippy and vulnerable and young, and yet her growth is believable and always consistent with that voice.

Listen, Slowly is very unfinished, though it ends when the key conflict is resolved. Still, a lot of threads are left undone, and I want more story!

Lucia says

I was so excited to receive an advance copy of this book!

I must admit, I first fell in love with the cover. It's simply beautiful. The colors, the lake, the figures... Everything perfectly matches the feeling of the book. Whoever designed this cover art is a genius.

As for the story, I didn't give it five stars only because I am not twelve anymore. Which doesn't mean that this book is only for young readers, but it teaches a lesson about culture, diversity, and friendship that is still fairly new to a younger audience. Twelve-year-old me would have absolutely loved this book. I ended up traveling to other countries anyway, but this story would have definitely pushed me in that direction a little earlier. This is a book that I would want my kids to read.

Thanh Hà Lê's love for Vietnam (or should I say Việt Nam?), its culture, and its language, is wildly contagious. I dare anybody to read this book without thinking, at least once, about packing their bags and going to Vietnam for a vacation. Maybe a long one.

I'm looking forward to reading *Inside Out and Back Again*.
