

Teacher's Guide

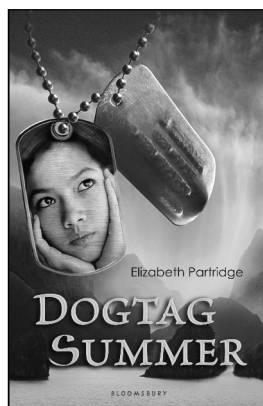
DOGTAG SUMMER

By Elizabeth Partridge

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Tracy (Tuyet) is a Vietnam orphan adopted by a California couple when she was a small child. Though she has loving parents, she is haunted by memories of her birth mother and grandmother and of the horrific events she experienced during the Vietnam War. During summer vacation Tracy (now in middle school) and her best friend, Stargazer, scour her father's garage for supplies to build a Viking funeral ship and run across her father's Vietnam ammo box. Against Tracy's wishes, Stargazer, breaks into the box, thinking they may have found real army ammo; however, the two discover a military dogtag and some medical supplies. Tracy's father catches them in the act and confiscates the box and dogtag, leaving Tracy more curious about her father's past and determined to understand her own. Longing to make sense of the vague memories, Tracy pushes her parents to talk about the war and her early years in America in an attempt to find the missing pieces of her childhood. Who were her birth parents? What happened to her mother and grandmother? By blending flashbacks of Vietnam with Tracy's life in California, Partridge weaves together broken threads of a child's life born into a war-torn country and saved by a soldier with a broken heart.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY:

Ask students to free write what they know about the Vietnam War and children of war. Lead a class discussion on their thoughts.

Themes

A number of themes are prevalent in *Dogtag Summer*: loss, emptiness, identity, and human connection. How do the following opening lines set the tone for these themes: "Have you ever known absolutely for sure that some piece of you was missing? A piece you buried deep inside and didn't even know was there. Then something cracked open and that missing piece flew out and left an empty,

scooped-out place in you, and your heart beat with a longing so strong it sounded like a drum in your ears.” (p.1).

Setting

A story may have single or multiple settings, and each setting can create a different effect, mood, or reaction. The California setting in *Dogtag Summer* contrasts starkly with the Vietnam setting. Compare and contrast the two settings. Compare and contrast Stargazer’s home environment with Tracy’s current home.

Main Characters

Dogtag Summer is written from a first-person point of view. Each character’s thoughts, reactions, and behaviors are revealed and interpreted through Tracy’s eyes. What do the following passages reveal about each character? What do they reveal or suggest about Tracy?

Tracy’s father: “I shot a quick glance at Dad, spearing green beans. He was hunched over his plate, one elbow on the table. In the living room is a photo of my parents getting married in someone’s backyard. My mom’s wearing a simple sleeveless dress. He’s in uniform, standing up tall, looking at the cameras, grinning” (p. 20).

Tracy’s mother: “It was after eleven before Mom finally left. By then she’d vacuumed the whole house. She started up front in her bedroom, like she always did, and worked her way back through the bathroom, living room, kitchen, and my room. While she vacuumed and cleaned the bathroom, I folded and put away two loads of laundry, cleared the dishwasher, emptied all the wastebaskets, and took out the kitchen garbage. By now, it was a tradition: me and Mom, cleaning the house together” (p. 24-25).

Ruthie: “Ruthie looked beautiful with her hair in messy curls and

the room all steamy and blurry behind her. I stood beside her and watched her stir. I liked how Ruthie never fussed over me or asked me the kind of stupid questions adults came up with. She just seemed to fold me into the rest of the family” (p. 34).

Stargazer: “I knew that when Stargazer thought something bad was going to happen, he started making a list. He’d made one last year of edible fruits and berries, and then Beldon fell off a ladder pruning the apple trees and broke his ankle. Stargazer said that if he could see the order of things by making a list, he figured he’d know how to deal with the problem when it came.

I didn’t think it was very scientific, but Stargazer said the first rule of science was observation. That didn’t make sense, but I figured it was just one of those Stargazer things.” (p. 86-87).

Flashback

A flashback is a literary technique that allows a writer to convey information from the past that provides insight into a character’s behaviors and motivations. It can also explain a conflict in the story. An author may provide information about the past in various ways (memories, dreams, diary entries). Tracy has memories of living in Vietnam and of her Vietnamese family. What does the reader learn about Tracy’s childhood through her memories? How is her life in Vietnam different from her current life? In what way does Partridge’s use of flashback create suspense and move the story forward?

Foreshadowing

Writers use hints or clues to set the stage for future story events. Writers may present clues through dialogue, description, character reactions, perceptions and/or attitudes. Partridge uses description

to foreshadow events in the opening pages by referencing the ammo box: “At first I thought it started when Stargazer broke the lock off the old ammo box we found hidden in my garage. . . . Opening the ammo box just let out the ghosts that had been trapped in there for years, waiting” (p. I). Identify other clues that predict other story outcomes.

Conflict

Both internal and external conflict are important to the story. Much of the conflict centers around the effects the Vietnam War had on Tracy and her parents.

Tracy struggles to remember her past. What conflicting feelings does she have about her own identity?

What internal demons haunt Tracy’s father? Her mother?

Both of Tracy’s parents have been impacted by Vietnam. Describe the external conflict between her parents.

Stargazer’s parents have their own beliefs about Vietnam that suggests a conflict between the two families. How is Stargazer’s father in opposition to Tracy’s father?

What conflict develops between Tracy and Stargazer and why?

Personification

Personification is a literary technique that gives human qualities to objects or things. For example, Partridge gives the river a human emotion: “The river, angry and deep brown with mud, heaved and swelled as the clouds darkened.” (p. III). Find several additional examples and share them with your group and/or class. How do your choices contribute to the imagery of the story? How do they contribute to the mood?

Symbolism

Water symbols abound in the story. What multiple meanings might the following passage convey: “Far out past the breakers a huge wave gathered, swelled, then rolled toward the beach. It came faster, gathering speed, gray blue and fringed with dirty white foam, hungry to drag me out to sea and pull me along the ocean floor with the sand and the pebbles” (p. 16-17). Find additional references to water and explain their multiple meanings. What other symbols can you find?

Discussion:

- Most young people are excited about summer vacation. Tracy seems less so. What explains her melancholy and feeling of emptiness?
- Why is Tracy’s mother ambivalent about Tracy spending a great deal of the summer with Stargazer?
- Stargazer wants Tracy to help him build a Viking funeral ship over the summer. What role does this ship play in the story? Is the ship symbolic?
- Compare and contrast Tracy’s family with Stargazer’s. Explain.
- What happens to damage Tracy’s relationship with Stargazer and his family?
- Compare and contrast Tracy and her father.
- Throughout the summer, Tracy pieces together her memories of her childhood in Vietnam. What does she remember about her grandmother? Her mother? Why did it take her so long to remember what happened when she was with her mother and the American Boss Man?

- Tracy's family is one of secrets. Her parents never talk about her dad's time in Vietnam or her adoption. What sparks Tracy's determination to know about her father's experiences as a soldier and her childhood?
- There are numerous references to water, rivers, boats/ships, and fish in the story. How do these references hold the two stories together—the story about Tracy's summer break from school and the story about her past?
- Tracy's mother gets a raise and she and Tracy set off on a rare shopping trip to San Francisco. Tracy notices an elderly, fragile Chinese woman in a dark blue shirt and pants and forces back tears. Why does Tracy have a tearful response to her? Explain.
- How has Tracy's adoptive mother been wounded by the Vietnam War?
- Why do you think Tracy's father tells her about her biological father?
- Tracy (Tuyet) is a child of war. Explain.
- If you were to write a sequel to *Dogtag Summer*, how would you move the story forward? (ex., How would Tracy change? What about her parents? How would their family dynamics change?)
- Write a scene where Tracy shows Stargazer the photo of herself at the orphanage, and finally tells him a little more about her past.

Other Novels for Young Readers about the Vietnam Conflict:

All the Broken Pieces by Ann E. Burg

Almost Forever by Maria Testa

Cracker! The Best Dog in Vietnam by Cynthia Kadohata

Eli the Good by Silas House

Escaping the Tiger by Laura Manivong

Georgie's Moon by Chris Woodworth

Park's Quest by Katherine Paterson

Shooting the Moon by Frances O'Roark Dowell

Sonny's War by Valerie Hobbs

Summer's End by Audrey Couloumbis

The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam

by Quang Nhuong Huynh

When Heaven Fell by Carolyn Marsden

About the Author:

Elizabeth Partridge is an award-winning author of more than a dozen books, from picture books to young adult nonfiction and fiction and photography books. She grew up in a family of bohemian photographers in the San Francisco area. Her parents often took all five children on coast-to-coast camping trips, school not being a priority. Money was not always abundant, food was sometimes sparse, and clothes were hand-me-down. Partridge sometimes longed for a “regular” family and, yet, she was always encouraged to reach for her dreams. Partridge attended the University of California–Berkeley and was the first woman to graduate from the Women’s Studies program. She later studied acupuncture in Oxford, England, and worked as an acupuncturist for more than twenty years in California. While she was a Chinese medical doctor, Partridge started writing books. Her biography, *John Lennon: All I Want Is the*

Truth was a Printz Honor book and *This Land Was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie* was a National Book Award finalist and winner of the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award* for nonfiction. *Marching for Freedom: Walk Together, Children, and Don't You Grow Weary* won the 2010 *Los Angeles Times Book Prize* for Young Adult Literature, the *Boston Globe-Horn Book Award* for nonfiction, *School Library Journal's* Battle of the Books, and the Jane Addams Award.
www.elizabethpartridge.com

A Brief Q&A with the Author

COLE: Can you talk about the seed for *Dogtag Summer*? Where did the story originate and how did it develop over time?

This story found me, and stayed with me. Many years ago my husband hired an electrician to help him do some wiring at his family's ranch. After they finished, they sat in front of the fire, talking. The electrician was a Vietnam vet, and began telling my husband about his war experiences. It burst out of him as if he couldn't stop himself.

His stories of combat sat in the back of my mind, waiting. It made me think about the complexities of war, for everyone involved. Every so often I wondered if I could do justice to those complexities in a novel. Years passed, and finally I started working on the idea in earnest. I read books about the war, read personal stories on the internet, talked to vets and to Vietnamese who'd been involved in the war.

My husband and I bought a small place near his family's ranch. One day my friend Sydney Feeney helped me clean out an old burn barrel that had been sitting, unused, on our property for years. She jumped inside the huge, rusty barrel and dug her shovel into the ashes. "What's this?" she said, as she pulled up a shovelful. There was a dogtag half buried in the ashes. I pulled it out and rubbed the ash off to read the words punched into the aluminum tag. It belonged to the vet whose stories I'd heard long ago.

COLE: Can you talk about your use of flashback to inform readers about Tracy's childhood in Vietnam. Did you consider using another style, approach, and/or even another character to help the character (and reader) remember her past?

I originally wrote the scenes with Tuyet in first person, present tense, to make everything as immediate as possible while I was writing. This way, everything happened exactly in Tuyet's point of view, and life came at her as if it were a surprise. I imagined the scenes and let what I was experiencing come out my fingers onto the keyboard. Later I went back and put the scenes into past tense, third person, which gave me more distance. I filled in things I knew the reader would need to know, such as: where was the river in relation to her grandmother's house?

At first I resisted jumping back and forth between two the different times and places. I tried putting all the Vietnam scenes first, and then the American scenes, but the novel felt flat. I'm not a very experienced novelist, and I felt I was on the very edge of my capabilities when I arranged the book alternating back and forth between Vietnam and America. It felt dangerous—if it didn't work, it would fail spectacularly. But in the end, it felt right for Tuyet's past in Vietnam to be revealed as she was remembering it in America.

COLE: What was the most difficult scene in the story to write and why?

Absolutely the hardest scene to write was the one in the American military base in Da Nang, when Tuyet is trying to save her mother and her mother is trying to save her. That was excruciating to write, especially in first person. Both of them were in an untenable position, and no good outcome was possible.

Some of the scenes I didn't write—couldn't write—still haunt me. What happened to Tuyet's mother? To her grandmother?

COLE: Can you talk about how you drafted the novel? Did you share the story in multiple stages with others? What type of feedback was helpful in the writing process?

Dogtag Summer went through many stages. It took me a long time to really know the characters: their needs, their weaknesses and strengths, and what they secretly longed for. The main way I learned about them was through researching the historical period they were living through, and then writing scenes. First I kept a journal as I read and learned and researched. I kept a second journal when I took a trip to Vietnam—how things looked and smelled, memories people shared with me, the children in the orphanage I visited, the silence and inexplicable peacefulness of an old battlefield.

Then I wrote a couple hundred pages of scenes. These were still not anything that anyone could read. I don't belong to any writing groups, as I tend to write for a long time in a kind of stream of consciousness way. Finally I started to shape more real scenes, and then I was able to ask a few writing friends to read it. They were encouraging about the good parts, and yet honest about where I could make it stronger. Once I was feeling close to a final novel, I had several thoughtful people read it for historical accuracy.

COLE: The themes of loss and the importance of human connectedness are central in this story. What do you hope young readers will take with them when they close the pages of *Dogtag Summer*?

I hope readers will get a sense of how complicated war is, and how it reverberates forever in the people who were caught up in it. I hope I also touch on how the connections of the heart save us, over and over again.

COLE: You've written a number of books, both fiction and non-fiction. Is your writing process the same for both genres?

Writing nonfiction and fiction both start for me in a similar place: something strikes me as really interesting, and I'm curious to know more about it. Generally what I write requires lots of learning,

which I love. I am truly an archive rat—I could spend my life reading in a library. But at some point I start to feel I know enough to put a book together, and then I'm eager to challenge myself and see if I can convey some of my enthusiasm in a book.

In *Dogtag Summer*, there are a number of different groups of people, often working in opposition to one another. There were poor Vietnamese families, trying to survive the war. There were Vietnamese fighting against one another. There were American GIs, and their particular codes of ethics and conduct, vocabulary, and living arrangements in a foreign country. In America, there were rednecks and hippies, people working and people living on the land. I loved bringing them all together.

COLE: What will you remember the most about writing this book?

I'm not sure yet. I loved how generous and open-hearted people were with me, sharing memories of how profoundly the war touched them. It was amazing to take a trip to Vietnam.

One thing I loved exploring in this book was the constant interplay between good and evil. We humans do such horrible things to one another, and then we redeem ourselves with an amazingly selfless, gracious goodness.

COLE: How have you changed (and grown) as a writer over time?

Over time I've become more able to see what makes a good story. I know when a story has the layers and conflict that will make it interesting. I've also realized that the main thing you need as a writer is persistence. I've found that just stubbornly keeping at it, day after day, things that seemed impossible start to work. That's a really satisfying feeling.

Other Books by the Author:

(YA Books)

Marching for Freedom: Walk Together, Children, and Don't You Grow Weary

John Lennon: All I Want Is the Truth

This Land Was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie

Restless Spirit: The Life and Work of Dorothea Lange

(Children's Books)

Big Cat Pepper

Whistling

Oranges on Golden Mountain

Moon Glowing

Annie and Bo

Pig's Eggs

Clara and the Hoodoo Man

(Adult Books)

Quizzical Eye: The Photography of Rondal Partridge

Dorothea Lange: A Visual Life

www.elizabethpartridge.com/index.html