

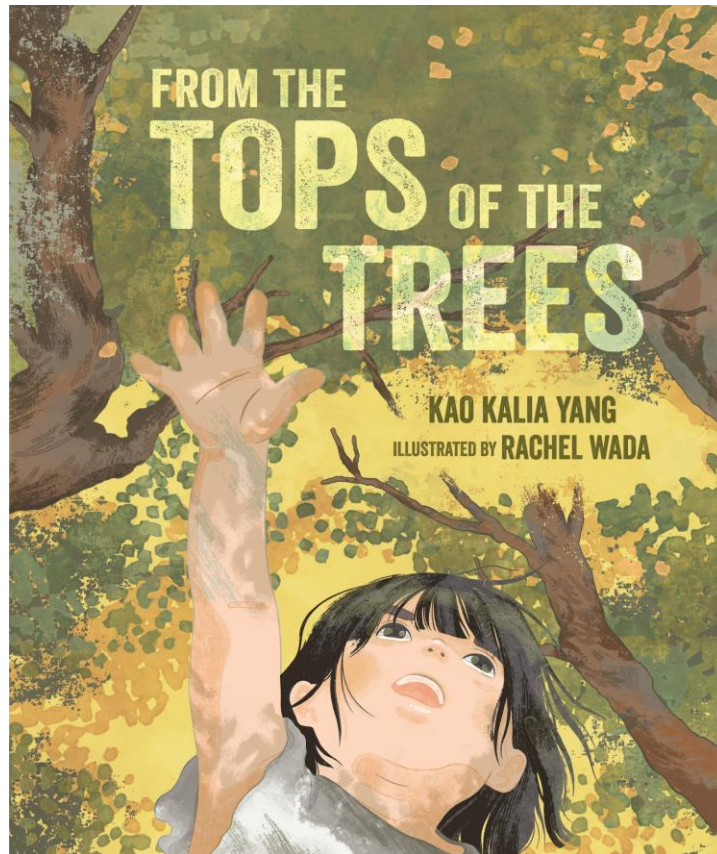
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Review of *From the Tops of the Trees* Written by Kao Kalia Yang & Illustrated by Rachel Wada

Adult/Educator Reviewer: Mohit Mehta
University of Texas at Austin, US

Child/Student Reviewer: Ashrit Beskrowni, Austin, TX



Yang, K. K., & Wada, R. (Illustrator) (2021). *From the Tops of the Trees*. Carolrhoda Books.

ISBN: 978-1541581302

Adult Review: Mohit Mehta

In *From the Tops of the Trees*, we enter into the world of the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in northeastern Thailand, where Hmong refugees displaced from Laos during the Secret War await resettlement in third countries like the United States. In the opening pages, the child protagonist Kalia, based on the author herself, spends time distracting herself from the hard realities of the camp through play and games. By listening to the whispers of her elders, she learns about the war and precarious state of her community. She starts to wonder about life outside the camp, and on one special day with her father, she climbs the tallest tree in the camp. Observing the tops of the camp structures and the world beyond, Kalia's dreams carry her far away.

Kao Kalia Yang draws from her lived experiences of displacement and resettlement through several children's books including *A Map into the World* (2019, Carolrhoda Books), and *The Most Beautiful Thing* (2020, Carolrhoda Books). Both selections have been translated into Hmong, Mandarin Chinese, French and Spanish. Alongside children's literature, Yang is a memoirist and essayist, with several publications directed at adult readers including the award winning *The Song Poet* (Picador USA, 2017). Her lyrical style emanates from the oral storytelling traditions of Hmong poets and is present across her body of work for both young readers and adults alike. In *A Map in the World*, Rachel Wada's illustrations in a palette of tan, amber and forest green evoke refugee camp life.

There are roughly 250,000 Hmong Americans in the United States, concentrated mainly in Wisconsin, Minnesota and California. Asian American histories are rarely taught in schools. The history and experiences of Hmong Americans, who served the U.S. military honorably during the Secret War between 1953 and 1975, are even less known. The triumph of Hmong American Sunisa Lee in the 2021 Summer Olympics sparked a short-lived interest in learning about the stories of how Hmong people were displaced to the United States. *From the Tops of the Trees* will serve as an entry point for young

people to inquire into the Secret War, and gain further appreciation for the diverse experiences of Hmong people in the United States. The book's backmatter includes an author's note that explains the book's source of inspiration and an inset map of Southeast Asia.

Several external resources will be useful to teachers who are interested in using *From the Tops of the Trees* alongside Kao Kalia Yang's other children's books to learn about Hmong history, culture and traditions. Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America* (Simon & Schuster, 2016) has an excellent chapter on Hmong American history. The Hmong Museum (<https://hmongmuseummn.org/>) in St. Paul Minnesota offers coloring and activity pages for children to inquire into aspects of Hmong culture. Additionally, I encourage readers to seek out opportunities to listen to Kao Kalia Yang speak virtually, or in person. To know Kalia is to love her.

Children's Books Referenced:

- Yang, K. K. (2021). *From the Tops of the Trees*. Carolrhoda Books.
Yang, K. K. (2020). *A Map into the World*. Carolrhoda Books.
Yang, K. K. (2019). *The Most Beautiful Thing*. Carolrhoda Books.

References:

- Hmong Museum. (2022). Activities for Kids and Families. (<https://hmongmuseummn.org/free-coloring-pages/>).
Lee, E. (2016). *The Making of Asian America*. Simon & Schuster.
Yang, K. K. (2017). *The Song Poet*. Picador.

Student Review: Ashrit Beskrowni

From the Tops of the Trees is a Hmong short story written by Kao Kalia Yang and illustrated by Rachel Wada. The story is about a four-year-old girl named Kalia in a Thai refugee camp during the Vietnam War. Kalia was born in the camp and has never left or seen anything outside of the camp. She only knows the life of a refugee—she gets slim rations, strict rules, she's prevented from meeting any new people—though still she enjoys living there.

One day Kalia asks her dad, "is all of the world a refugee camp?" and her dad says no. Still looking for answers, she asks "What is the world outside of the camp like?" Her father doesn't reply, and the next day, her dad dresses her up in special clothes and climbs the tallest tree in the camp with her on his back. She sees birds flying. She sees mountains and meadows - but the most important thing is that she gets answers.

The things I like about this book are the short but meaningful plot, and the images, which rotate from dreamy to sunny to real but still manage to capture the scene well. I have never read a picture book about a refugee camp or a book about the Vietnam War, and I had to Google more about the Lao involvement in the Vietnam War.