

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## A Boat to Nowhere

by

### Maureen Crane Wartski

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### Book Information

Maureen Crane Wartski, A Boat to Nowhere

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152 Pages

Book Level: 4.5

Interest Level: UG

This is the story of two Vietnamese children, their ailing grandfather, and the orphan who attempts to save them in a small fishing boat.

**Award:** Misc./Other

**Topics:** Adventure, Danger; Adventure, Rescue/Save; Countries/Regions, Vietnam; Family Life, Grandparents; Family Life, Orphans; People, Vietnamese; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies

### Main Characters

Bac Thong the leader of the criminals on Outcast Island

Big Tam Hong's husband; the Village fisherman

Duc Big Tam's brother; the Village carpenter

Hong Loc and Mai's foster mother in the Village; Thay Van Chi's housekeeper

Kien the fourteen-year-old orphan boy who becomes part of Thay Van Chi's family

Loc Thay Van Chi's young grandson

Mai Loc's older sister

Thay Van Chi (Grandfather) a wise old man who came to be the teacher of the Village after moving from the city

### Vocabulary

**beach** to land a boat securely on shore to keep it from drifting away

**keel** the mechanism found on the bottom of a boat that is used to keep it stable in the water

**mast** the tall structure on a boat upon which the sail is hung

**pitch** to toss violently up and down

**sarong** an article of clothing made from a long strip of cloth that is wrapped around the body

### Synopsis

Mai is a Vietnamese girl who lives with her little brother, Loc, and her grandfather, Thay (Teacher) Van Chi, in a small, isolated fishing and farming village at the southern tip of Vietnam. Their quiet life is disrupted when Kien, a young orphan boy, is caught hiding in the woods that borders the Village. Grandfather allows Kien to stay in the Village, although many of the villagers do not like him because of his rudeness. Mai senses that a change is coming based on Kien's long, secretive talks with her grandfather, and she does not like it.

Kien is nearly thrown out of the Village the next day after he insults Grandfather and ridicules the primitiveness of the remote Village, but he redeems himself when he helps save the life of the head fisherman. From then on, he becomes a favorite of the Village, which infuriates Mai. She refuses to believe that he has changed until the day she is persuaded to go out fishing with Kien and Loc. There she gets to know him better and after he gets them home safely in the storm, she begins to feel that he is a good friend.

However, as soon as she changes her opinion of him, Kien shocks her again. Upon returning to the Village, the three children discover it has been taken over by representatives of the New Government. The representatives accuse Grandfather of teaching bad things about the New Government, and they plan to take him to a "reeducation camp." Mai is horrified and hurt when Kien immediately agrees that her grandfather had been misleading the villagers. She forgives him later when he uses the trust that his lies gained with the representatives to help her grandfather and the rest of the family escape to the fishing boat they had used earlier that day. In desperation, they set sail to Thailand to hide from the government.

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From this point on, the narrator tells the story from Kien's perspective. Kien flashes back to how he bribed Grandfather's guard with the watch an American soldier had given him and wonders why he gave up his treasure for this family. Before they reach Thailand, they weather another storm, narrowly escape pirates, and run out of food. Now they face a new problem: the Thais have received so many "boat people" that they are not willing to rescue any more. So after receiving food from some of the women of the village who take pity on them, the little group pushes on towards Malaysia.

Once again they are out at sea. They survive another storm which nearly sinks them. The situation deteriorates as Grandfather becomes increasingly ill, their food supply runs out again, and they sail through shark-infested waters. To make matters worse, they are attacked by pirates who let them go free but severely cripple the boat. They drift to Outcast Island only to discover that it is populated by shipwrecked criminals. Planning to steal the boat for their own use, the criminals repair it under the pretext of helping the family. However, Kien learns of their plan and is able to sneak the family away to sea with only one loss, the precious bottle of penicillin that was being used to treat Grandfather's pneumonia.

Cast into the sea once more, things rapidly deteriorate for the family. Everyone becomes weak from starvation, and Grandfather's pneumonia returns worse than ever. When a ship appears on the horizon, they believe themselves saved, but it does not stop, even when Kien starts to swim towards it. Later, after making Kien promise to return to Vietnam someday, Grandfather dies, and Kien finally admits that he loves the family. A few days later, the children are picked up by a passing ship, and they know that their fight for survival is over.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Why do the government officials hate Grandfather so much?

*They hate Grandfather because the lessons he is teaching the villagers contradict those that the New Government are promoting. Because he is so well respected and loved in the village, they are afraid of the power and the influence that he has. They fear he would continue to oppose their ideas, so they have to get him out of the Village.*

### Literary Analysis

Why was the bag of sand so important to Grandfather?

*The bag of sand is a little part of Vietnam that Grandfather could bring with him wherever he goes. For him, it symbolizes the beautiful country that he had left behind and that he hopes to return to someday. It also probably helps to strengthen his will to survive when times are very difficult.*

### Inferential Comprehension

When Kien first arrives in the Village, he avoids trusting the other villagers too much or showing too much affection for them. In fact, he does not even seem to completely trust the family until after they have been in the boat for a few days. What might have caused his attitude of suspicion and indifference?

*Kien probably does not want to become too close to the people around him because he is afraid that he will be hurt by them. His past experience with people has not given him any reason to trust other people: his family abandoned him at the orphanage and the one friend he had made since then, an American named Jim, had also left him alone. As a result, he is now afraid to open up and trust anyone else because he fears that they will hurt him.*

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#### **Constructing Meaning**

In the story, the sea and the storms that batter the "Sea Breeze" and her occupants are often personified. List at least two examples of personification you have found in the story and explain them.

*There are many examples of personification that the students can identify and explain such as "the sullen sea" and "mad water." Both of these examples compare the ocean storms to human hostility.*

#### **Teachable Skills**

**Understanding the Author's Craft** Grandfather carries the bag of Vietnamese sand with him to remind him of Vietnam. Help the students make their own small, colorful drawstring bags. Ask them to bring in an object from home that is small enough to fit in the bag and symbolizes something important to them. Those who feel comfortable sharing their object and what it represents may do so for the rest of the class.

**Extending Meaning** When the family gets to Thailand, the people there refuse to let them come into their village. Divide the class in half and have them debate the Thai people's decision. Make sure they consider how the villagers feel and the responsibilities they have to their own families as well as their responsibility to Grandfather and the children. Allow the students to offer alternative actions that the villagers could have taken.

**Understanding Dialogue** Before Grandfather dies, he tells Kien that "none of us choose to be born into a family.... Nor do we choose those we come to love." Write a one-to-two page essay explaining what that statement means and how it applies to Kien.

**Responding to Literature** In the middle of the worst storm, Grandfather begins singing, which helps the children to be less afraid. Play the song "Whenever I Feel Afraid" from the musical *The King and I* and learn it as a class. Students may volunteer to share the other ways they combat fear if they are comfortable doing so.