

Modern Jungles (Pao Lor)

Discussion Questions

1. Many Americans did not know about the Secret War in Laos as it was happening. How much did you know about the Hmong or the Secret War before reading this book? What would you like to learn more about now?
2. Pao Lor uses the jungle to represent both the difficult journey his family took in Laos and the challenges he experienced after arriving in the United States. What difficulties did he face as a young boy in the US? How might these experiences have reminded him of an actual jungle?
3. Pao was very young at the time he left Laos for Thailand and then the United States. How did his age affect his experiences? How might this story have been different if told by an older relative, such as one of his teen brothers or adult uncles?
4. Oral storytelling is important in the Hmong culture. What are some of the different purposes these stories serve? How do you think stories that are shared out loud many times compare to ones that have been written down?
5. What role does storytelling play in your own family? Does your family have any stories about its history that have been passed down? How have these stories been shared from one generation to the next?
6. From all the stories Pao grew up hearing from his elders, why do you think he remembers the orphan tale the most and chose to retell it instead of other stories?

7. The author describes several incidents of racist bullying or name calling toward himself or others. How did such behavior affect students who experienced it? Have you witnessed or experienced anything similar? If so, how did it affect you?
8. Several teachers and coaches played a key role in Pao's early life. How did the actions of these adults affect him in positive or negative ways? Have any teachers or other adults outside your family had a big impact on you?
9. Why did Pao see himself as someone who was not meant for college, in spite of doing well at school? What factors held him back? What changed his mind?
10. Independence is a key theme in Pao's story. In what ways did his experiences force him to become independent from a young age? How did his independence help or hinder him as he grew older?
11. In the first chapter, Pao describes the life he was meant to lead, if the war hadn't happened and he had grown up in Laos. How does that compare to the course his life ended up taking, and how does he seem to feel about that?
12. Late in the book, Pao seeks out his uncle for a conversation about his family history. Why was this important to him? How did finding out more about his past affect him?
13. Why did Pao decide to write this memoir? What value do you think his story has to other Hmong families in the United States? What do you think Americans who are not Hmong get out of reading this story or others like it?
14. What surprised you most about Pao's story? Were there any parts you could relate to?
15. If you could ask Pao one or two questions about his journey, what would you want to know?