

A GUIDE TO

The Clay Marble

Minfong Ho

“They seem to think it’s a game. . . . Who wins, who loses, whose turn it is to kick next—it’s like an elaborate soccer game. Except that they don’t use soccer balls. They use us.”

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Clay Marble is a coming-of-age historical novel addressing the hardships of war and the resilience of the human spirit.

Setting: 1980, Cambodia.

Protagonist: Dara, a twelve-year-old Cambodian girl traveling as a refugee from camp to camp with her mother and brother until the war-torn countryside is stable enough for them to return to their home.

Conflicts: The violent conflict among three warring factions in the Cambodian civil war provides the background for the novel. The specific external conflict that sets the plot in motion is the plight of civilians like Dara and her family who try to survive in a war-torn country. Other conflicts include that of Dara and her friend Jantu, who long to make whole families of the fragments they have left, and the external conflict that pits Dara, who wants to make a new life at home, against her brother, who wants to join the fighting.

Resolution: The major conflict is resolved a decade later, as the civil war is becoming less virulent, allowing a semblance of normal life to return to Cambodia and Dara to marry and have a daughter. Dara’s and Jantu’s fragmented families will be joined when Dara’s brother and Jantu’s cousin marry. After Jantu is killed, Dara manages to persuade her brother to leave the fighting to others and lead the family back home.

Themes: War inflicts terrible suffering on innocent civilians, particularly children; love can provide a source of comfort and courage in horrific times; war can bring out the resilience of the human spirit; hardships bring about the psychological and spiritual growth of a young girl; the longing for home and family is universal.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no comprehension problems for students reading at the middle school level. Several scenes in the novel portray mortar attacks. In general, the novel portrays Cambodian life and culture in concrete, accessible terms and presents information about the ongoing civil war in that country.

BACKGROUND

The Land and People of Cambodia. Located in Southeast Asia, a neighbor of Vietnam and Thailand, Cambodia is a wet, tropical land not densely populated. Most of the Cambodian people work in agriculture; many of them speak French. The political turbulence of the 1970s disrupted rice planting, resulting in severe famine that has had long-term effects on the country’s economy.

The Cambodian Civil War. Cambodia had a long history of being overrun by its neighbors until it asked for French protection in 1863; in 1954, Prince Sihanouk negotiated his country’s independence from France. Sihanouk tried to keep Cambodia neutral during the Vietnam War of the 1960s but ended up allowing the Vietnamese Communists to set up bases in Cambodia. This led to U.S. support of General Lon Nol, who overthrew Sihanouk and tried, unsuccessfully, to drive out the Vietnamese. A separate rebel Communist group, the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, took over much of the country in the early 1970s, setting up slave labor camps.

During this time of the “killing fields,” more than a million Cambodian people—either were murdered by the government or died of sickness and starvation. The Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979 and renamed the country Kampuchea, but an uneasy coalition of forces—two anti-Communist groups and the Communist Khmer Rouge—fought under Sihanouk against the invaders. This struggle provides the background of the novel. Later on, in 1988, the Vietnamese began to withdraw their troops, and Sihanouk was eventually recognized by

the West as the head of the government. Nevertheless, rebel groups—most particularly the Khmer Rouge—continue to disrupt Cambodia’s stability.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Dara, the narrator and protagonist; a twelve-year-old girl who wanders with her mother and brother, seeking a safe haven before returning to their village, which has been burned.

Sarun, Dara’s older brother, about nineteen, now the head of the family.

Their mother, a resilient, gentle woman, who seeks to return to her village home.

Nea, a young woman, about nineteen, staying with her grandfather and young cousins in a refugee camp. She and Sarun fall in love.

Grandpa Kem, Nea’s elderly grandfather.

Jantu, Nea’s thirteen-year-old cousin, an orphan; an imaginative, strong-willed girl who becomes Dara’s best friend.

Nebut (Baby), Jantu’s baby brother.

Chnay, a refugee boy of about Dara’s age who does not have a family of his own.

PLOT

Chapter 1. The **first-person narrator**, a twelve-year-old Cambodian girl named Dara, introduces the **setting**, several other **characters**, and the novel’s principal **conflict** by describing the outbreak of war between forces loyal to Cambodia’s former ruler Prince Sihanouk, Communist Cambodian Khmer Rouge, and another Communist faction supported by the neighboring Vietnamese. Four years before, the Khmer Rouge killed Dara’s father; they later burned her village, and Dara’s grandmother died. When the war makes life impossible at home, Dara, her brother, Sarun, and their mother load their possessions onto an oxcart and head toward what is rumored to be a safe refugee camp in Nong-Chan, on the border with Thailand. They finally approach the camp, which they are thrilled to hear has rice seed for planting and tools for building.

Chapter 2. As Dara’s family walks through the camp, a new **setting**, they are stunned to see families conducting almost normal lives. They meet Nea, a kind young woman who came to the camp with her grandfather and two young cousins; the members of Nea’s family are the novel’s other major **characters**. Nea generously invites Dara’s family to join hers at dinner, and Sarun appears to be attracted to Nea. After her first real meal in a long time, Dara falls contentedly asleep, feeling that she has finally come back home, one of the novel’s main **themes**.

Chapter 3. The next day Dara gets to know Jantu, Nea’s thirteen-year-old cousin. Jantu teases the less

confident Dara and introduces her to the wonders of the lunch truck, which impresses undernourished Dara as a miraculous provider of food.

Chapter 4. The next night Nea explains that food rations are distributed every two weeks to families in the camp, who often share their food with newcomers, as her family does with Dara’s. Dara watches an orderly food distribution in which Sarun and Grandfather Kem, along with thousands of others, pick up their rations of rice and other food. Nea and Sarun seem to be falling in love, and Dara begins to hope that she will be going home with a renewed family.

Chapter 5. Dara’s friendship with Jantu deepens. Jantu has a gift for creating wonderful toys out of anything that comes to hand. One day she makes an amazing mobile in which two straw dolls pound a tiny mortar, but Chnay, a tough orphan boy, viciously smashes her work. Refusing to be discouraged, Jantu rolls an ordinary lump of clay into what she calls a “magic marble.”

Chapter 6. The girls play every day by an ancient stone beam in the camp. Reflecting on one of the novel’s **themes**, Jantu tells Dara that they have only pieces of families now. But then she reveals a family of clay dolls she has made, each doll resembling a member of her family or Dara’s. As the two girls play with the dolls, making the family grow and prosper, Jantu tells how her father died.

Chapter 7. Complications develop when soldiers visit the camp, trying to recruit men; Sarun insists that he wants to go home, not fight. When they hear gunfire nearby, the families, along with thousands of other refugees, leave the camp to march to Thailand. The girls spot a lunch truck, which they run to but find empty. As they leave, a shell explodes, scattering everyone and badly injuring Jantu’s baby brother. Dara leaves Jantu with Baby and takes off to find help.

Chapter 8. Swept up with other confused, frightened refugees, many of them children, Dara manages to lead a medic back to Jantu and Baby; the medic takes them to a hospital in another refugee camp, leaving Dara on her own to try to find her way back to her family. To give Dara courage, Jantu makes a “magic” clay marble for her, one that will make her strong, brave, and patient. Dara begins her search, turning back toward Cambodia, gripping the marble.

Chapter 9. Homesick, Dara survives her first night on her own. She plans to find the ancient stone beam from the old camp, hoping her mother will look for her at her old haunt. A kind old man feeds her, but she doesn’t see anyone she knows. When she reaches the stone beam, she finds only broken bits of Jantu’s doll family, a **symbol** of her own shattered family.

Chapter 10. When Chnay, the bully, mocks her tears, Dara is grateful to see a familiar face. Chnay tells her that her mother had sought her at the stone beam but that some soldiers persuaded Sarun to lead the family to

their base camp for safety. Dara wants to wait for her mother at the stone beam, but Chnay says she'll find her family only if she follows their oxcart tracks. Taking pity on Dara, he gives her some rice before she leaves. Then she invites him to join her on the journey, and he does.

Chapter 11. On their long walk, Chnay scrounges food for himself and Dara, his **character** taking on new dimensions. They reach the soldiers' camp but see no signs of Dara's family among the many refugees there. For days they methodically hunt for Dara's people but without any luck. Then, when Chnay is caught stealing a chicken, Dara cleverly persuades the cook to give her a job, reasoning that she will have regular meals. She attributes her spunk and success to Jantu's magic clay marble.

Chapter 12. Dara and Chnay develop a routine in which she works in the kitchen, saving food scraps for him, and he roams the camp in search of her family. One day he thinks he has spotted her brother. The next day, the cook leads her to where the soldiers stay, and Dara grows angry when she sees precious seed rice being wasted as food for the soldiers instead of being saved for planting. Then she sees Sarun marching with the soldiers; when she tries to catch up with him, someone grabs her from behind. It is her mother.

Chapter 13. Dara tells her mother and the others about her journey, attributing her good fortune to the marble, but Sarun says it was Dara's own good sense. When she learns that Nea and Sarun are to be married, Dara wants to rush to the hospital to tell Jantu, but Sarun insists that she stay in the camp. He seems to care little about going home, caught up instead in military fervor, his heart set on drilling before Prince Sihanouk at a flag-raising ceremony in twelve days. Nea confides to Dara her concerns about Sarun's new single-mindedness. Dara insists that they force Sarun to lead them home by secretly preparing the oxcart to leave, her independence developing the novel's **theme** of psychological growth. Nea reluctantly agrees, and they eventually persuade Grandpa Kem and Dara's mother to join in too. For the next week the four work together, packing and preparing the oxcart, proud of their accomplishment.

Chapter 14. When they show Sarun the oxcart the day before the flag ceremony, he puts off the idea of going home; however, Dara insists on going to the hospital to get Jantu and Baby. Sarun sends her with Nea since he is preoccupied with his sentry duty that night. Dara and Nea take off toward Thailand and the hospital. They reach an orderly refugee camp and its silent, sad hospital: a series of sheds filled with pathetic victims of war waiting to die. The girls finally locate Jantu and Baby, whose foot has healed. Jantu introduces Duoic, a gaunt, legless boy, who seems resigned to death. Jantu forces him to make the effort to get his water bottle, her insistence developing the **theme** of the resilience of the human spirit. Then Jantu and Baby leave the hospital with Dara and Nea.

Chapter 15. As they walk back toward Cambodia, the girls become confused as to which trail to follow. They are about to change course when a shot rings out and they see Sarun, whose fellow sentry has mistakenly fired at them. The sentry fires again, hitting Jantu. Sarun decides not to risk other lives to take Jantu back to the hospital that night. Silently, Dara worries that by the next day Jantu will be beyond help.

Chapter 16. Dara's mother cleans and bandages Jantu's bad chest wound, and Dara prays to the clay marble to save Jantu. The next morning, Dara's mother and Nea go to see Sarun perform at the flag-raising ceremony while Dara stays with the weakening Jantu. As they hear fragments of patriotic oratory at the ceremony, Jantu condemns the whole war as a kind of heartless, confusing game that destroys lives. Knowing that she will die, Jantu tells Dara that she will have to persuade Sarun to lead the family home. Jantu reminds Dara of the courage she has already shown, but Dara insists that the clay marble has protected her, and she begs Jantu to make another one for her. Jantu refuses, telling Dara that the magic is in her and in the making of the marble, not in the marble itself. Then she asks Dara to sing her and Baby to sleep. Dara fears Jantu will not wake up.

Chapter 17. When the others return from the ceremony, Sarun conceitedly tries to wake Jantu to admire him, but it is no use—she is dead. In the novel's **climax**, Dara begs Sarun as family head to lead them home, but Sarun says he wants to stay and fight courageously as a man. At first overwhelmed by grief and anger, Dara calms down when she rolls a clay marble of her own. Sarun says that only a man can fight a war, while anyone can plant rice. Dara says that she is prepared to go home, with or without him. One by one the others side with Dara, and finally Sarun lays down his gun and says he will go home too.

Chapter 18. Just as they are about to leave, Chnay comes to Dara with a goodbye gift—wooden bells that he carved himself. He apologizes for having destroyed Jantu's mobile long ago. Dara invites him to join her family, but he feels more at home among the homeless. On the journey home, Dara drops Jantu's clay marble, but they cannot stop for it, and she is forced to let it go. Then she looks at the marble that she herself had made and finally realizes what Jantu had meant: that the magic is in herself, in the making of the marble, not in the marble itself.

Afterword. Dara explains that ten years have passed and that a semblance of normality has returned to her village home, although fighting continues. Dara now has a daughter whom she will one day teach to make a clay marble of her own.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

An outstanding element of this novel is its rendering of recent historical events in personal, human terms by

portraying the effects of the Cambodian civil war on a handful of characters. (Its portrayal of this specific time and place makes the novel an excellent adjunct to social studies courses focusing on recent global events or world geography.) Discussion groups or students doing projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Investigating the Historical and Geographical Background

After reading this novel, young readers might want to discuss what Cambodia is like and whether events like those in the novel actually did take place. That concern could lead to an investigation of several features of the novel's setting:

- the Cambodian civil war: what it was about; who was fighting; what the outcome was
- Cambodia fifteen years later
- everyday life in Cambodia: family structure, courtship, food, children's activities

2. Evaluating Credibility and Relevance

Discussion groups might focus on other specific elements of the novel by considering the following questions:

- Dara, the twelve-year-old narrator, grows and develops in a short time from a shy little girl to a young woman prepared to live by herself. Does her growth as a person seem believable in her circumstances? Why or why not?
- What does Jantu mean when she says that the magic is in the making of the marble, not the marble itself?
- According to the novel, why is it important to have a home and a family?

3. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend the ideas in the novel by considering the following questions:

- Are all wars pointless games that serve only to hurt the innocent? Students should defend or refute the position advanced by Jantu in the novel.
- Why do people value talismans like the clay marble? What do such objects represent and how do they make people feel?
- Even though Cambodia and the United States are quite different countries, is the situation of any person or group in the United States similar to Dara and her family's?

MEET THE WRITER

Minfong Ho (1951–) grew up in Thailand and Singapore, neighbors of Cambodia; she is a graduate of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where she wrote her first novel, *Sing to the Dawn*, which won first prize from the Council of Interracial Books for Children in 1973. She has also worked in a plywood factory as a union representative. Ho understands homesickness firsthand. She explains that when she wrote *Sing to the Dawn*, she was very homesick. Ho wrote this story in the middle of winter in upstate New York, and Thailand seemed far away. She said that writing about the children from her homeland made her feel as if they were very near. After the manuscript was published, Ho found that a new purpose for writing was open to her. Although she had been writing for some time, she now found that people wanted to read her books. Minfong Ho's desire is that young Americans will read her stories and begin to understand what life is like for youth in Asia. She also hopes that as students from other countries read her novels, they will feel a little less homesick.

READ ON

Minfong Ho, *Sing to the Dawn*. Novel. A girl in a Thai village wins a scholarship to a city school; her father is reluctant to let her go.

Minfong Ho, *Rice Without Rain*. Novel. A seventeen-year-old girl is caught up in the political unrest in Thailand and a student uprising in Bangkok.

Allan Baillie, *Little Brother*. Novel. A young Cambodian boy copes with the jungle and with social upheaval in his attempt to rescue his older brother.

Blanche Hannalis, *The Secret Garden*. This play, based on the famous novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, shows how love and determination help a bitter orphan and a sickly boy create a loving home and family.

Joyce Hovelsrud, "Young Ladies Don't Slay Dragons." Women in fairy tales are usually passive, submissive, and decorative. But in this "modern" tale, a resilient Princess Penelope breaks the fusty old mold.

Dougal Robertson, *Survive the Savage Sea*. A gripping nonfiction account of a family's struggle to survive a disaster at sea.

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