

U of D Jesuit
English Department
Freshman Summer Reading Study Guides

Welcome, Freshmen students, from the U of D Jesuit English department!

All UDJ high school students are required each summer to read two novels. This year, Freshmen are reading *Of Mice and Men* and *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*. You have received the following questions to serve as a guide when reading Steinbeck's and Nguyen's novels. These guides are not meant to serve as summer homework nor are you required to take notes or write full responses to the questions provided. The questions are meant to help the reader(s) consider elements of the novel such as the themes, characters or conflicts. It is okay if one isn't sure if they understand each and every question. The freshmen English teachers simply ask that each reader think about possible responses to the following guiding questions.

Enjoy the summer,

Freshman English Teachers

Of Mice and Men, John Steinbeck

Of Mice and Men, like most of Steinbeck's work, drew heavily from his own life experiences. Set in his hometown of Salinas Valley, California and reflecting the labor and class struggles of the 1930s, the story has been called a "parable of what it means to be human" because it reflects Steinbeck's empathy for the common people. He understood their strengths, their connection to - and craving for - land and, above all else, their loneliness, and the need to connect to one another in friendship.

1. The main characters Lenny and George are companions.
 - How do they relate to each other?
 - Why do they stay together?
 - What words best describe each character?
 - What happens to their relationship?
 - What does their relationship say about companionship and isolation?
2. Lenny has George talk about "the dream." What is that dream?
 - Why is this dream important?
3. Each of the supporting characters have well defined traits – consider how to describe each of the following characters:
 - Candy
 - Slim
 - Curly
 - Curly's wife
 - Carlson
 - Crooks
4. There are two summer reading novels. Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*. Consider how they're similar and different. Which characters from each book are similar in how they act and react to others and their surroundings?

***Stealing Buddha's Dinner* by Bich Nguyen**

LEVEL ONE

This memoir is written by Bich Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant. How do Nguyen and her family end up in Grand Rapids, Michigan? What are Nguyen's first impressions of Grand Rapids?

Describe Rosa. How does Rosa's arrival change Nguyen and her family? Is Rosa a good mother?

Describe Nguyen's grandmother, Noi. How does Noi uphold the old traditions from Vietnam while the family adjusts to life in Michigan?

Nguyen describes the growing Vietnamese community in and around Grand Rapids, with its markets and social clubs. How do the Vietnamese immigrants retain their Vietnamese identity and also their American identity?

Nguyen discusses food a lot in this memoir. How does food relate to identity in this memoir? How does it relate to family bond? How does it relate to love? How does food relate to the desire to fit in?

How is Nguyen's home different from Holly Jansen's and Jennifer Vander Wal's? What are some of the feelings that arise in Nguyen as she visits her friends' houses?

How does Rosa's Mexican culture and heritage mix with Nguyen's Vietnamese culture and heritage? How does that household successfully combine Mexican, Vietnamese, and American traditions?

LEVEL TWO

Nguyen writes "that in wanting to belong everywhere I ended up belonging nowhere at all." What does she mean by this?

Nguyen writes, "When I think of Grand Rapids I think of how much time I spent trying to make real the dream of the blond-haired girl with a Betty Crocker mother and a kitchen to match." Is there an unrealistic dream version of American perfection? If so, what does it look like today? Who creates this unrealistic dream vision of America? How does this unrealistic ideal cause suffering and anxiety?

Nguyen writes that this memoir is "about an immigrant's dilemma to blend in or remain apart." What does she mean? How did Nguyen solve this dilemma?

Some people are forced to live like outsiders. Others feel like outsiders. How does this memoir capture accurately what it's like to be an outsider?

Pope Francis said of refugees, "I would like to ask you all to see a ray of hope as well in the eyes and the hearts of refugees and those who have been forcibly displaced. A hope that is expressed in expectations for the future, in the desire for friendship, in the wish to participate in the host society also through learning the language, access to employment and the education of children. I admire the courage of those who hope to be able gradually to resume a normal life, waiting for joy and love to brighten their existence. We can and must all nourish this hope!"

How and where do you see this hope in the Nguyen family? How can Americans continue to offer this hope to immigrants and refugees?