



TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary to lower secondary
(Years 5-7)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English; Science; Humanities & Social Sciences; the Arts; Health & Physical Education.
- **General capabilities:** Literacy; Critical & Creative Thinking; Personal & Social Capability; Intercultural Understanding.
- **Cross-curriculum priorities:** Asia & Australia's Engagement with Asia.

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- A great starting point for a critical discussion about the place and influence of social media in our lives.
- To promote discussions about our own identity and how we perceive and express that.
- To promote discussions about our changing relationships with our parents and friends as we grow and change.

THEMES

- Identity/Culture
- Being the New Kid
- Rural Life
- Refugees/New Arrivals
- Poetry
- Friendships

PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia and
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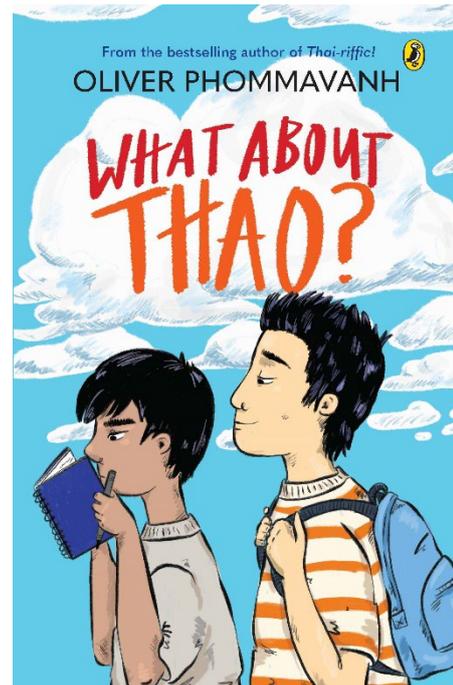
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What About Thao?

Oliver Phommavanh

From the author of the bestselling *Thai-riffic!*, *Connerd*, and *The Other Christy* comes a funny, heartfelt journey into small-town community and big-hearted belonging.

PLOT SUMMARY

What About Thao? is about the beginnings of an enduring friendship between the two new kids, Thao and Kadir, in a small country town, Megulla.

This tiny community is turned upside down when two new families move in. One Australian-Vietnamese family escaping the busy city lifestyle, and a Syrian family, escaping their war-torn country. Both families are looking for a peaceful and quiet life, and trying to fit into new surroundings, even more so for the Syrian boy Kadir who struggles to find peace in his heart.

Thao and Kadir are both yearning to fit in. Thao is a city kid looking to belong in a rural town, who wonders why Kadir has chosen him to be his only friend. Thao helps his new friend find his voice through his love of words and poetry, realising in the process that his own migrant experience is not so different from Kadir's.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver is a young Thai-Australian writer for children. He has featured in school sessions and on panels at the Sydney Writers' Festival among many other appearances at festivals and writing events, plus in blogs. He has worked as a primary school teacher and a stand-up comedian, and now spends his time writing and sharing his writing passion with kids and engaging them with humour.

Oliver's first book, *Thai-riffic!*, drew much from his own life growing up as a Thai-Australian, and he has continued to focus on kids from different cultural backgrounds, dealing with the everyday fun and worries of school and family in his books *Con-nerd*, *Super Con-nerd*, *Punchlines*, *Thai-no-mite*, *The Other Christy*, *Natural Born Loser*, *Don't Follow Vee*, *Ethan* in the *Stuff Happens* series, and in his short story collection, *Brain Freeze*.

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Oliver says:

What About Thao? is my love letter to all the country towns I've visited over the last decade as a touring author. I have been to places that feel like I'm in the middle of nowhere. Some of my best memories on my travels were visiting kids in small schools. Some schools only have a handful of students, and they kind of feel like a big family. I wanted to capture some of these moments in *What About Thao?*.

I wanted to write a story where a third-generation Asian-Australian kid, experiences what it's like to be new and different. Thao is one of many cultures in the big city, but in Megulla, he stands out for being the only one from an Asian family. I've always observed any Asian kids when I visit small towns, and wonder how they feel. All of them seem to fit in, and I feel like it's because they realise that they are pretty much Australian in their mannerisms and interests. Thao embraces his second chance to stand out at school. He was a nobody in a crowded primary school, but in Megulla, he finally gets some attention.

I also wanted *What About Thao?* to be a parallel new-arrival story. Kadir opens up to Thao because he thinks that Thao understands what it's like to be different, which is quite strange to Thao up until this point. When Kadir forms a bond with Thao, it allows Thao to reflect back on his own family's migrant experience. It also brings up some feelings that he's never experienced before, such as the feeling of not belonging or being told that you're not welcomed somewhere. Through their enduring friendship, both

boys learn a whole lot of empathy, as well as cementing their place in Megulla.

CHARACTERS

Thao

Thao Truong is a cheeky kid who loves to make up silly songs, though he keeps that a secret until he meets his new friend, Isaac. Thao's initially excited to be moving to a new town, but it sinks in that he's worried he might not fit in. A part of me in Thao is the love of making silly songs. I used to make them up in my head back in primary school, which includes 'Turtleland' and 'Pat My Tummy'!

Kadir

Kadir Mafi is a headstrong and volatile refugee from Syria. His English is surprisingly good, but he hardly makes any effort to speak or connect with any of his classmates at Megulla School. Kadir's only solace is his notebook, where he writes his own poems. Poetry can be a powerful form of expression for someone affected by trauma. I wanted to highlight the power of poetry for Kadir, which is key in helping him come out of his shell.

Isaac

Isaac is a funny and good-natured kid who also has a knack of making up silly songs. He's an all-rounder and is made up of a number of country kids that I've met over the years – friendly, carefree and easygoing – which makes him the perfect friend for Thao.

Jess

Jess is Isaac's twin sister and school captain. She's a know-it-all and can be a little bossy, but she's also quite empathetic and caring. She has a deep concern for people in her town, especially Kadir's younger sisters, Amira and Jamila, when they first arrive. Jess likes being in a small town but she does sometimes wish that there was a little more excitement.

Xander

Xander loves his sports and can be a little snarky at times, especially towards 'city slickers' like Thao. Despite Thao's best efforts to try to convince him that he's here to stay, Xander's still sceptical. He has seen many kids come to Megulla School, only for them to leave after a few weeks, so he gives Thao a tough time. But he does slowly warm to Thao, and will defend his friends and town when the time comes.



Ava

Ava can't wait to leave Megulla because it's so boring. She's keen on visiting the city and plans to go to boarding school there.

Thao's family

Thao's parents are second generation Vietnamese-Australians, and were both born in Australia. Thao's dad has left his old engineering job to work at Avalon Mines, which prompts a treechange for his family. Thao's mum is keen to go, longing for a place with plenty of space and more time to do other things, especially after the pandemic. While Thao's mum does miss some of the city life (such as Japanese food), she is keen to shake things up a little in Megulla. Her skills in organising events as a librarian was one of the reasons why she was hired to run Megulla library. Thao's mum does take some time to adjust to the quieter life of Megulla, having been a social butterfly back in the city. However, she relishes the free time to cook more and take up gardening.

Kadir's family

Amira and Jamila are Kadir's twin sisters, who have opposing sides when it comes to wanting to stay in Megulla. Amira is quite content to live in Australia, whereas Jamila is keen to head back to Syria, like her big brother. Mrs Mafi is a wonderfully resilient woman who holds up the family well, wanting her kids to have a better life, despite being very worried for her missing husband, and for Kadir's welfare as well.

THEMES AND ACTIVITIES

Identity/Culture

Questions and Activities

- How many cultures/nationalities do you have in your class? At your school?
- Thao often thinks people are saying he's different because he's Asian, but it's more that he's a 'city slicker'. What other kinds of identities can you have? e.g. a city or country person, a cat or dog person, a footy supporter etc
- Thao just wants Kadir to fit in at school and in town. What would it take for you to belong to your own school or area if you were new?
- Thao experiences a little hostility about his own cultural background. What would you do if you had a similar experience?
- Thao's Mum says sometimes people say mean things because they don't understand. How could you make someone who is being racist or unkind better understand about another person's culture?

- Kadir says that he reached out to Thao because he's different like him. What are the similarities between Kadir and Thao? What are the differences?
- Food is a big thing when it comes to introducing people to different new cultures. List the foods mentioned in the book, in particular the Vietnamese and Syrian foods. What kind of food could you bring to a multicultural feast/Harmony Day or an event to show your own culture?

Being the New Kid

What About Thao is a parallel new-arrival story, where both Thao and Kadir get a chance to be the new kid.

Questions and Activities

- Discuss how might you feel (or did feel) as a new kid at school? What would you be worried or scared about?
- Isaac and Jess welcome Thao to the school with a tour. Describe how you would do a tour of your own school. What kind of secrets or quirks would you show them? How would you make a new kid feel welcome at school?
- Imagine if you were the new kid to a different country or even a different planet. What kind of things would you need to get used to in a new place?

Rural Life

Questions and Activities

- Compare living in the city and rural areas by creating a list of pros and cons.
- Thao's family wanted to move to the country. After reading the book, create an argument/persuasive piece trying to convince someone else to do the same thing.
- You could also make a counter-argument about why living in the city is better than rural life.
- Van thinks living in a rural town is boring, do you agree/disagree? Why?
- Megulla school only has 23 kids in their whole school. What similarities/differences does this school have with your own? How would you feel if you went a school like Megulla? Or if you're from a small school, how would you feel going to school like the city school Thao has come from?
- Create a brochure of a made-up small town like Megulla. What would you include to attract people to come to the town? Is it the food, the attractions (such as a big statue or art silo) or an event like a festival?



- Look up images of big things in Australia (or the world), what is the most amusing big thing you've seen?
- Choose a town in Australia (without a big thing) and find an attraction or something the town is known for that could be featured as a big thing.

Refugees/New Arrivals

Questions and Activities

- The Mafi family have come from a war-torn country to live in Australia. Create a mood board on how you think the Mafi family might be feeling when they arrive in Australia. How would Kadir feel in particular.
- Thao has to ask his parents about how his family came to Australia. Who would you have to ask/where would you get information about how your own family came to Australia?
- If possible, interview someone not born in Australia about what it was like to first move to Australia. Where did they live? What did they first do? How did they settle into Australia?
- The Mafi family represent part of the current wave of refugees coming to re-settle in Australia. What are some of the previous nationalities/cultures of refugees who have come to Australia?

Poetry

Questions and Activities

- How does Kadir use poetry to express himself? Analyse one of Kadir's poems to see what he's trying to say/how he feels.
- Re-read the 'What About Thao?' poem on pages 205-206. What is Thao trying to say about his experience with Kadir?
- Re-read 'The Quiet' poem on pages 207-208. Why does Kadir like about the Quiet?

- Reread Chapter 18 (pages 127-134), then do the poetry activity described on p130 where you find an image around the school (or on the internet) to match your colour/mood as inspiration for a poem.
- Either using some of the poems in *What About Thao?* or poems written in the above activity, have your own poetry slam performance in class or for a school assembly.

Silly Songs!

Activity

- Find a jingle on YouTube and re-write the lyrics to make it a different and sillier song. Let your imagination go wild!

Friendships

Questions and Activities

- Create a venn diagram with Thao and Kadir. What are their similarities and differences between the two new kids?
- Make a web diagram between all the Year 6 kids we're introduced to in Megulla school, what common interests do they have? What makes them friends?
- Why does Thao feel like he's getting a second chance at making friends, being in Megulla School?
- What are some of Thao's concerns about making friends in a small rural town like Megulla?
- Do you have a hidden talent like making up silly songs or maybe dances that you're afraid to tell others? Why?
- Isaac says that in a small town, you don't get to choose your friends, you have no choice but to get along. Would you agree with him? Do you think it would be easier or harder to be friends with kids in a smaller school/town?



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
What About Thao	Oliver Phommavanh	9781760897161	4-7	\$16.99		
Brain Freeze (short stories)	Oliver Phommavanh	9781760897147	4-7	\$14.99		
Don't Follow Vee	Oliver Phommavanh	9780143505747	4-7	\$16.99		
Natural Born Loser	Oliver Phommavanh	9780143505730	4-7	\$16.99		
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Punchlines	Oliver Phommavanh	9781760890902	4-7	\$16.99		
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