

Free First Saturday at Home, October, 2020

Kao Kalia Yang and Khoa Le Discussing *The Most Beautiful Thing*

(gentle music)

Khoa Le: Thank you very much for having me here. And Kalia, it's absolute my pleasure to be the illustrator for your beautiful story and being here with you all to have a chance about the book called "The Most Beautiful Things". So when I first received Kalia's script from Carol, I knew right away this is the story that I'd love to do illustration for besides the fact that I feel that I share the same thing with Kalia, that we were very close with our grandma. I also feel resonate with the fact that this story somehow it's about growing up with hardship, like with not so many material things. Which is a common things for Vietnamese at that time as well. But I was not so sure how to start. I began with doing a lots of research on Hmong People culture. Their way of life, their textile, their clothing, and so many different things that it becomes a little bit... I cannot concentrate on the most essential things. Only when Carol send me email and say like, "Do you want to have a copy of Kalia memoir *The Latehomecomer*?" And I was like, "Yes, of course." Only when I have the books in my hands things just starts to look much clearer. And the book was like a treasure chest with so many material that I can dig into. And those photos, it was beautiful. Black and white photos was like extraordinary. I feel like I was looking to some sort of documentary and it was lots of inspiration come from there, which helped me tremendously in working on the book as you can see. I also want to shout out to Daniel and Emily Art Director from Lerner Publishing Group, who helped me a lot with their

input with the process of creating the artwork from sketches to the final form that you can see as the book today. So now it's a little bit of a video clip of everything I put together some of my work in progress. Please have a look and thank you.

(piano music)

Rebecca Slaby: Hello. Oh, I'm just so inspired and moved to tears practically, which is the beauty of both the illustrations as well as the story. And so I'd really like to ask you for both of you Khoa and Kalia, what do you hope children think about after reading this book?

Kao Kalia Yang: Khoa would you like to go first?

Khoa Le: You can go first. Yes please.

(speaking over each other)

Please Kalia, you can go first, yeah.

Kao Kalia Yang: No, for me it was so important in the writing and it's so important in this moment right now. I want children to think of all of the things that money cannot buy their lives. I think at this time, particularly here in America, but across the world there're so many children who cannot have the things they want. Who cannot have the things they need. And so thinking about the priceless stuff in our lives, surrounded by poverty, my father has always said that we are not poor people because our hearts are not poor places. And these words have been a bandage over my heart at many different moments. And so my hope is that this book like all the great literature I love, that it imparts strength

and that it inspires young people and older people too to look for the meaningful things that we can give to each other and things that money cannot buy.

Khoa Le: That's so precious Kalia. For me, how I think about is quite simple. I just hope the children can read the book and think about their love for their grandma, the love for their family and while viewing some of the illustration I hope they can have some fun with their imagination life resembles some of grandma's memory. I think it's beautiful and very vivid. When I read Kalia's story, right away I'm thinking of how that works in the imagination in the memory of a young grandma would look like. And I just hope that I did convey some of that into the illustrations and the children can have fun looking at it and maybe have the little side story from those pictures as well for themselves. That's all.

Rebecca Slaby: Thank you so much. I just think that that connection with elders, that connection with how we care for each other is such an important message. Especially in a time when we are so separated from each other. So how do we hold onto those connections. And Kalia, this is more specifically for you, but Khoa I think, I'd love to know how you stay connected, but Kalia, what do you miss most about your grandmother and how do you stay connected with her? But for you too Khoa, thinking about your grandmother or grandmothers and your elders that you've known and loved as well. How do you stay connected with them?

Kao Kalia Yang: The thing about love is that when somebody is gone, the love still stays. I speak to my grandmother often and I speak to her in the present tense, because so much of what I love about her remains with me, her smell. My grandma smelled like tiger balm and menthol oil. So her smell lingers with me, I love her words. Every time we said, "I love you, grandma." Grandma's only response... And I know my family is watching. Some of my cousins are watching as well. Grandma's only response was, "I know." "I love you." "I know." In the moment I believe she knows, and that is like the biggest gift now. I know that knowing that somebody loves you and that somebody understands your love for them, that is such a deep and abiding human gift. It is a gift that time cannot take away. The knowledge that she knew that I loved her every step of the way. Long before I could get a job, long before I could buy her anything valuable. It was just this love. So that stays.

Khoa Le: Kalia, that is beautiful. I don't know, for me, my grandma passed away four years ago and to be honest every time I think about her, I still somehow will tear up. She had a severe dementia. Some kind of Alzheimer's disease, and she forgot everything in her last 10 years. Her last 10 years life. Of course I love her in our Asian way, it's usually we are very shy to say so. And I feel I should have said that more often when she was alive. Yeah. That's it.

Rebecca Slaby: Thank you both of you for being vulnerable and sharing with us your love for your grandmothers. I think that is so important to model for children, how we can share our emotions, how we can show our grief in our lives, but also our

deep connection and our love for each other and for all of our loved ones. So thank you so much for that. And then I have one more question, as a parent, from a parent perspective for you, Kalia, how have you learned to say no to your children? What have you had to say no to your children about and how do you help them understand why you must say no sometimes? It doesn't have to be for economic reasons necessarily, but just how do we help our children understand wants versus need.

Kao Kalia Yang: That's such a good question. You know, Rebecca, I honestly thought it would be harder, but before I knew it, no came out of my mouth. For the first year and two and three and four and five of their lives, half of the things they did with deadly and dangerous? And no came out so naturally from deep inside of me. I am bilingual (speaking in Hmong) When I speak to them of love, I generally go into Hmong automatically. It's a tender thing, but when they're doing something to each other or themselves, no comes out and it's the English that comes out of me. So I have these two languages that allow me to do different kinds of work in my relationships with the people in my life. I think in Hmong will be much harder for me to say no to them, but in English, when they're like, "Mommy, can we have this?" I'm like, "Sure." Everything on TV I say sure too, they don't get any of it. It's a pattern now, they know. But by saying yes to their dreams and their hopes, is tremendously fun for me as a parent. And so we play games for hours on the things that they want in their lives. A tree house, a play house. We play, imaginatively with these things for hours and hours and they forget that they don't have the actual thing. So in my house we play a lot with

newspapers and cardboard boxes. And I think this is lovely. It was how I was raised. I have a mother who allowed me to do a lot of things that I could come up with imaginatively. And that's really the key, and the crux for me. I say no often because I want them to think of other ways of doing, other ways of thinking, other ways to meeting the world. Linguistically for me and I hope for them, this is in two different languages, two worldviews. They know that when it's the American kiss, I kiss them on the face. When it's the Hmong kiss, I sniff them inside of me. Their smell. And they're beginning to repeat. 'Cause I think children learn best by example, which is why it's so important that they see our tears of love, and our tears of grief. That these emotions just don't go away and that, yes, it is completely okay and acceptable to share them with the world. In fact, it makes all of us more human to each other. And so no is easy for me, Rebecca.

Rebecca Slaby: We are ready to move on to the next part. I think Christi is going to share some videos from children also. Thank you so much, Khoa thank you so much, Kalia.

Kao Kalia Yang: Thank you.

Christi Schmitt: Yes, we've sent out a message this week as the students were sharing this book with their families. And each day they had a question about what they do to help other members of the family just as Kalia's family did, or what are some of the memories that have been shared with them from members of their family. So I will pass this on to Sarah who will be introducing the videos. Thank you.

Sarah Lampen: Thank you so much Kalia and Khoa for those reflections and insights and for sharing your beautiful work with us. As Christi mentioned, we've received some questions from students at Nokomis Montessori Magnet School. And so we'll start with those questions, and then after we answer the student's questions, we'll move on to some of the questions that we've received in the Q&A. So if you have any questions you'd like to ask of Kalia or Khoa or any of our panelists, please drop them into the Q&A. So now we'll hear from Emma.

Emma: My name is Emma and I'm in first grade, and I wanted to know if you got braces later on.

Sarah Lampen: Thank you Emma, for that question. So Emma is wondering Kalia, if you got braces later on.

Kao Kalia Yang: I never did. At some point it became less important to me. But I'm 39 now Emma. And when I think about my teeth and I think they're not that strong. One day, when they all come off, I know what I want my dream dentures to look like, unless I have a single tooth standing like my grandma, then I think like her, I'll keep it because it would be a gift from my mom and dad still standing strong in my mouth.

Sarah Lampen: Thank you. And now we have a question from Jasper.

Jasper: Hi, Miss Kao Kalia. My name is Jasper and I'm in second grade and these are my two questions. Have you traveled where your grandma was born and why did you want braces?

Sarah Lampen: So Jasper has a great question. Wondering if you've traveled to where your grandmother was born and if you ever, er, why you wanted braces apologies for (laughs) that.

Kao Kalia Yang: No apologies needed Sarah Lampen, you are a rock star in my eyes. So no apologies needed. Jasper, that's such a good question. Three years ago, I had the opportunity to return to Laos with my mom and dad and my older sister and my younger brother. And we could not go back to where my grandma was born, but we got close enough where my father pointed to all of the mountains and he said, "That's where grandma, that's where she was born." And I'll tell you something. I came to America when I was six and I grew up here and I thought most of my stories were happening here. But Jasper, the moment I returned there, I could feel all of the ghosts of the stories that have been haunting me for most of my life. So there are a lot of stories that I think one day I will write about the place where grandma was born about the place where we could, and couldn't be together. There's so many stories in Laos waiting for me as well. Although I'm very much American in so many ways, I'm Asian American and I'm proud of these facts about my life. They make it richer. I'm not poor because I know all these places and because I love them in different ways.

Sarah Lampen: Great. Thank you. And I believe we have a question from Matthew next.

Matthew: Hi. My name is Matthew. I'm in second grade at Nokomis. My question is what inspired you to write this book and why?

Sarah Lampen: Great question from Matthew. What inspired you to write this book and why?

Kao Kalia Yang: Wonderful question Matthew, you don't know this, but my younger brothers and sisters went to Nokomis. And so when I was much younger, I visited your school often. And I'm still happy to do it today. I wrote this book because one, the missing of the love. I talk about how love never dies, how it lives on. I still love my grandma. There are many memories that we share that continue to flavor my life. I think about them often. And then I think it's so important for me to say to my mom and dad who are sometimes worried because they wish they had more money so they could buy gifts for my kids. And I tell them, "The most important gifts you are already giving them." You don't have to worry about that. As a parent and as somebody's child, I mean like I'm still my mom and dad's baby, but I also have babies of my own. That was important for me. And then there's just the simple truth, that the most beautiful things in life, we treasure those things and we treasure them always. Even if it's just a memory. Especially sometimes because it's a memory. Because one day Matthew, I'll be old, and maybe I won't remember any more, but because I've written *The Most Beautiful Thing*, I can still remember with the help of the book. And that's such a gift.

Malia: Thank you, Kalia. And now we have a final question from Malia before we turn to the questions that have come in from the audience.

Malia: Hi, my name is Malia Felber Smith. I am in first grade. My question is for the illustrator. How do you decide what type of lines to do? Squiggly lines, straight lines, but maybe on the squiggly lines and straight lines. That's my question, bye.

Khoa Le: (laughs) I think that question is even more difficult than a professional's questions. I don't know how to answer. I want to say that there's a little mouse inside my head, that's telling me what to do and like pulling the string and telling me when to draw straight, when to draw wiggly line but I just have to go with everything come from my head and from my imagination and go throughout my hand into the pens and that's how I do lines. Yeah.

Sarah Lampen: Great. Thank you, Khoa. And we have a question from Sylvie who is wondering, why did you make the tiger so big in the illustration?

Khoa Le: Yeah, I love this question. I think because right at the beginning when I read the story and I read into the part where grandma tells a story of hers as a little girl ventured into the jungle and I was like, "Whoa." What's grandma would've felt and saw at that time as a little girl, she must feel like the tiger would be so huge and almost like evil gods. So I just think, wow, that's very cool to have that into a illustration and you can imagine that how awesome it would it be. I think for us, we will see is that some kind of a dangerous situation, but in our story, when we look back for symbol, when grandma tell the story to the kid and the kid's gonna be like, "Wow, that's is really an adventure even." So I think I want to put that into a positive and fun way. So

grandma as a little girl, standing gray and strong, and she saw huge tiger and she's still there, she's still being here today telling the kids the story, telling it to her grandchildren. That's why I want to make an impression on the tiger in that way.

Kao Kalia Yang: Khoa, I loved it. When I saw your initial sketches and I saw how big that tiger was, I knew that you understood how big the tiger was. Yes, to grandma as a little girl, but to me as a writer and to the Hmong imagination. Metaphorically, the tiger is so huge and you understood that. And so it made me really really excited.

Khoa Le: Thank you, I'm really glad that you liked it.

Sarah Lampen: Great. Thank you both. We have some questions coming in in the Q&A. If anyone has any more, feel free to drop those in here now. I will read a couple. Let me see. There's so many good ones. Shannon has shared Khoa, your illustrations are truly breathtaking and brought me to tears. They allowed me to engage with the story in a completely new way. How long did the illustrations take you to complete from start to finish? And Kalia, what was the process like to see the story come to life through pictures.

Khoa Le: I think, let me remember. I think it took at least a few months from sketches to final. There's lots of revisions. I got some feedback from our art director and from Carol as well. And even when coloring there's still some revision and changing here and there, and it's a long process but I'm very happy that it's turned out very... In my opinion, I am very proud of how those

artworks turned out, and I hope that the readers will enjoy the books as well.

Kao Kalia Yang: No, it's such a gift that we could do this international collaboration. And the Lerner team was excellent. I can't even draw a straight line Khoa. So in terms of the illustration, I'm just blown away by your work. The process for me when you write a book for sults, there's a price and there's a team, but mostly it's your name on the cover. And so it's like I'm in the middle holding a straight pole, a heavy pole, but I'm in the middle. This time Khoa's holding one end and I'm holding the other and it's much lighter. In that way, I feel like we can run if we need to run. If there's a tiger lurking, we can run and we can probably survive. On my own, I'm just gonna jump off a cliff. The tiger, if it wants to eat me, has to decide whether it wants to die with me or whatever. But in that way, it's been such a gift knowing that there was such a strong artist on the other side, holding the stick with me and that together, this thing would travel far.

Sarah Lampen: That's beautiful. We have another question from Finley who is five years old and is curious, Kalia, how did you decide to become an author?

Kao Kalia Yang: That's such a good question Finley. When I was young, I thought because my family, we needed doctors and lawyers. We were new to America and we thought doctors could heal our bodies, lawyers could protect our rights. And so I thought that I would be a doctor because my older sister, won a spelling bee. So we decided that she was the one who was good

with words, so she should become the lawyer. I didn't have the courage, I've always loved stories, but I didn't have the courage to pursue a life as an author, as an artist, until my grandmother died. Her death gave me the strength to become something I was afraid to be. I wrote my first book, *The Latehomecomer* and my editor, Chris of *The Latehomecomer* is also here. Because I wanted people to know who she was, she who could not read or write because my grandma had never been to school. In many ways, we become the dreams of our ancestors. I know we are the dreams of our ancestors. So I wanted to make her dream come true. To put her story into the written word, the hope that other people would love her with me. And so when I wrote that book, I became an author and I like the life. I say this to my nieces and nephews and it's true, even when you're a young author, even when you don't make a lot of money, you get a lot of free food Finley. You get a lot of free food. And sometimes in the beginning you start getting plane tickets too. And so I started to see the world around me and the country. And the more I saw, the more I loved and the more I wanted to keep seeing. And so that's why I'm a writer. I see into the world, and I see into myself and I find the places to love and to grow.

Sarah Lampen: Beautiful. Khoa, we have received a couple of questions. People are wondering if you have any advice for young writers and illustrators. So this is both for Khoa and Kalia. Do you have any advice for young writers and illustrators who want to be writers and illustrators?

Khoa Le: Kalia, you can go first (indistinct)

Kao Kalia Yang: You're so gentle, Khoa.

Khoa Le: (laughs)

Kao Kalia Yang: For me, I think the most important thing when you're starting out, you have to be able to finish a story. I think it took me a long time to finish a story. I was that kid who wrote a thousand beginnings and I didn't know how to end them because I do know how to solve the problems that I posed in the story, so I would just kill. I said, "The main character died, the end". But one of my teachers said I was cheating. That to be a writer is not to solve the problems of life, but to meet them and meet them honestly, with everything we are. And that really helped me. I knew then as the writer that I wasn't gonna solve all the problems of the world, that I was gonna meet them. And that the human being inside of me was gonna rise to the occasion. Even if it isn't quite as glamorous sometimes as I'd like, but the key is to finish the story. The moment you are done with the piece of art, it only begins to live in the world. And then everything that you do, you have to remember, and I think this is really useful. Every piece of writing that you do is only a picture of you in time. So only a picture of where you are in time. In the end of your life we hope that there's a whole body of work to draw from. And people can see you grow. I think people are seeing me grow. I started when I was 22, I'm 39. I've done a lot of growing in that time. And that makes it incredibly rewarding to share this journey and my growth with a bigger world that understands we are human because we're together. We're human beings together.

Khoa Le: I think my advice for illustrator is very short and simple. That is (chuckles) just keep working. Working on your skills, working on your way of thinking everything. Because things change. The business change, the word change, people will need different things from you and your style can also change. And don't worry so much about people, critics, and if they don't like your work or something, you just have to believe in yourself, believe in what you feel is your style, your feel to your art. And I think if you're hard-working, then you will make it. I think it's the case for me. I work so hard, I work like crazy. So yeah, that's what I'm thinking if you want to make it work.

Sarah Lampen: Thank you so, so much for your generosity, both of you and sharing your work with us, your story with us, your advice with us. Everyone at home, give Kalia and Khoa a big round of applause. Thank you. Thank you.