

*This reading group guide for **HOUSE OF STICKS** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

Ly Tran is just a toddler in 1993 when she and her family emigrate from a small town along the Mekong River in Vietnam to a two-bedroom railroad apartment in Queens. Ly's father, a former lieutenant in the South Vietnamese army, spent nearly a decade as a POW, and their resettlement is made possible through a humanitarian program run by the US government. Soon after they arrive, Ly joins her parents and three older brothers in sewing ties and cummerbunds piecemeal on their living room floor to make ends meet.

As they navigate this new landscape, Ly finds herself torn between two worlds. She knows she must honor her parents' Buddhist faith and contribute to the family livelihood, working long hours at home and then later as a manicurist alongside her mother at a nail salon in Brownsville, Brooklyn, which her parents eventually take over. But at school, Ly feels the mounting pressure to blend in.

A growing inability to see the blackboard presents new challenges, especially when her father forbids her from getting glasses, calling her diagnosis of poor vision a government conspiracy. His frightening temper and paranoia leave an indelible mark on Ly's sense of self. Who is she outside of everything her family expects of her?

Told in a spare, evocative voice that, with flashes of humor, weaves together her family's immigration experience with her own fraught and courageous coming-of-age, *House of Sticks* is a timely and powerful portrait of one girl's struggle to reckon with her heritage and forge her own path.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the Vietnamese proverb at the beginning of the book and compare it to the dedication. How does this help you understand Ly's family dynamics as you read?
2. There are several chapters where water or oceans are featured, such as "Water and Angels," "In the Swim," and the final chapter, "Almost There." What role do oceans and water play throughout the book on a metaphoric and literal level?
3. Ly's parents tend to rely on Buddhism in their struggles and instruct Ly to pray when she faces difficulty. In what ways does Buddhism influence Ly throughout her life? How does her relationship to it change?
4. At one point early in Ly's childhood, her mother takes on a nanny job for a Vietnamese couple with a one-year-old boy named Cuong. Ly and her brothers then see "how the other half lives"—very different from their own existence. What does this chapter add to the story?
5. What is the difference between the way Ly's older brother Thinh deals with conflict with their father versus the way Ly deals with conflict? Why do you think this is?
6. Growing up, Ly struggles to understand relationships and sexuality. Initially, her mother tells her not to think about it, and Ly, as a young girl, says she will never get married. As she matures, she experiences sexual harassment, which further rattles her understanding of attraction. Can you describe Ly's journey of understanding in regards to sex and sexuality?
7. Throughout the book, Ly's mother seems to be a quietly stable character, supporting both her husband and children. The one moment she has an outburst is when she laughs bitterly when Ly's father yells at them for calling the police on a customer who left without paying. What do you make of Ly's mother as an individual?

What do you think about the relationship between her and Ly?

8. In the chapter “Betrayed by Our Tongues,” Ly references the American dream after facing racism and harassment. She wants to promise her family will achieve it but is disheartened. Yet, in what ways is this experience, the immigrant experience, a quintessentially American story?

9. In the chapter “A Lazy, No-Good Daughter,” Ly’s teacher Ms. Walsh calls the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) to report Ly’s parents for child neglect since her father refuses to allow Ly to get glasses. This triggers Ly’s father’s PTSD, widens the rift between her and her parents, and worsens her own mental health. Still, Ms. Walsh says, “If I had to do it again, I would.” Discuss the source of the conflict here and if there could have been a better outcome. What would you have done in Ms. Walsh’s position? In Ly’s?

10. Though Ly is initially excited about going to college and finding new experiences, her mental health starts to decline because of her feelings of guilt for leaving her parents behind. Why do you think Ly struggles in particular with these feelings?

11. Think about the relationship between Ly and her brothers. Oftentimes when she cannot go to her parents, her brothers step in financially. At the same time, there is a certain distance between Ly and her brothers as they grow older. Why do you think their relationships fell into that pattern?

12. Ly experiences a second traumatic event at the hands of a well-meaning authority figure when she is taken to a psychiatric hospital without notice or explanation. There, she meets several people she makes a connection with, but is rattled all the while. Discuss Ly’s experiences and if anything surprised you. How might mental health patients be better served?

13. After Ly is dismissed from the Honors College, she meets Joseph and begins a romantic relationship with him, the first we’ve seen her experience. In what ways is Joseph a grounding and supportive figure for Ly? What does their relationship add to her life that she has not previously experienced?

14. Though Ly’s journey in education has its challenges, her efforts culminate in getting accepted to Columbia. She makes it clear she approaches her education there differently, prioritizing self-care over perfect grades. What can we, as individuals and as a society, learn from her experiences?

15. The defining conflict between Ly and her father is over her struggling eyesight. She must often resort to outside help and hide it from her father. However, in the end, her father offers to pay for LASIK surgery. Discuss this moment and what may have contributed to her father’s reaching this point of understanding. What does this do for your understanding of her father as a complex individual?

16. There are many voices featured in this memoir: Ly’s voice, her mother’s voice, and her father’s voice in particular. As Ly comes to understand her journey, she also moves from a position of voicelessness, where she struggles to articulate her experiences, to a place where she can speak freely about the events of her life. Which of the voices in *House of Sticks* resonated with you the most? Can you think of a turning point for Ly in being able to speak or write about her journey?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. There are several monuments around the world and within the United States commemorating the perilous journey and the people who died escaping Vietnam. Do your own research and try to find one near you, if possible. Interesting fact: There is one in Des Moines, Iowa!

2. Try taking a practice nail tech and/or manicurist exam online. You can find one for your state or a general practice exam. For example, you can try the New York Nail Technician state board exam here: <https://cosmetologypracticetest.guru/new-york-nail-technician-license/>.

3. For more information about Ly Tran, visit <https://www.lytran.me/>.