



Book Club Set

# How to Pronounce Knife

By Souvankham Thammavongsa

## About the Author



Souvankham Thammavongsa is the author of four poetry books, and the short story collection *HOW TO PRONOUNCE KNIFE*, winner of the 2020 Scotiabank Giller Prize and 2021 Trillium Book Award, finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and PEN America Open Book Award, out now with Little, Brown (U.S.), McClelland & Stewart (Canada), and Bloomsbury (U.K.), available in French, with foreign rights sold in China, Korea, Poland, and Turkey. Her stories have won an O. Henry Award and appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic*, *Granta*, and *NOON*. She has also written book reviews for *The New York Times*, and edited the anthologies *Best Canadian Poetry* (2021) and *The Griffin Poetry Prize* (2021). She is known for her PowerPoint videos on Zoom about writing, most recently one titled "I Am Not That Interesting." Currently, she is working on her first novel. She was born in the Lao refugee camp in Nong Khai, and was raised, and educated at public schools, in Toronto.

Retrieved from: <https://souvankham-thammavongsa.com/bio.html>

## About the Book

*How to Pronounce Knife* is the debut short story collection of Canadian author — and already-established poet — Souvankham Thammavongsa. Winner of the 2020 Giller Prize and the 2021 Trillium Book Award, the collection narrates the experiences of Lao immigrants as they orient themselves within Canada —many of these relating to their confrontations with the English language. The stories are informed by Thammavongsa's own experiences immigrating to Canada: she herself was born in a Lao refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand, and, at the age of one, immigrated with her family to Toronto per a sponsorship program that the Canadian government enacted in July of 1979. According to the 2016 Census of Canada, just under 25,000 people of Laotian ancestry live in Canada today.

The collection opens with its title story, “How to Pronounce Knife”, which follows a Laotian grade one student named Joy struggling with one particular word, ‘knife’, in her practice book. Enlisted to help, Joy’s father confidently asserts, “Kah-nnn-eye-ffff. It’s kahneyff”. When confronted about her pronunciation at school the following day, Joy stands by her father, arguing, “It’s in the front! The first one! It should have a sound!”

Thammavongsa’s characters in these stories are uncompromising about language. She uses language and its difficulties as a vehicle not for shame but for laughter - the jokes not at the expense of the characters ‘foreignness’, but at everything and everyone but. Thammavongsa tells *The Paris Review*:

“Yes, my parents mispronounced things all the time, and they did it with a wonderful and grand confidence. I would tell my parents that the kids at school pronounced knife with no *k* sound and we would laugh and laugh at how silly they were. There’s a letter right there and they don’t even do anything about it! And they call themselves educated! All of the stories play with that in some way—what is lost and what is gained in these mistakes.”

A similar motif appears in the story “Chick-A-Chee!”: the young narrator’s father takes her and her brother trick-or-treating in a neighbourhood of colossal Victorian homes, instructing them to go to the door and yell “Chick-A-Chee!” at whoever answered. The owners are so endeared by this mispronunciation that, even when in a group with other children, the narrator and her brother are beckoned to come forward and get more candy. And when (amid boasting the next day about her exploits) the child is corrected by her teacher, she replies: “No, Missus Furman. We went Chick-A-Chee!”

Herein lies the treatment of language in *How to Pronounce Knife*. What others regard as mispronunciations, Thammavongsa's characters regard as opportunities for integrity and for reward. In an interview with New Canadian Media, Thammavongsa says, "Whenever we pronounce English words wrong, we are often expected to feel ashamed or embarrassed or humiliated — but that isn't the right feeling. I didn't feel that way, but I do see people expect me to". The young narrators of these two stories stake their claim with their 'mistakes'; in the mispronunciations themselves is an assertion of the children's identity. After all, why pronounce something correctly if it could only mean less candy?

"The right way to pronounce 'trick-or-treat' isn't even an issue," Thammavongsa says. "It doesn't matter how you say it because the candy's already in the bag".

## Discussion Questions



1. The opening story is about a child who doesn't know how to pronounce a word. Are there words you've had trouble with or that you find unusual?
2. In the story "Paris," no one ever goes to Paris and it does not take place in Paris. Why do you think the author decided to title this story "Paris"?
3. Many of the stories have main characters who are not named and other who are but then their names end up changing. What is the value of a name? How do you feel about a character that is not named?
4. In "Mani Pedi," Raymond's sister tells him to "keep your dreams small." Have you ever told yourself this or have you ever felt someone was saying that to you? What were those dreams that you felt you had to "keep small"?
5. Work is an important theme in this collection. Have you worked a job you were terrific at, but no one noticed, or did you have a job you loved but others didn't see the value of the work?
6. The stories often refer to the setting as simply "here." Why do you think the author did this with the setting of a story?
7. In "Randy Travis" the mother becomes obsessed with the singer and with his music. Who was your celebrity crush, what purpose did they serve for you, and how did you grow out of it?
8. In "A Far Distant Thing" the narrator said that even friendship that doesn't last is worth having. Do you agree?
9. In "Picking Worms" the teenage girl in the story does not open the door for her date. Why does she do this?
10. Sound is important to many of these stories. The silent letter at the front in the word knife, the voice of a mother in a dream, the way sound lasts only for a short while and disappears, or how sounds can often stand in for meaning. Why is sound a concern in these stories?

11. In the Audiobook, "Edge of the World" is narrated by a male voice. Does this change the meaning of the story for you, and how?
12. Mr. Vong says there's a difference between love and what *feels* like love. In your life experience, do you feel there is a difference? If there is a difference, what is that difference? Discuss.
13. Many of these stories are told from the point of view of a child or what we learn in the end is an adult recalling a story. What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing this?
14. These stories feel real, yet we are told they are fiction. Does it matter to you to know what the real story is behind them or if they come or do not come from the author's real life? Do you think such knowing could take away the magic of not knowing?
15. In "The Gas Station," Mary believes there are two kinds of people. Those who are seen and those who are not. Do you agree with this? Which one do you feel you are—someone who is seen or someone who is not? Is being seen something important to you? Discuss.
16. There are many meanings of laughter. List and discuss the descriptions of laughter in this story collection. Why do you think the author took such care with this?
17. Love is an important feeling and theme. Love of family, romantic love, love when it's failed, and love of self. Discuss the ways in which the characters love or lose their love. Which love story in the collection were you most moved by? Discuss.

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## Author Interview



**The first thing that struck me about your writing was that it was devoid of embellishment and any kind of pretension. Could you tell us a bit about this choice of style of writing?**

I am so happy you feel this way about my writing. The kind of writing I do — this spare and plain language — withholds a great deal, and it can be frustrating for a reader because they have to do the work. When you read, you bring your whole life, your lived experience into the work you read, and if you have very little, then you might fault the writing for not giving you more. These stories are not sad stories, and this really becomes clear when I read them out loud, or when you listen to the audiobook.

**The characters that stayed with me are the siblings and their father from “Chick-A-Chee!” A funny bit in the story is when the siblings are out at Halloween and they say “chick-a-chee!” instead of “trick-or-treat!” The couple in the posh house find this mispronunciation “adooooorable,” and the kids end up getting extra candy. Tell us a bit about the thought behind this story.**

Whenever we pronounce English words wrong, we are often expected to feel ashamed or embarrassed or humiliated — but that isn’t the right feeling. I didn’t feel that way, but I do see people expect me to. This story is about not belonging. It is about not wanting to fit in, about not being ashamed or embarrassed or humiliated. The question of the right way to pronounce “trick-or-treat” isn’t even an issue. It doesn’t matter how you say it because the candy is already in the bag.

**Many of the stories in *How to Pronounce Knife* are told from the perspective of a child. Tell us a bit about what a child narrator brings to a story.**

There’s a difference between point of view and perspective. The stories in *How to Pronounce Knife* play with that difference. These are not children’s stories and they are not necessarily narrated by children. We learn, often in the end, that it is actually an adult narrating. As adults we never forget what we saw and felt as children, and even as adults we speak with the vocabulary of a child because that was the view and feeling we had when we first encountered the world.

**What would you say is the recurrent theme in your collection and what would you want readers to take away from it?**

Laughter is the cornerstone of these stories. Laughter when we are the centre of it, or when we form it. I want readers to see themselves and to marvel at some of the sentences. I want them to cry, to feel heartbroken. I want readers to see I don't write from the margins and my characters are not in the margins. They don't long to eat baloney or macaroni and cheese. They are not humiliated or embarrassed or ashamed. They don't want to learn to speak English and fit in, they are proud of who they are where they come from. They aren't nice and quiet and submissive. There are sad moments, but that is not all that there is. I don't pity anyone and I don't try to convince anyone my characters are human or of their humanity. I assume it.

**Immigrant stories tend to be largely about displacement and struggle, but so many of your stories could easily be about any family and the motions they go through, for example the funny yet poignant “Randy Travis” or the achingly beautiful “Slingshot.” Is there an effort in your writing to not stereotype the immigrant experience?**

I try to write a good book. That is where my effort is. There are stereotypes and bit characters that get placed in the margins, but they are not immigrants. We are not used to seeing that in literature, and that is a wonderful opportunity a good literary critic might give close attention to.

**What did winning the Giller for *How to Pronounce Knife* mean to you?**

It brought my writing attention in a way talent alone and good and hard work for many years cannot do. I am happy to have it, and it has been life-changing, but I work really hard for it not to have too much meaning. I will write more books, and if my books don't win a Giller, or if a jury does not name or choose me, that book will still be good.

**Finally, could you tell us a bit about what you are working on now and what can readers expect?**

I don't think readers should expect things from me. It's not fair and awful to the making of any art. I should be allowed to do whatever I want, including fail and disappoint and change readers.

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